



THERE IS 'NO OTHER WAY OUT' IN MYANMAR

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Protesters hold signs during a demonstration against the military coup near Sule Pagoda in central Yangon, Myanmar, 22 February 2021, Myat Thu Kyaw/Nur. Source: Getty Images

Since the military coup d'état in February 2021, an armed resistance, composed of diverse segments of Myanmar society, has emerged against the coup regime. The people of Myanmar did not want armed conflict, but what other choices were even left when the security forces, which were supposed to protect them, had been busy jailing, torturing and killing them on a daily basis and no international intervention could be hoped for? Of course, this is not the first time the country's military, called 'sit-tat' by everyday Burmese speakers (not the self-styling word 'Tatmadaw' which the military calls itself to boost their legitimacy and non-Burmese speakers unwittingly use without understanding the context), has committed unspeakable human rights violations against the people of Myanmar. But there were hopes

that the country could be democratized and the *sit-tat* could be reformed with 'political dialogue' and 'national reconciliation'. Even major ethnic armed organizations that had fought against the *sit-tat* for more than half-a-century held onto those hopes and signed the 'Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement' (NCA) in 2015 to negotiate federalism and self-determination, the key demands of the minority groups. These hopes have long since been abandoned with the violence upon violence committed by the military since February 1st 2021. The majority of the country now believes there is 'no other way out'. What has changed in the country and the society?

Clash of the New and Old Groups

From 2011, Myanmar experienced a decade of rapid economic expansion with an annual growth rate of 7 percent every year (The World Bank 2022b). While the country was still a lower-middle income country and much inequality remained, many people began to enjoy improved living standards, measurable in every indicator from health and education to transportation, electricity and mobile internet access. With the country's opening up and liberalization, billions of foreign investments came in every year, providing a steady source of foreign exchange revenue (DICA 2022). These resulted in a significant shift in the structure of the economy - the primary sector composed of peasants and farmers declined from 65 percent of the total workforce in 1990 to 45 percent in 2019, whereas the secondary and tertiary sectors with better paying jobs expanded to 16 percent and 39 percent respectively (see the longer article of this for more references). In fact, in 2019, the tertiary sector employed 9 million workers, a figure comparable to the 10 million workers in the primary sector of agriculture (Department of Population Myanmar 2020). The GDP per capita jumped from \$963 in 2011 to a record high of \$1587 in 2020 (The World Bank 2022a). The middle class in Myanmar had indeed grown substantially from 2011 to 2021 with the democratic transition of the country.

The emerging social groups were consolidated into social classes, a fact visible in the expansion of the education sector. Around 2 million more students were enrolled in secondary and post-secondary

educational institutions compared to 10 years earlier (Department of Higher Education 2022). These young people were hopeful that their future would be better than that of their parents' generation, and they grew up in a relatively more democratic and freer political environment, with access to the internet and social media. All these dreams of upward social mobility were crushed by the military coup d'état and subsequent economic upheavals. Within one and a half years, economic and development indicators were down in every measurable way, reversing years of gain. Apparently, the coup itself was motivated by the military class's desire to control the country's economy, which they felt was slipping from their control because of liberalization and economic reforms. The newly emerging social classes suffered as the military and its cronies tried to grab everything in sight from every sector (The World Bank 2022c; Asia Times 2022; Nikkei Asia 2021; RFA 2022; Mizzima 2022). This resulted in 'class consciousness' converting into 'revolutionary consciousness,' with the determination to eradicate the military class once and for all.

Violence and Legitimacy

While the structure of the economy indicated the troubles of the social classes, the immediate trigger of the armed resistance was the escalating violence by the military. It indicated the *sit-tat*'s lack of will to seek a peaceful political solution as well as their regard of the public as 'the enemy' as Mary Callahan (2004) once wrote. The brutal and indiscriminate use of violence hardened the attitudes of Myanmar people as they perceived that 'this was grossly unjust.' As the once peaceful public sought ways to respond to escalating violence by the military, new alliances were forged between the long-standing ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and the young protesters and politicians who had decided that the only way forward was to fight back with arms.

The combined pressure of nonviolent civil disobedience in various forms and violent armed insurrection led to the coup regime, known as the State Administration Council (SAC), losing both effective government bureaucracy down to the local level and territorial control in vast swathes of the

country. The fighting broke out in many areas including central dry regions that had not seen armed conflicts in decades. The notorious 'four cuts' strategy that the military had used against the past insurgents had been transformed into the 'three All' strategy of 'Kill All, Burn All, Loot All,' with civilian casualties and property destruction mounting every day. These resulted in an unprecedented 'legitimacy crisis' for the coup regime, as the military was increasingly viewed by the public as a 'terrorist entity' rather than the 'national army.' Meanwhile, the opposition National Unity Government and its allies began consolidating their claim as the 'legitimate government' in both domestic and international arenas. The country was in a full blown 'revolutionary state,' and violence was an inevitable feature of it.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

While the fighting and armed resistance are currently limited to within the country's borders, it has the potential to become a wider regional security and humanitarian crisis. With the big powers' rivalry elsewhere and tensions bubbling up in the Indo-Pacific region, we should not forget that the Cold War was, in fact, very hot in Southeast Asia. The coup regime was in survival mode and they were evidently willing to give up the country's long standing neutral foreign policy. I have argued that the 'the Revolution in Myanmar' had structural origins in the economy, the people of Myanmar no longer tolerate the greed and oppression of the military class, and the violence has hardened the attitudes of the public. The dreams and aspirations of the people in Myanmar were violently taken away by the military regime that lacked any legitimacy to actually govern the country or pretense to represent a functioning state. The friends of Myanmar should make it a priority to help the people win. The people of Myanmar are going to fight back no matter what as there is 'no other way out.'

Disclaimer: All opinions in this article are solely those of the author and do not represent any organization.