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MYANMAR

WHAT IS THE ENDGAME?

APRIL 2021

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Myanmar: What is the Endgame?

Executive Summary

On 1 February 2021, a military coup d'état took place in the Southeast Asian country of Myanmar. Weeks of widespread civil unrest and disobedience have followed since, with clashes between protesters and security personnel resulting in hundreds of fatalities. On 27 March, a national holiday, more than 100 protesters were killed by the military, with more than 700 people now believed to have died in the unrest. There are now fears that the continued violence could descend into a civil war.

The situation, though triggered by the military coup following the poor performance of the Union Solidarity and Development Party they back in the November 2020 election, has been caused by a number of issues facing the country. Myanmar has been in a state of low-level civil conflict and insurgency since its independence in 1948. These armed groups have begun pledging their support to protesters, heightening fears that the low-level fighting will escalate into a full-scale civil war.

With a strong Chinese influence in the country, Russian investment, and an already ongoing refugee crisis, the internal conflict could result in large ramifications on the international scene too. While the international community will be keen to avoid Myanmar turning into the "Asian Syria" or "Venezuela", there remains little effort from the West, regional powers such as Japan or even China, to find a solution to the situation.

The Background: A Coup Foreshadowed

The Myanmar military, or the Tatmadaw, have controlled many key positions in government and much of the machinery of the state since the country's "democratisation" 2011. The coup was largely triggered by the large victory by the National League for Democracy (NLD) in the November 2020 election.

To the military, this victory and the failure of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) which they back, began to be a threat to the military's strong position within the machinery of state. As a result, the Tatmadaw began to allege that the vote was fraudulent. Generals also began to warn about the "possibility of a coup". These warnings were widely condemned by the international community.

In the latter days of January, as preparations were being made for the official swearing-in of the newly elected parliament, troops were positioned at key locations in the country's major cities. Military vehicles began patrols on key national arteries and in key cities and towns. Finally, leading politicians and key civil society actors were arrested. This included State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint, other prominent parliamentarians, high profile Buddhist monks and leaders from former protest movements such as the Saffron Revolution and Generation 88. On 1 February, following weeks of foreshadowing, a military coup d'état occurred.

There is also the fact that the current army commander, Min Aung Hlaing, has long harboured presidential ambitions, and his tenure as commander in chief of the army comes to an end in 2021. Given the military's political party did so badly, it is unlikely he would have gained it through constitutional means. Mr Hlaing is also the general responsible for engineering the ongoing Rohingya genocide, and his retirement from the army or public life could have made him vulnerable to international prosecution for his role in that.

After the coup, the Tatmadaw instituted a yearlong state of emergency and transferred all governing power to the Commander in Chief of Defence Services, Min Aung Hlaing. On 3 February, senior members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) who had been detained two days earlier were also charged with breaking a number of the country's laws.

The day after the coup in Myanmar, on 2 February, healthcare and civil servants across the country, launched a civil disobedience and strike movement. The strikes and civil disobedience spread quickly and by the second week of February, it was believed that three-quarters of all government and state workers were involved in the strikes. They extended from healthcare workers to teachers, railway workers, state-run newspapers, and the Central Bank of Myanmar.

The first large scale protests took place on 6 February, the largest ones have taken place in major cities such as Yangon and Mandalay. Just two days later the Tatmadaw began to use violence. The use of violence has

steadily increased and the number of confirmed fatalities according to the UN and Assistance Association for Political Prisoners has surpassed 700.

Since then, the unrest, the largest since the Saffron Revolution of 2007, has been almost constant. Additionally, the military has reimposed wide-ranging restrictions of society, such as curfews, and limits to gatherings. They have also been steadily arresting journalists. On 1 April, it was announced after weeks of sporadic mobile and internet shutdowns, they would be shutting down the internet “indefinitely”, likely as part of a concerted effort to control communications and messaging, and to disrupt one of the main organising tools of the protesters.

The World’s Longest Civil War

The coup comes on top of an already existing long-running complex civil war in the country. At the start of 2021, around one-third of Myanmar’s total landmass was controlled by non-government entities, including at least 20 different rebel and insurgent groups. These collections of armed groups and ethnic militias have engaged the central government in an almost constant, albeit lower intensity, insurgency across the country for decades. These groups have a wide range of goals, such as achieving independence, increased autonomy, or the federalisation of the country. Given this fragile nature of Myanmar, and the constellation of actors, there are now growing fears that the situation has now destabilised to the point that a full-blown civil war in the country is a realistic possibility.

Efforts to end these long-running insurgencies have been made. A number of insurgent and rebel groups aligned with the Karen Ethnic group in 2012 and signed a limited peace deal with the government. Then, in 2015, eight groups signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NAC). Originally, 15 of the nation’s ethnic insurgent groups were involved in the peace negotiations. However, seven ended up leaving the process. In February 2018 two groups, the Lahu Democratic Union and the New Mon State Party, joined the NAC.

Despite these efforts and peace deals, a number of insurgencies are still ongoing in the country including in Kachin State, Karen State, Rakhine State – which includes the Rohingya Crisis – and Shan State. It is believed that there are at least nine large active insurgent groups in the country. Further to this, those that have signed peace deals with the government have not necessarily disarmed and the risk is now with widespread unrest, they may seek to take up arms against the Tatmadaw. Either to exploit the situation for their aims or to support the protesters.

Foreign Influence?

The situation is further muddied by international involvement. To the West, much investment had been poured into the country since the partial democratisation. There were also hopes that the country could have continued its path towards democracy in the coming decades. For China, due to its unique geographical location, Myanmar plays a pivotal role in its Belt and Road Initiative with its access to the Indian Ocean. For Russia, the country now presents an opportunity to sell weapons alongside access to new avenues of investment away from the Crimean sanctions.

