



Burma's Military Junta Totters Toward the Brink

Description

WORLD : Opponents of the military junta ruling Burma (or Myanmar) recently took another small step toward winning the ongoing civil war.

The Karen National Liberation Army, an ethnic militia which has long fought for autonomy, captured some 600 government soldiers and seized Myawaddy, a busy border city.

Humiliated, the regime had to fly personnel and records out of neighboring Mae Sot in Thailand. Last weekend, fighting continued as insurgents attacked retreating government forces.

While the junta recaptured the city Tuesday, its gain remains tenuous. Reinforcements sent two weeks ago from a base three hours away have yet to arrive, blocked by other KNLA units.

The victory seems modest since Myawaddy has limited strategic value. Yet the town was a fixture of military control when in years past I visited the region to cover the KNLA's fight on behalf of the largely Christian Karen people.

The current battle follows a coordinated offensive last October by several other militia groups that seized several border posts in the Shan State to the north, neighboring China. Overall, the opposition controls upwards of 60 percent of the country.

Most important, the Tatmadaw, or military, is weakening. Increasing numbers of soldiers are surrendering; insurgents are cooperating more effectively; opponents are capturing abundant military materiel; fighters are targeting junta leaders.

In February the so-called State Administration Council, an anodyne title for the brutal military regime, announced enforcement of universal conscription. Draft avoidance activities burgeoned, from hurried marriages to foreign flight.

Potential conscripts also have joined both the ethnic militias and the People's Defense Force, which is contesting control of the dominant Burman heartland.

The regime retains an advantage in airpower, which it deploys ruthlessly and cruelly against insurgents and civilians alike. However, military morale is cratering.

Observed Thomas Kean, a consultant with the International Crisis Group: “They have lost thousands of soldiers, either killed, wounded or taken as prisoners, and lost a huge amount of weapons.” Even before the latest losses “There was already some discontent within the military leadership and the pro-military circles.”

Indeed, there is increasing speculation that the army, whose common soldiers are abused, underfed, isolated, and misused, might break. No longer are troops battling distant ethnic groups.

Now they are fighting members of their own villages and even families. Expanding resistance across the country has stretched the Tatmadaw thin. Wives and children patrol bases in the absence of the men.

Forcing regime opponents into uniform might spur resistance within the armed forces, with increased desertions, surrenders, sabotage, and attacks on officers, bringing to mind “fragging” by U.S. personnel in Vietnam.

Disagreements are growing even among top commanders, with harsh punishments meted out to those who fail. Additional defeats will only increase tensions. Moreover, the opposition has demonstrated its ability to target military leaders and reach the capital, meaning no one is safe.

Observed Terence Lee of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies: “The more disillusioned they become, the more likely they are willing to move against [coup leader] Min Aung Hlaing.

He promised a bed of roses but that didn’t turn out to be the case as the country now is in civil war and many do not accept the legitimacy of the Tatmadaw.”

The military has misruled the country since 1962. The junta held elections in 1990, which resulted in a landslide victory for Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of an independence hero, and the National League for Democracy.

The regime voided the election, triggering democracy protests that were swiftly crushed. The nation’s Burman heartland, though hostile to military rule, remained largely quiescent as conflict continued to rage in the ethnic-dominated borderlands.

In 2010 the Tatmadaw created a hybrid system, sharing power with an elected civilian government. The Burmese military, like that in Thailand, expected to maintain control by rigging the electoral system and manipulating the government structure.

Suu Kyi and the NLD, however, won overwhelmingly despite the generals’ hope to fracture the opposition. Fearing that it was losing authority, Hlaing, described as “power-hungry, slithery and wolflike,” staged a coup in February 2022.

The Tatmadaw took over government agencies, abolished democratic institutions, proscribed demonstrations, arrested Suu Kyi, NLD leaders, and other military critics, and staged Stalinesque show

trials of its opponents, including Suu Kyi.

Hlaing called for “unity between the military and the people,” but the latter are the junta’s primary victims. The regime soon crushed non-violent protests and mass civil disobedience, killing and imprisoning thousands.

The Tatmadaw miscalculated. The Burmese people, especially the younger generation, had come to expect more freedom and opportunities. No longer was there peaceful acceptance of military rule.

