

Between Political Violence and COVID-19

Many Citizens in Myanmar Pushed to Armed Resistance

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The Myanmar military coup led by Sr. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing occurred on 1 February 2021, and since then the junta has consistently demonstrated its propensity for violence and repression toward Myanmar's citizens protesting the new regime.¹ In self-defense, many citizens established civilian-led militias or joined the ranks of established ethnic armed organizations (EAOs). From Naypyitaw, the battlefield view is convoluted: the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's armed forces) must deal with civilian protests in its major cities while battling multiple ethnic insurgent groups on different fronts. That being said, counterinsurgency is an area in which the Tatmadaw has excelled since its inception decades ago, and Myanmar's civilians are paying the overwhelming price of dissent. Further, the State Administrative Council (SAC) has used the COVID-19 pandemic to its advantage, amassing critical oxygen and vaccine supplies for use in its security forces while denying lifesaving care to those outside its ranks.

Since initiating the bloody coup on 1 February, the SAC has officially nullified the results of Myanmar's 2020 general elections and arrested senior national leaders, including Aung San Suu Kyi.² It is responsible for the deaths of more than 900 protesters and bystanders, the enforced disappearances of more than 100 persons, and the torture and rape of an unknown number in custody.³ Protesters took to the streets in the hundreds of thousands during the early days of the coup, but many have moved to flash mob-style protests lasting less than ten minutes to avoid violent repercussions from the Tatmadaw.⁴ In April, a group of ousted politicians, activists, and representatives from several ethnic minority groups formed the National Unity Government (NUG), with the stated goal of ending military rule and restoring democracy.⁵ The NUG first endorsed self-defense on 14 March and then announced the creation of People's Defense Forces on 5 May to oppose the SAC.⁶

In addition to killing civilians, the SAC has also imposed restrictions on the transportation of food, fuel, and other critical commodities into Kayah State since 28 May, starving residents of basic necessities.⁷ Tom Andrews, the UN special rapporteur for Myanmar, recently warned of "mass deaths from starvation, disease, and exposure in Myanmar" resulting from the Tatmadaw's restriction of

critical resources.⁸ The military has also been implicated in prosecuting and killing workers delivering humanitarian aid to affected areas. On 26 May, security forces gunned down two youths in Demoso Township, Kayah State, who were delivering food to displaced people and arrested three volunteers on their way back from assisting civilians.⁹ Reportedly, the Tatmadaw has undertaken an extensive online disinformation campaign, prolifically uploading Facebook posts designed to sow distrust among insurgent groups.¹⁰

As the regime continues to employ deadly tactics to subdue protesters, many citizens turned to violent resistance, which has extended to forming civilian militias and joining established EAOs.¹¹ In Myanmar's cities, residents took measures for self-protection in response to increasingly violent crackdowns from the Tatmadaw, including barricading roads, appointing night watches to monitor security forces, and creating defense groups armed with makeshift weapons and shields.¹² At one point, Frontier Myanmar magazine reported at least 10 urban rebel cells, while Radio Free Asia recorded at least 300 explosions since the February coup, which mainly targeted police and administrative offices, as well as other facilities connected to the regime.¹³ The antiregime movement is a diverse mix of Myanmar's citizens; its membership ranges from professional groups—including engineers and teachers—to preexisting civil society networks and labor unions.¹⁴

In the countryside, civilian self-defense militias evolved differently. Given the military's preoccupation with protests in major cities, rural citizens found themselves able to demonstrate free from heavy-handed crackdowns for much longer.¹⁵ Locally organized militias have fought the Tatmadaw in many areas, with notable battles occurring in parts of Chin State, Kayah State, as well as the Sagaing, Magway, and Mandalay regions.¹⁶ Tamu Township, in the Sagaing region on the India border, was the site of one of the earliest clashes. After the killing of a protester by security forces on 25 March, locals formed the Tamu Security Group (TSG) and began stockpiling rifles, purchasing grenades, and creating improvised explosive devices.¹⁷ After a number of battles and utilizing their intimate knowledge of the terrain to carry out guerrilla-style warfare, the TSG claims to have killed 15 members of the armed forces.¹⁸ The Tatmadaw reportedly enlisted the help of a militia composed of Meitei fighters from the Indian state of Manipur to help combat TSG, and the security situation in the area remains tense.¹⁹ Civilian-created militia groups have tended to be most effective in regions with existing militias or ethnic armed groups or with strong traditions of hunting.²⁰ Many civilian militias have also proven adept in regions that have not been subject to armed conflict for some time where the Tatmadaw's infrastructure, weaponry, and intelligence capacity are underdeveloped.

