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Burma Heads for Violent Chaos and Civil War

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What can be done?

What happens when an irresistible army meets the unmovable people? We may find out in Burma. The Southeast Asian country appears to be moving toward convulsion, collapse, and chaos. The ultimate result might be civil war.

Burma, also known as Myanmar, has suffered under military rule since 1962. The Tatmadaw, as the armed services are known, views itself as the embodiment of the state and routinely brutalizes the population to maintain control. For decades, the junta mutated into vicious variants amid popular uprisings.

After bloody protests in 1988, the Tatmadaw, underestimating the opposition, held elections two years later. After Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of a general and independence leader, handily won, the military tossed the results. She received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 and spent 15 years under house arrest. Another round of protests was brutally suppressed in 2007.

Separately, the military battled numerous ethnic groups, which fought for the autonomy promised when the United Kingdom freed its colony in 1948. The results were brutal combat and widespread war crimes. Even where the army was unable to hold territory, it routinely murdered and displaced residents. The Tatmadaw also sowed landmines, leaving entire areas uninhabitable. Tens of thousands of Burmese fled across the border into Thailand, where they continue to reside in refugee camps.

Concerned about China's tight embrace, however, the military began a process of limited democratization a decade ago, allowing civilian governance while preserving control over security issues and limiting political change. Again, the Tatmadaw underestimated the opposition. Despite writing the constitution to prevent Suu Kyi from being eligible to hold the presidency, Burma found her National League for Democracy (NLD) overwhelmingly winning the 2015 parliamentary elections. A special office was then created: State Counsellor, which was "above the president," she archly noted.

For the West, she proved to be a great disappointment, discouraging the development of other party and political leaders, enforcing authoritarian restrictions on press freedom and other civil liberties, and defending the military's deadly campaign against the Muslim Rohingya, which forced hundreds of thousands of refugees into Bangladesh. Freedom House warned that the reform process had "stalled" and rated Burma as unfree.

Human Rights Watch also found little to praise:

The overall human rights situation in Myanmar deteriorated in 2020, including heightened restrictions on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. Fighting between Myanmar's military and several ethnic armed groups continued, with government forces committing increased abuses against ethnic Kachin, Karen, Rakhine, Rohingya, and Shan minority populations. Military and police abuses were amplified with arbitrary arrests, detention, torture, and killings in custody.

Nevertheless, Suu Kyi's NLD won last November's election by an even bigger margin than before. Although disappointed in the government's performance, the Burmese people recognized that only the united NLD could confront the generals. But the Tatmadaw had again misjudged its opponents and expected a fractured parliament, which it could manipulate. Its captive political party received embarrassingly few votes. Although the military could continue to block constitutional changes, it would find itself under increased popular pressure to yield ground. And the army's commander-in-chief, Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, would be thwarted in his reported desire to be chosen as president — by a parliament that would be firmly controlled by the NLD.

Claiming widespread election fraud, declared nonexistent by election observers, Hlaing seized power on February 1. He declared a state of emergency, arrested top government and party officials, including Suu Kyi, and promised new elections — no doubt to occur with a rewritten constitution and Suu Kyi barred from the political process. Indeed, Thailand offered a model of how a military could create a faux democracy and continue to rule behind the façade of elections.

But Burma's generals made yet another bad assumption: that the public would either believe the regime's self-serving claims or passively accept a return to open dictatorship. The Burmese people did neither, however. The world has changed over the last decade. An older generation had experienced the relaxation of brutal autocracy for the first time in a half century. A younger generation grew up with greater freedom, increased information access, and genuine political participation.

Indeed, opposition to the military brought together Burmese from all walks of society. Author Mimi Aye, a British resident whose family suffered under successive military juntas, wrote,

Every day, we're seeing all ethnic groups (including the Rohingya), all religions, all professions and industries (spearheaded by medics in a White Coat Revolution), and even punks and drag queens marching, together and waving the three-finger salute to show support for the Civil Disobedience Movement — a nationwide, decentralized and incredibly creative initiative intended to shut down the country, and thus the Tatmadaw's activities, using peaceful means.

In response, the military rolled out its old tactic of brutal repression. But, observed Richard Horsey of the International Crisis Group:

The problem for the regime is that, unlike in 1988 or the 1990s or the 2007 suppression of the Saffron Revolution, the violence is not producing its desired results. Despite the bloodshed, people continue to demonstrate in the streets, a large proportion of public sector employees refuse to work for the regime, a general strike of key private sector staff continues. Army violence is not effective at convincing scared bank staff or truck drivers to return to work. Violence cannot restore business confidence. A military rampage on the streets and in the homes of Yangon and Mandalay and other towns appears a desperate attempt to terrorize the

population into submission; instead, it has created chaos. Various forms of violent urban resistance to the regime are also emerging.

Continuing popular protests despite the murder of more than 600 demonstrators testifies to the bravery of the Burmese people. Equally significant is the unprecedented national shutdown of government agencies, critical public services, and important private businesses, such as banks. The public also is boycotting firms tied to the Tatmadaw that enrich the military elite.