Multiple ethnic militias reignited rural insurgencies that had ebbed a decade ago and trained an influx of urban volunteers. More dramatically, opposition throughout majority Bamar or Burman territory turned violent with formation of the PDF units.

An incredible 315 of 330 townships are aflame. The regime is almost alone in waging war on its population as the opposition formed the National Unity Government.

The coup and resulting conflict have left the country in shambles. Nikkei Asia reported, “The economy and currency have tumbled perilously, the peace process with insurgent ethnic minorities has foundered, the medical system has buckled after defiant doctors and nurses quit public hospitals or were arrested, and hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people cower along remote borders.”

As resistance has stiffened, the military has grown more murderous and destructive, killing civilians, destroying villages, and displacing residents.

So far, tens of thousands of civilians have been killed and almost three million people have been driven from their homes. Some analysts fear that another million might be displaced this year by the regime’s “campaign of brutality.”

Washington should eschew military involvement. On my first trip to the region a quarter century ago, Bo Mya, the legendary Karen leader, asked me why Washington did not do for the Karen what it had done for the Kosovars, whom the U.S. protected from the Serb military.

My cynical response was that their land held no oil. More seriously, the U.S. has no important security interests in Burma that warrant going to war. So distant is this battle that, amazingly, none of Washington’s predictable war hawks have advocated intervention.

Adding another conflict would be especially foolish when the allies are engaged in a dangerous proxy war with Russia, North Korea is building ICBMs capable of hitting America, Israel’s war on Gaza has inflamed the Mideast, and American officials are threatening China if it attacks Taiwan.

There simply is no justification for risking the lives of Americans, including military personnel, in Burma.

Overthrowing the regime would be costly and transfer responsibility for Burma’s future to America, creating an unpredictable, probably violent long-term commitment. Supporting an insurgency is tempting but could go bad. The U.S. would become responsible for the outcome—and war is rarely a good humanitarian tool.

The best strategy is working with friendly states to weaken the regime. The U.S. has sanctioned Naypyidaw, but most countries in the region, including India, Japan, and the Southeast Asian states,

have proved reluctant to follow suit.

Resistance to targeting general commerce, most notably energy sales, which would further impoverish the general population, is understandable.

Nevertheless, the regime deserves the same treatment as Russia when it comes to cutting state revenue and restricting military purchases, especially of jet fuel for the air force, as well as defunding businesses run by military elites and their cronies.

Although it is premature to recognize NUG, as the junta's hold on power weakens Burma's neighbors might become more willing to expand ties with it. Naypyidaw's defeat in Myawaddy caused the Thai prime minister to suggest pushing the junta to engage the opposition.

Along with official ties could come as much as a billion dollars in regime funds frozen after the coup.

Naypyidaw's most important supporters are Russia and China. The former is unlikely to abandon the junta so long as it is under attack by the allies over Ukraine. Which is another good reason to try to end, rather than prolong, the Ukraine war.

Beijing might be more willing to cooperate on Burma. The former's relationship with the Tatmadaw was undermined by the former's suspicion, even hostility. In contrast, China established good relations with the Suu Kyi government. Beijing has shown no great affection for the junta.

Indeed, tired of the regime's toleration of organized criminal activity along its border, China apparently acquiesced in last October's insurgent operations in Shan State.

Washington should disclaim any intent to push China aside in a new democratic Burma and encourage the Xi government to take a more balanced stance between regime and insurgency. Beijing might prefer a stable, prosperous though democratic neighbor which leaned its way rather than the status quo.

Finally, governments friendly with Burma's democrats should encourage cooperation between the largely Bamar PDF and the ethnic movements. To forge a unified opposition against the junta, anti-regime elements need to build trust, especially by guaranteeing greater autonomy for ethnic minorities.

Promises of financial aid from the region's democracies, starting with Japan and India, might help encourage greater comity.

For more than six decades the Burmese people have suffered from political oppression and economic deprivation due to military rule. A decade ago, they had reason to expect a brighter future.

The Tatmadaw is delivering the opposite. The road ahead remains long and hard, but recent gains by the opposition revive hope of creating a new Burma, one in which the Burmese people finally rule.

BY Doug Bandow

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