



**MYANMAR'S EMERGING NATIONAL
IDENTITY COULD CHANGE
EVERYTHING**

BY WAYLAND J. BLUE

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The Myanmar military is, paradoxically, achieving one of its longest-standing objectives: [a tangible national identity](#). The success of this goal, however, will require the failure of the regime's more pressing objective: remain in power.

To maintain control, the Myanmar military has demonstrated a willingness to inflict brutality. Many observers assess the regime's increasing use of air strikes and explicit targeting of civilians as desperation due to depleted and demoralized ground forces. However, these actions also follow the military's [long-standing "four cuts" doctrine](#): cut off access to food, money, potential recruits, and information within areas opposing central government rule.

Critically, the four cuts doctrine is now directly applied against the majority ethnic Bamar population areas previously relied upon for recruitment and material support which, more than desperation, may signal the Myanmar military's quasi-religious belief in its own [centrality](#). Even if the regime is desperate, Commander-In-Chief Min Aung Hlaing and his

coalition are likely willing to sacrifice everything to maintain privilege and power.

The resulting civil war has mobilized citizens across class, ethnic, religious, and geographic divides toward the common goal of ending the regime. The current opposition to the military is the strongest unifying force in Myanmar's recent history.

A broader opposition

The Civil Disobedience Movement, which started as a general strike against the coup, drew workers across the country and from diverse sectors of the economy. Even when met with lethal force, peaceful opposition has far [outlived](#) comparable past attempts. Simultaneously, violent opposition has expanded beyond the long-established claims of Myanmar's powerful [ethnic armed organizations](#) (EAOs) and into traditional military strongholds.

Majority ethnic Bamar areas, notably [Magway](#) and [Sagaing](#), are now sites of intense combat against loosely organized, often poorly equipped People's Defense Forces (PDF), as well as the regime's indiscriminate raids, killings, and the burnings of civilian homes.

Yet the Myanmar military's operational and strategic challenges have only intensified. Last month saw the effective [end of a tenuous ceasefire](#) with the Arakan Army, the powerful EAO seeking autonomous rule in Rakhine State. The Myanmar military also, after [months of clashes](#), struggles to make operational gains against the Karen National Union—which has resisted central government rule since 1948—in Karen State.

The growing [cooperation](#) of some EAOs with the National Unity Government (NUG)—primarily members of the prior civilian government—and NUG-backed PDFs signals potential for much greater operational capacity on the part of the opposition.

Most tellingly, the Myanmar military appears to be [losing](#) people faster than it can replace them. The military's response, no matter how brutal, is likely insufficient to reestablish previous military dominance.

However, the alternative to a central government victory against the opposition is not necessarily one where a popular, or less brutal, regime comes to power. The Myanmar military is in the process of becoming one among many armed factions grappling for territory and resources.

Nevertheless, the continued survival of opposition across Myanmar's ethnic and geographic boundaries represents the clearest opportunity yet for the emergence of a shared national identity. This identity, should it survive, may prove a critical unifying force giving the nation and its people a more stable and prosperous future.

For most of Myanmar's turbulent post-colonial history, its ethnic minorities have suffered the brunt of successive military regime attempts at consolidating power. This has often been easy to dismiss for those in the Bamar-dominated heartland now suffering what those in Myanmar's ethnic states have for decades experienced. These minorities remain suspicious of how the NUG-led opposition might act in power. Growing cooperation suggests this suspicion is gradually relieving, but much mistrust remains.

The damage caused by the double [disasters](#) of COVID-19 and the 2021 coup left millions in poverty, and rampant economic [mismanagement](#) in the wake of the coup has destroyed the financial system, making access to critical commodities, including [medicines](#), scarce. Yet, perhaps because they have little left to lose, the opposition continues.

Regional realism

It's easy to assume the current opposition won't succeed, especially considering the [stances](#) of regional powers such as China, India, and [Thailand](#), which continue to either enable or outright support the military regime. That should come as no surprise: those who continue to support the regime look first to their own interests, backing the side perceived as most likely to win.

But it's more complicated than it seems.

As the largest country in mainland Southeast Asia,

with [45%](#) of its population under 25 and expansive natural resources including [hydroelectric potential](#) and [fossil fuel reserves](#), Myanmar could become a major regional power, potentially threatening Thailand's central economic position in mainland Southeast Asia. Thailand continues to [endure](#) ongoing political turmoil that appears to share much in common with Min Aung Hlaing's regime in terms of maintaining power at the expense of political and economic transformation. Keeping Myanmar undeveloped and a source of cheap labor and commodities is therefore a tolerable status quo.

A more unified Myanmar may also prove less amenable to the economic and security interests of India and China when these do not align with the popular will.

The expansive sanctions and efforts at humanitarian aid delivery by the [United States](#) and others notwithstanding, international efforts stop short of official recognizing the NUG. Doing so would surely pose significant diplomatic risk, ending whatever engagement is possible with the current regime and upsetting key partners—especially Thailand.

The national identity taking shape in opposition to the regime demands consideration through both realist and idealistic lenses. From a humanitarian perspective, the growing toll of nearly [30,000 homes burned](#), thousands of [civilians killed](#), and [hundreds of thousands](#) displaced is unconscionable. The crisis drains the [credibility](#) of ASEAN, while transnational threats of narcotics and arms trafficking are sure to intensify and undermine regional security.

A "wait and see" approach will keep Myanmar's future opaque. The damage from this civil war will not be reversed anytime soon, yet the opportunity for outside powers to support a national identity, which could lead to stability and prosperity, is unprecedented. Doing so will require backing the opposition against the current regime in recognition of a better future. Growing unity suggests that this is not only possible, but increasingly expected.

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