As a result, the country is shutting down. The New York Times explained, “an entire nation has come to a standstill. From hospitals, railways and dockyards to schools, shops and trading houses, much of society has stopped showing up for work in an attempt to stymie the military regime and force it to return authority to a civilian government.” As business slows, so do tax revenues. Moreover, the regime’s U.S. assets have been frozen, and debt has become difficult to sell abroad.

More ominously, popular patience with peaceful resistance is fraying. Demonstrators have started tossing stones at and using slingshots against security forces. Internet searches on Molotov cocktails have burgeoned. Chinese-owned factories have been torched — reflecting the widespread belief that Beijing backed the coup. One protester told the *Washington Post*, “We are glad to see arson continue in other areas. We will do it again whenever we have the chance.” And ceasefires with a dozen ethnic forces are under strain, with combat already having broken out between the Tatmadaw and Karen National Liberation Army.

What do the generals do next? They have killed hundreds, detained thousands, closed independent publications, shut internet access, and issued threats far and wide. Resistance continues. More than two months in, the regime has few options left. The Tatmadaw’s well-laid plans obviously are kaput. The regime no longer even commands most government agencies. No one in Burma takes seriously the military’s claim that only a few malcontents are to blame for protests. No one outside of Burma defends the military. Even Beijing has avoided endorsing the Tatmadaw.

But it is impossible for the regime to back down. Too much has happened for a return to the status quo ante. The Burmese people would insist on justice as well as democracy. This means the coup-masters must forge ahead. But moving in that direction increasingly risks plunging into the abyss.

The generals have been increasing their use of violence. At some point, they may see their only option as massed fire on crowds, with catastrophic consequences. The only hope to avert that disaster may be a break in the military. There have been some police defections, but the Tatmadaw is a far tougher organization. The officer corps enjoys a privileged life; members likely figure they will either hang together or hang separately. Moreover, officers’ families have been drawn into the capital of Naypyidaw, apparently both for safety and to act as hostages to ensure soldiers’ loyalties. Common soldiers are conscripts whose family members mostly voted for the NLD but suffer from brutal discipline and rigorous indoctrination.

What can the U.S. and other democratic countries do? Diplomacy is irrelevant for the Tatmadaw, a largely self-contained institution that survived decades in isolation. The generals appear ready to sacrifice all the gains made over the last decade.

Nor is there a military option. Most of Washington's allies don't want to defend themselves; they certainly won't fight for the Burmese people. The U.S. has no security interests at stake, and there would be no public support for such a misadventure. Although America's armed forces are far superior, the sizable Burmese army would fight. The humanitarian consequences of urban battles would be horrid. The countryside is insurgent-friendly, hosting ethnic forces that long survived against the superior Tatmadaw.

Worth review, however, would be the possibility of drone strikes to destroy stored arms, which the army could use against civilians. The goal would be to degrade the Tatmadaw's ability to harm the Burmese people, without engaging in a shooting war.

This leaves economic pressure. But the military ruled for decades despite U.S. and European sanctions. Washington already has targeted top Tatmadaw leaders and military-related enterprises. Still, the U.S. and other democratic states should sanction any businesses owned by, tied to, or in business with the armed forces. Penalties might be expanded to jute, lumber, and natural gas exports, industries dominated by the military. The goal should be to dry up as much of the regime's resources as possible.

The U.S. should, however, avoid broad economic sanctions, which would hurt the people more than the military. Indeed, regime elites and their allies often profit from such controls, since the powerful have the means to dominate new markets created by smugglers and others. American and allied diplomats should contact civil society leaders in the country to learn what the Burmese people want friendly nations to do.

America also should work with Europe in supporting similar United Nations penalties, including an embargo on sale of weapons, surveillance technologies, and other mechanisms of control to the regime. Both China and Russia would normally be expected to vote no. But sanctions supporters should note the angry popular reaction against China and suggest to both governments that supporting such a measure would help insulate Moscow and Beijing from further popular rage. Washington also should privately assure the PRC that America has no design to displace China from Burma or push U.S. trade and investment under a new government. The Biden administration should argue that addressing the plight of Burmese who are being shot down in the street should not be derailed by the vagaries of the U.S.–China relationship.

Finally, Washington and like-minded states should urge India and Japan, two Asian democratic nations with substantial economic ties with Burma, to weigh in against the military, at least to oppose mass violence. Neither Delhi nor Tokyo is typically a fan of intervening in other nations' political strife. Economic collapse and street massacres, however, would be catastrophic for India's and Japan's investments as well as Burma's well-being.

The Burmese people have suffered tragically for six decades. What comes next could be worse than ever before. Horsey warned, "The glue that has long held the fractured country together is coming unstuck. The world faces the prospect of chaotic state failure in a country with myriad armed groups, a large and well-equipped military that is unlikely to capitulate, and a huge illicit economy backed by transnational criminal organizations that will exploit the situation as they have done for years." The result would be a genuine crisis, terrible tragedy compounded by tremendous insecurity.

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