The foreshadowing of the coup appears to be a deliberate strategy by the generals to gauge what pushback from the international community they may receive. The fact they then went ahead with it shows they believed the international community would not pushback too forcibly. Many Western governments have been quick to denounce the coup. While most of this has come in the form of statements, there have also been sanctions placed on key leaders in the junta. However, notably, Japan has been slow to condemn the military, the country’s Minister of Defence even announcing that should governments not approach the situation well, then Myanmar could “grow further away from politically free democratic nations and join the league of China”.

The coup has created an interesting geopolitical quagmire for international governments. Despite the widespread condemnations by Western governments, the military junta is considered less pro-Beijing than the democratic government it overthrew. For China, the military and the associated unrest, risk their infrastructural investments that are considered key for access to the Indian Ocean. Inside Myanmar, especially early on in the protests, tangible anger was seen against China. Protestors would regularly gather outside the Chinese embassy and known Chinese owned firms until moved away by security forces. Initially, this anger was driven by the fact that Beijing was refusing to condemn the coup. This anger soon gave way

to accusations that Beijing had engineered the coup and was backing the military, due to the country's widespread influence in Burmese society.

In this, the protesters and the military actually have a concern in common, China has much influence in Myanmar thanks to being directly involved in a number of large-scale economic projects. These projects include the Sino-Myanmar pipeline, and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor and will result in new ports, highways and a special economic zone all connected to Chinese transportation networks. In effect, such infrastructure would make Myanmar important economically to Beijing by giving China almost direct economic access to the Indian Ocean in the immediate sphere of influence of its regional rival India.

However, despite this initial anger, and the ongoing refusal of Beijing to condemn the Tatmadaw's actions, it remains unlikely that China was behind the coup. The Burmese military have been an unreliable partner of China in the past and have shown concern for some years of the security risk of being economically dependent on Beijing. Indeed, the Chinese projects were agreed with the National League for Democracy (NLD) and it remains to be seen if the Tatmadaw follow through on these projects with time.

Additionally, the instability the unrest has brought and widespread pro-democracy protests, even if in support of a political party friendly to Beijing in the past, will be unwelcome in China. Having been internationally condemned for the unrest in Hong Kong, China will be keen to avoid such unrest gaining momentum on its border. Instead, China will be keen for stability and, as such, Beijing is unlikely to show outward support for the junta, but will not condemn it either, finding itself in a weird paradox.

Russia, however, are looking to increase their support of the Tatmadaw. Moscow itself has been hit with sanctions since 2014 due to the Crimean conflict and has looked to increase ties with Asian countries since. Russia also has little to lose from investment into the country. Should the situation deteriorate, they will not have to deal with the fallout or worry about refugees.

For the junta, closer relations with Moscow are also a benefit. As Western sanctions start to impact Burmese society, the junta will look to increase trade with Moscow in the hope of replacing some lost trade and investment. With Beijing's reserved reaction to the coup, given their close ties with the former democratic governments, a foreign power looking to invest, even optimistically, will be welcome by the military leadership and will alleviate the concern they had of reliance on Beijing.

An Asian Syria?

Following the coup and the subsequent internal strife in the country means that the situation remains volatile. With a number of political crises impacting the country, there is a very real risk of the country descending into civil war. A sizable portion of the country is not currently under government control. These sections of the country are under the control of sometimes competing rebel groups, some of whom have a close association with China. As such, a civil war, or an escalation of the ongoing civil conflicts in the country, is now the most likely outcome.

On one side, the Tatmadaw see themselves as the guardian and protectors of a unified Myanmar, and their central status in the country is written into the 2008 constitution. The military now sees the situation as a battle for the "soul" of the country, and their place in it. Historically, they have not hesitated to use lethal, often brutal, force against protest action, with some estimates citing 10,000 fatalities during the 8888 Nationwide Popular Pro-Democracy Protests in 1988.

For the protesters, the fight is for the future of the country. One protest slogan alluded to the 1988 unrest with "we need to fight for our future we can't go back to 1988". The demonstrators have been equally determined not to concede any ground to the military. On 28 March, armed protesters fought back against soldiers and security forces attacking a protest camp in the town of Kalay.

In addition to protesters, on 10 April, an alliance of Arakan Army, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army and the insurgent Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army carried out an attack on a police station in Naungmon in the eastern Shan State. As the military struggles to control its nominal territory, such groups and similar, are more and more likely to see the conflict as an opportunity to achieve their own aims, some of which overlap with the goals of protesters and some do not.

As the situation continues to deteriorate with a peaceful resolution looking unlikely, it becomes increasingly possible that violence will become more widespread. The country already has a large refugee population of around 1 million and around 800,000 Muslims who have been driven out of their homes to neighbouring Bangladesh. Both these populations present a perfect recruitment ground for rebel groups as well as more extremist elements looking to achieve their aims.

The next steps are unclear, the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) has, on 16 April, announced an interim National Unity Government. This government includes ousted lawmakers and key figures in the anti-coup protest. Crucially, it also includes members of ethnic groups. However, for such a group to have any success, protest action will need to continue and rebel groups will need to work with these demonstrators. Both actions make further clashes and deaths likely.

The situation, therefore, has all the ingredients of a full-blown civil war. It is thus unlikely that the protests will result in a peaceful political transition as those behind the coup are not going to back down. Unless there is a schism at the heart of the Tatmadaw or an international intervention, all the dynamics in Myanmar indicate towards a state of continued violent political unrest, multiple escalating insurgencies in rural areas and a fast-failing economy. All of which will culminate in a prolonged civil war and a growing humanitarian crisis.



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