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## Military Rule Destroys Burma's Future

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Burma's coup leader General Min Aung Hlaing now claims to be a nominally civilian ruler. He anointed himself prime minister while extending the military's state of emergency into 2023, promising a return to democratic rule afterwards: "We must create conditions to hold a free and fair multiparty general election."

Of course, to prevent just such an election is why the Tatmadaw, as the Burmese military is known, drafted the current constitution, which was intended to create a civilian gloss to continued military rule. Preventing a fair election in the semi-democracy that had resulted is why Hlaing orchestrated the February coup.

And preventing a fair election is why the military renewed its reign of terror against the civilian population, which has sought to defend the freedoms it has gained over the last decade. Since February 1 the Tatmadaw has detained elected civilian leaders, killed at least 940 protestors, arrested some 6,000 people, launched nightly raids against activists, and extended military control throughout government ministries, public enterprises, and private businesses. Reported the *New York Times*: "Prisons are once again filled with poets, Buddhist monk and politicians." In response to military raids thousands of Burmese have fled their homes and even country. As the Covid-19 pandemic rages, the junta halted civilian immunizations and redirected vaccines to the military. Now Hlaing has formally added another couple of years of overtly military rule to create a new, more rigidly controlled democratic façade to the dictatorial regime.

The military's brutality makes opposition dangerous, but the Burmese people have refused to yield. Flash mob protests continue, with participants dispersing before the police and military can arrive. Doctors, teachers, bankers, civil servants, and others have walked off their jobs, creating a national civil disobedience movement. Hundreds of police and soldiers have defected. A provisional National Unity Government is seeking international support.

Indeed, a nascent national armed resistance has emerged: Multiple ethnic militias have returned to the battlefield; dozens of Chinese-owned factories have been burned; a growing urban movement across the country known as Peoples Defense Force has attacked security personnel and bombed police stations, government offices, and state installations, including utilities and

banks; junta sympathizers, officials, and informants have been assassinated; and thousands of activists have received military training from ethnic militias.

Although opposition is widespread, and far broader than against previous Tatmadaw rule, the odds of victory remain long. However, the likelihood that the military, which has reigned in Burma (also known as Myanmar) since 1962, will be able to reimpose order across the country is also low. The Tatmadaw propagandizes, disciplines, and brutalizes its conscripts to keep them in line, but has lost all credibility with the rest of the population, other than those who profit from military's extensive commercial activities.

Even more dangerous for the regime, people's expectations have risen. For decades Burmese saw no hope and could only assume continued dictatorship. However, the last decade—with its shared civilian rule, free though limited elections, expanded economic opportunities, and increased personal and civil liberties—showed people what they now risk losing. On a mass scale younger Burmese are refusing to kowtow to Hlaing and the rest of the Tatmadaw's corrupt, repressive leadership. The people's views are trickling down to the security services. The number of defectors remains small compared to their overall numbers, 350,000 soldiers in the Tatmadaw alone, but are a potential harbinger of many more to come.

Hlaing's latest pronouncement, and the extra years that he now intends to take to "create conditions" for new elections, likely reflect his realization that the military's original plan is kaput. He is believed to have repudiated the military's own scheme for limited democracy because after two landslide elections by the National League for Democracy, headed by Aung San Suu Kyi, he realized that the military was losing the battle for public support. And though the military could prevent the NLD from overturning constitutional provisions favoring the Tatmadaw, having grabbed 25 percent of parliament's seats and insulated the military from public oversight—the generals could not extend their reach. Hlaing reportedly wanted to become president, a political gift the NLD would never bestow.

Thus, he followed the example of the Thai military. In 2014 it staged a coup that unashamedly imposed military rule on the country, imprisoning most anyone who protested against or even criticized the junta. Then it rewrote the constitution to guarantee its ability to retain political control. Although student protests erupted last year, so far the Bangkok regime remains in charge. Whenever a new civilian threat to military rule arises, political parties are disbanded, politicians are banned, and activists are jailed.

However, this now is looking like a dubious model for the Tatmadaw to follow. Whether the Thai military can sustain its control is yet to be seen. Moreover, the Burmese people have good reason to fight more desperately than Thais. In Thailand military rule had been only occasional. The political system was rigged for urban, military, and monarchical elites, but remained mostly free. The country was open to the West and enjoyed some prosperity. Popular frustration triggered a populist eruption and military counter-reaction, but there remained hope of a better future. Few Thais are prepared to destroy the system.

Not so in Burma. Denied even the pretense of democracy for more than a half century. Stuck in the region's worst poverty. Oppressed by a ruthless regime. Hopes and expectations of improved opportunities dashed.

