

The US Can Only Do So Much For Burma

The U.S. objective should be to minimize the military junta's depredations in Burma, not engage in ostentatious moral preening.

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Following the February military coup, Burma (or Myanmar) became two countries. The Tatmadaw, as the armed forces are known, is in formal control, but lacks virtually any public support. The regime is unable to compel anything more than angry acquiescence to its rule as violent resistance rises. The U.S. and other democratic states should continue to seek to defund and delegitimize the military, while preparing for the humanitarian catastrophe that Burma may soon become.

When Burmese General Min Aung Hlaing staged the latest coup, he destroyed the system created by the military a decade before. Then, the Tatmadaw granted itself control over the country's armed forces, three government departments concerned with security, and a quarter of its legislative seats. However, that was not enough to deliver the presidency to Hlaing, which he apparently coveted.

After Aung Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won another landslide election victory, Hlaing faced military retirement with no chance of political promotion. Instead of retiring, Hlaing arrested the entire government and party leadership, charging electoral fraud—because the Burmese people refused to vote for the military's despised captive party.

The Tatmadaw imposed a state of emergency, took over the government, and named Hlaing prime minister. He promised to hold new elections, but only did so after taking enough time to rig the system to ensure a military majority. He began with a series of bogus legal charges against Suu Kyi, including for her security team's having ordered walkie-talkies from overseas, to disqualify her from the next poll. He said the regime intended to “create conditions to hold a free and fair multiparty general election,” meaning, in practice, one the Tatmadaw was guaranteed to win.

Virtually the entire population rose in outrage. Brutal military repression crushed public protests—the latest estimate is that the Tatmadaw has killed 1346 protestors, arrested 11,000 people, and is seeking another 2000 who so far have evaded arrest. However, creative protests continue, including “silent strikes,” which empty city streets. More ominous for the military is the revival of combat with rural-based ethnic groups, the rise of violent urban resistance, and possible cooperation between the two. The country is deadlocked, with a military too strong to oust and a population too resolute to coerce.

Although outsiders have limited opportunity to help, they can spread the truth about the military's depredations. For instance, in September, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights issued an update on the Tatmadaw's burgeoning regime of terror:

For decades, the Tatmadaw has committed gross human rights violations with impunity, including alleged international crimes against ethnic minorities that have been extensively documented for the Human Rights Council. Detailed recommendations have been made on accountability and security sector reform, but have not been implemented. Following the February coup, the Tatmadaw has systematically unleashed a new level of violence and repression across the country against the people of Myanmar.

The Burmese people responded with mass protests and civil disobedience. Opposition to military rule permeated all sectors of the population—those who had fought for democracy decades before and a rising youth generation whose members grew up with greater freedoms than their parents and grandparents. The military retaliated with brutal violence.

Explained OHCHR:

In succeeding months, a human rights crisis ensued, with a steady escalation of attacks against the civilian population as the Tatmadaw sought to suppress opposition and consolidate power. Military authorities abused the legal framework to stifle free expression, enable arbitrary deprivation of liberty, and strip away due process and fair trial rights as they detained thousands, particularly activists, journalists, and human rights defenders. When nationwide peaceful protests began, military authorities initially used less-lethal weapons in an unnecessary and disproportionate manner and conducted neighborhood raids, creating an atmosphere of terror. This evolved into systematic targeted killings and mass arrests, with torture and ill-treatment causing additional deaths in custody.

The Burmese people fought back by shutting down much of the economy:

Myanmar's economy has been crippled, largely resulting from mass worker strikes across sectors, including banking, transport, and logistics. Banking has been virtually brought to a standstill, severely limiting people's access to cash and rendering businesses unable to make or receive payments. Disruptions in the banking system have also reduced domestic and international remittance inflows, which provided an important source of income for millions of households.

Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, the country's health system has imploded. Investor confidence collapsed, driving foreign companies home. The regime ruthlessly sought to force essential economic services open, with limited success.

Aware that it lacks domestic support and international recognition, the regime has attempted to create a lawful appearance by formally authorizing its brutal repression. The rule of law, weak to start, has been wiped away, as OHCHR explained:

With the introduction of military tribunals in these areas, regional Commanders were authorized to try a range of criminal cases summarily and impose the harshest penalties for each crime—including death sentences—with no right of appeal, in violation of international fair trial standards. ... In areas without martial law, judicial proceedings have been conducted within

prisons ... most detainees have no access to legal counsel and the small minority who do, face significant challenges consulting with their lawyers and presenting evidence and witnesses.

