

RESPONSIBLE STATECRAFT

A bloody stalemate one year after Myanmar coup tests our restraint

The international community may feel impotent, but there is a lot it can do to help — and Washington doesn't have to lead to get it done.

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February 7, 2022

The Tatmadaw, or Burmese military, staged its first coup six decades ago. A year ago in February the generals staged their latest takeover, against the semi-civilian government they created a decade ago. As a result, Burma — also known as Myanmar — is sliding into chaos and civil war, with the armed forces facing urban and rural insurgencies.

Confronted with unexpected countrywide protests and widespread civil disobedience, Burma's military has deployed lethal force. The Tatmadaw is believed to have killed 1500 people, detained 12,000 (with nearly 9000 still in prison), destroyed 2200 civilian structures —including homes — and displaced 320,000 people.

Increasingly under fire, soldiers are responding with atrocities. In December, Human Rights Watch detailed the latest brutal attack: “In a year where atrocities by Myanmar's military have been commonplace, credible reports of a massacre of 11 people, including 5 children, who were bound, shot, and then burned, have sparked revulsion and outrage.” This is just the latest of many.

As the horror expands, the rest of the world remains essentially impotent. Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, complained that the international response has been “ineffectual and lacks a sense of urgency commensurate to the magnitude of the crisis.” She concluded that “accountability of the military remains crucial to any solution going forward — the people overwhelmingly demand this.” Just not the right people, those with guns, unfortunately.

Her frustration is shared by Burmese activists. Wrote Wai Wai Nu: “while more and more of us have come together to call for justice, freedom, and democracy, the international community has failed to truly stand in solidarity with us, issuing lofty statements of condemnation but taking few practical steps to protect our lives.”

What can be done? After first seizing power the armed forces faced periodic opposition, but its control was never seriously challenged. After a pro-democracy uprising, the military held elections in 1990, in which Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won an

overwhelming majority. The Tatmadaw refused to recognize the results and staged a political crackdown. In 2007 Buddhist monks led a series of protests, which were ruthlessly repressed. Separately, multiple ethnic minorities began fighting for autonomy after Burma gained independence.

Beginning in 2008 the armed services created a hybrid system with a civilian façade. Under the new constitution the Tatmadaw ran the three security ministries and was guaranteed a quarter of parliamentary seats. The military could block any constitutional changes and Suu Kyi, a widely revered Nobel Laureate, was prohibited from serving as president.

The generals apparently expected a fragmented opposition, which would allow them to divide, conquer, and continue to rule. However, an overwhelming majority of the Burmese people voted for the NLD, which formed the first civilian government since 1962. The new parliament created the position of state counselor for Suu Kyi, from which she effectively governed “above” the president. However, reforms lagged. Freedom House continued to rate the country “Not Free” despite the partial shift to civilian control:

“Myanmar’s transition from military dictatorship to democracy stalled under the leadership of the National League for Democracy (NLD), which came to power in relatively free elections in 2015. The military, known as the Tatmadaw, retained significant influence over politics, and the government largely failed to uphold human rights and to prioritize peace and security in areas affected by armed conflict. A 2017 military operation and ongoing conflict have forced hundreds of thousands of people from the Rohingya minority, a mostly Muslim ethnic group, to seek refuge in Bangladesh, and those remaining in Rakhine State continue to face the threat of genocide. Journalists, activists, and ordinary people risked criminal charges and detention for voicing dissent during 2020, while a lengthy internet shutdown impaired access to vital news and information in Rakhine and Chin States.”

Nevertheless, the Tatmadaw was dissatisfied. In the November 2020 election the NLD won reelection by an even bigger margin, with the military’s party far behind. Civilian rule would only become more entrenched, with the Tatmadaw continuing to lose legitimacy.

So the generals falsely accused the government of electoral fraud, arrested public officials and NLD leadership, and appointed Hlaing prime minister. The Tatmadaw claimed to be upholding the law, and threatened journalists who referred to it as a “junta” or “regime.” Hlaing’s plan apparently was to close the NLD, bar Suu Kyi from politics (through a flurry of bogus criminal charges), and rerig the political process to ensure the Tatmadaw’s full control.

The military expected widespread obedience as before. However, the country changed over the last decade. The population is younger, more worldly, and unwilling to docilely accept a return to dictatorship. Mass demonstrations erupted after the coup. They were savagely suppressed, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, with “military tactics and combat-grade weaponry, including semi-automatic rifles, snipers, and live ammunition.” People now stage “flash mob” and silent protests, assembling and dispersing quickly and emptying streets and businesses. Moreover, civil disobedience has shut or stalled much of the economy, which last year shrank by a fifth.

Most ominously for the regime, armed opposition is spreading. Ethnic militias which had forged ceasefires with the military have taken up arms again. Urban activists also are turning to violent resistance. “Resistance groups are getting more sophisticated at targeting regime forces, and increasingly cooperating with various ethnic armed groups,” reported analyst Richard Horsey.

Reconciliation looks ever less likely. The generals have committed too many crimes to yield power or participate in a new democratic government. An increasing number of Burmese reject the Tatmadaw’s legitimacy and say they want a new, diverse military under civilian control. Neither side is currently strong enough to prevail. The hardships facing the Burmese people is only likely to increase.

What can the rest of the world do? The United States isn’t going to war in Burma, and certainly no one else is going to do so. A United Nations arms embargo would target the Tatmadaw but faces a Russian and Chinese Security Council veto. Tougher sanctions on the economy would hurt the military — but only along with the rest of society and would be unlikely to drive the Tatmadaw from power. Everything else is akin to what Nu called “issuing lofty statements of condemnation.”

The most important objective should be to defund the Tatmadaw and punish its leaders. Economic sanctions should target army commanders and their civilian enablers. Broader restrictions, including on the sale of minerals and hydrocarbons, would hit the population as well as military. The U.S. government should consult the National Unity Government in exile as well as expatriates and NGOs to ascertain whether the Burmese people would support such a course.

Washington should promote a broad coalition in favor of a United Nations ban on weapons sales to the Tatmadaw. That would require assent or acquiescence from China and Russia. For them, the U.S. should focus its arguments on stability rather than democracy. China enjoyed good relations with the NLD government. Chinese-owned factories already have been destroyed by protestors; broader violence strife would put all Chinese investments and plans at risk. Moscow also risks its future relationship with the country if it backs the regime as civilian resistance grows. Arming the Tatmadaw to fight its own people ensures the enmity of any regime which follows the junta.

Private citizens and NGOs also can aid the cause of Burmese democracy. Public protests and shame campaigns should embarrass the regime and its enablers. Aid could also help sustain activists and people as their economy suffers.

Burma is a human tragedy with no foreign answer. Washington and other democratic states should focus on sustaining the Burmese people as they fight to control their own future. After six decades of military rule, the Tatmadaw should step aside, instead of forcing its victims to depose it violently.

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