But with the disappearance of people's dreams came a greater willingness to fight back. So Burma now faces an extended period of chaos and conflict, in which neither the junta nor the people are likely to gain victory. That might be the best case, however. Widespread violence looks possible, which could convulse urban as well as rural areas.

What should the U.S. do? Burma's quasi-democratic system falls far short of genuine liberal democracy. Moreover, Suu Kyi, a Nobel laureate for her lengthy and courageous battle against military rule, disappointed her Western backers by defending the Tatmadaw in its campaign against the Rohingya and failing to challenge government restrictions on civil and political liberties, especially involving the media. All true and unfortunate, but the Suu Kyi-led NLD in the present system is still far superior to direct military rule in any incarnation at any time.

Hlaing claimed election fraud on the part of the NLD, but his allegations were dismissed by outside observers. Although the voting process was not perfect, any irregularities did not affect the overall outcome. And Hlaing is in no position to complain about the niceties of democratic practice, having created a constitution designed to maintain military control over the elected government. Reportedly the generals abandoned the very political system they had created because their puppet political party did much worse than expected in last November's poll.

Who is at fault is not in question. Observed Brad Adams of Human Rights Watch: "Myanmar's junta has responded to massive popular opposition to the coup with killings, torture, and arbitrary detention of people who merely want last year's election results to be respected and a government that reflects the popular will."

Some Burmese hope for outside military rescue, but this is not a new sentiment. On my first trip to Burma two decades ago, when I visited areas controlled by the largely Christian ethnic Karen, I was asked why the U.S. did not do there what it had done in Kosovo. After the earlier junta's botched response to Cyclone Nargis in 2008, [proposals for humanitarian intervention](#) circulated in the West. Now some frustrated Burmese activists have mooted the possibility of Western military action.

That isn't going to happen. Options range from [full-scale invasion](#) to [selective airstrikes](#), but none are appealing. Burma has no notable security significance for America, and humanitarian intervention has lost its sheen after Washington's botched interventions in the Middle East. Absent the U.S., there is neither much interest in nor ability to engage in "humanitarian intervention." Even the United Kingdom is little concerned about its onetime colony, after their historic ties were degraded by a half century of oppressive Burmese isolation.

Sanctions have become Washington's go-to policy but their value is limited. Hlaing and other Tatmadaw leaders already have been penalized for the military's brutality toward the ethnic Rohingya. The best policy would be to target the military and its many civilian enterprises. Most vulnerable may be oil and gas exports, whose revenues benefit the junta. However, the broader

the reach of sanctions, the greater the likelihood of hurting innocent Burmese, who today are the Tatmadaw's chief victims. U.S. and Western policymakers should consult with leaders of the Burmese resistance inside and outside of the country to assess what policies are supported by the population. The West should not sacrifice the interests of the Burmese people in pursuit of unrealistic ideals unlikely to be reached.

Politically, the U.S. should work with Asian and European states to further isolate the junta and press for United Nations sanctions, most importantly against arms sales. Such steps are unlikely to oust Hlaing but could help undermine his legitimacy and encourage resistance. The regime already is largely alone. The UN General Assembly passed a resolution denouncing the junta and advocating an arms embargo; even Beijing is not comfortable with the Tatmadaw, having forged a good relationship with the Suu Kyi government. The West should continue to press China and Russia, in particular, to limit their backing for the junta, noting the long-term harm to their reputations in Burma from supporting the Tatmadaw. The U.S. and friendly countries also should offer humanitarian assistance, but only directly to the Burmese people, not through the military.

The best outcome would be the generals' retreat, but absent an intramilitary coup against Hlaing and his clique, that is highly unlikely. The Tatmadaw's current leadership has gone too far. Its ongoing war against the population has made a return to the status quo impossible.

More likely is an extended struggle in which the military's only answer will be increased repression. But that is more likely to intensify than break resistance. Washington's goal should be to encourage creation of a broad coalition committed to weakening the junta financially, politically, and militarily. Similar efforts should be waged to strengthen the opposition.

Particularly important is aiding the free flow of information both ways and encouraging more police and soldiers to break ranks. Moreover, should regime brutality, and consequently civilian casualties, increase dramatically, Washington should consider taking tougher steps against the regime's access to and ability to produce weapons.

The Burmese people have suffered under military rule for six decades. Unfortunately, their travails continue after the latest coup. The U.S. and allied countries cannot solve Burma's problems, but they can help the Burmese people suffer through the junta's repression. People of good will around the world should look for opportunities outside of politics to support Burma's population and resistance, too. The Burmese freedom struggle endures.

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