Freedom of expression has disappeared. The junta suspended publications, manipulated telecommunications networks, limited internet access, and criminalized criticism. According to OHCHR, “As of 15 July 2021, at least 98 journalists have been arrested at some point since 1 February 2021, including Polish, Japanese, and American correspondents; another 33 had arrest warrants pending against them. Forty-six journalists remain in detention, 20 of whom have been criminally charged.”

Peaceful protests were immediately met with violence. The Tatmadaw increasingly turned to lethal weapons and tactics: “Security forces escalated violence, relying increasingly on lethal force, even employing military tactics and combat-grade weaponry, including semi-automatic rifles, snipers, and live ammunition, to disperse peaceful assemblies. In March and early April, use of lethal weapons, alongside unnecessary and disproportionate use of less-lethal weapons, led to a dramatic increase in arbitrary killings and wounding of peaceful protesters, including many children.” This escalation in violence caused protestors to turn to flash crowds and “silent protests.”

Arrests, imprisonment, and torture steadily expanded. First, the Tatmadaw detained members of the government, leaders of the NLD, election officials, and civil society activists. Then, noted OHCHR: “As young people mobilized to demonstrate peacefully against the takeover, mass arrests of students soared over the following month.” The regime “published daily lists of individuals wanted for arrest ..., primarily Myanmar celebrities, artists, doctors, educators, nurses, and others for their criticism of the coup” or other opposition activities. Moreover, in a move characteristic of totalitarian systems, “Military authorities have also taken at least 93 family members into custody in lieu of wanted individuals, presumably to pressure those in hiding to surrender themselves.”

Of course, these mass roundups did not conform to the rule of law. In many cases, those arrested simply disappeared. Torture was common. In addition, “Children have also been subject to arbitrary detention and processed through military interrogation centers.”

Burma is now in danger of imploding. Reported OHCHR:

Myanmar has faced multiple armed conflicts for decades, and following the coup, armed violence exponentially increased around the country. Armed conflicts between the Tatmadaw and ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), which existed prior to the coup in different states and regions of Myanmar have continued, intensified, and reignited. Separately, armed resistance has emerged, including in urban areas, made up of numerous new armed elements.

Indeed, the latter may be transformational. The Tatmadaw ruled for a half century after the initial coup in 1962 without violent domestic opposition. That has changed:

Armed elements began to form in many areas of Myanmar, some of which grew out of community-based neighborhood watch movements or local formations that demanded detainee releases or tried to protect demonstrators. Others banded together to launch attacks against security forces to secure control of their local areas. Some members of these groups and other individuals have undertaken forms of military training—in some cases provided by established armed groups.

The U.S. largely sits on the sidelines, since there is little it can do. Last week, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said: “It’s going to be very important in the weeks and months ahead to look at what additional steps and measures we can take individually, collectively to pressure the regime to put the country back on a democratic trajectory.”

While a U.N. arms embargo deserves support, so far China and Russia have blocked action—despite the fact that neither Beijing nor Moscow benefits from Burma’s economic and social collapse. Indeed, soon after the coup, Burmese demonstrators who assumed Chinese support for the junta burned down Chinese-owned businesses. There may be room for otherwise-unlikely cooperation.

The Tatmadaw and its leaders were already under direct economic sanctions before the coup. Western countries hit some companies run by the military, but much of the Tatmadaw’s resources come from resource sales critical to the overall economy.

Washington could go after these sectors, particularly the oil, gas, and gem industries. However, the Burmese people would bear the brunt of the cost, as there is little reason to expect the Tatmadaw to yield. Western governments should assess whether the Burmese people support targeting these industries in spite of the mass hardship that would result. The objective should be to end—or at least minimize—the military’s depredations, not engage in ostentatious moral preening.

Burma has suffered repression and conflict for decades. Noted OHCHR: “The coup has evolved into a human rights catastrophe that shows no signs of abating.” Burma is of minimal security interest to America. Washington’s focus should be to help the Burmese people remake their society through the rule of law, democracy, and peace.

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