Citizens have also turned to established ethnic armed groups (EAO) for protection and war-fighting skills. Dissidents and activists have received military training and combat experience from established EAOs, such as the Kachin Independence Army, Karenni Army, and Karen National Liberation Army.²¹ Members of the NUG have also sought refuge from the SAC in border regions controlled by ethnic insurgents.²² Especially in the early days of the coup, while the Tatmadaw was focused on Myanmar's major cities, armed ethnic groups were able to launch coordinated attacks in the countryside, killing numerous Tatmadaw soldiers and raiding outposts.²³ The Arakan Army (AA) in Rakhine State has also played a complicated role in postcoup Myanmar. As the military wing of the United League of Arakan, the AA was removed from the Tatmadaw's list of "terrorist" groups in March, reportedly so that the military could end the distraction of fighting on its northern frontier.²⁴ However, this has not prevented AA troops from engaging the Tatmadaw in combat, and in June the AA released a number of captured soldiers to the security forces.²⁵ In all likelihood, the AA sees Myanmar's evolving security situation as a means to extract concessions from the military while it fights on multiple fronts, as well as an opportunity to more strongly assert its political interests in Rakhine State.²⁶

At times, civilian-organized militias have combined forces with established militant groups and created entirely new organizations. The Karenni Nationalities Defence Force (KNDF) is one such example, which formed on 31 May as a merger of factions from the People's Defense Forces and EAOs throughout Kayah and Shan States.²⁷ The KNDF has claimed it has killed nearly 200 members of the security forces since 21 May, and it has been known to target alleged Tatmadaw informants.²⁸ In June, the KNDF was involved in heavy fighting in Kayah State, bordering Thailand, with the confrontation peaking in Demoso Township, where the group reportedly killed about 80 members of the security forces.²⁹ In response to KNDF resistance in Demoso, the Tatmadaw employed overwhelming force, utilizing artillery barrages, airstrikes, and helicopter gunships, which led to the displacement of more than 100,000 civilians.³⁰ The huge impact on civilians brought the KNDF to the negotiating table on 15 June in talks facilitated by local church leaders. Both sides reached a temporary cease-fire agreement, which tentatively remains in place.³¹

The emergence of civilian militias and growth of established EAOs following the February coup carry wide-ranging implications for Myanmar. Some observers have suggested that opposition to the military junta presents an opportunity for different ethnic groups to work together against a common enemy.³² In an interview with the *New York Times*, Col. Mai Aik Kyaw, of the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, seems to echo this sentiment, noting that cooperation among

EAOs will lead to better outcomes for resistance groups.³³ However, not every ethnic armed group has been able to overcome the divide-and-rule strategy of the Tatmadaw, which has come to define its approach to counterinsurgency.³⁴ In Shan State, for example, a recent proposal for unity between the Restoration Council of Shan State and the Shan State Progressive Party under the proposed Shan State for Federal is yet to occur.³⁵ The sheer number of ethnic groups further obscures clear communication among EAOs, and many of the major ethnic groups have more than one armed organization claiming to represent their interests.³⁶

Additionally, the NUG will struggle to achieve its stated goal of bringing established or civilian militias under a single command. Many of the ethnic armed groups remain wary of the NUG, which was initially formed by a Bamar political party that, prior to the coup, was widely criticized for ignoring the rights and grievances of Myanmar's ethnic minorities.³⁷ The Chin National Front remains the only ethnic militia formally allied with the NUG, and its vice chairman and NUG minister of federal affairs, Salai Lian Hmung Sakhong, has expressed his concern of a Bamar-dominated coalition.³⁸ Although many of these militias express support for the parallel government, the majority have had minimal contact with the NUG and have not stated their express intention to come under its command.³⁹ Civilian militias have, thus far, declined to enter a formal military alliance with NUG and seem more likely to form alliances under the authority of EAOs, as the Kayah militia has done and as the Kachin Independence Organisation has stipulated that any militia in Kachin State must do.⁴⁰ That being said, there remains the possibility that the NUG will be more appealing to EAOs given that it has openly endorsed federalism rather than a centralized authority; it also boasts significantly more ethnic minorities than the cabinet formed by the National League for Democracy.⁴¹ Nevertheless, with the privileged access to lucrative resources and economic rents that armed actors usually enjoy, new militias are unlikely to dissipate quickly. In fact, as the economic fallout of the February coup becomes increasingly acute, this could create an incentive for groups to secure existing sources of revenue.⁴² The International Crisis Group suggests that the emergence of new, sustained militia groups is likely, which is consistent with the patterns of insurgency seen throughout Myanmar's history.⁴³

The rise of so many new militias and expansion of established EAOs complicate the combat landscape for the Tatmadaw. It must now battle insurgents that are widely dispersed throughout the country, including many areas where it has not fought before and has little military infrastructure.⁴⁴ Confronting these groups and dealing with escalated fighting with armed groups in Kachin, Shan, and Kayin States, while simultaneously maintaining a strong troop presence in the nation's cities to suppress dissent, will likely stretch the Tatmadaw's capacity.⁴⁵

However, the security services have been accustomed to fighting insurgencies since Myanmar's independence in 1948, and it has been fiercely battling the Arakan Army in Rakhine State. Counterinsurgency is a particular skill of the Tatmadaw, and the armed forces have shown a proclivity to implement its so-called four-cuts counterinsurgency strategy.⁴⁶ Designed to restrict access to food, funds, intelligence, and recruits, the four-cuts strategy seeks to starve the support base of armed resistance and turn civilians against insurgent groups.⁴⁷ The Tatmadaw is also known to employ sexual violence and the deliberate targeting of civilians to terrorize and displace populations, as it has already done in Mindat (May) and Demoso (June).⁴⁸

The COVID-19 pandemic, although problematic for the military junta, has proven to be another tool the Tatmadaw has exploited to privilege its own security forces to the detriment of those opposing the SAC. According to official numbers, more than 14,000 people have died from the disease, which per capita is the worst rate in Southeast Asia.⁴⁹ However, few citizens are officially tested and even fewer are treated in public hospitals, which suggests that the actual numbers are likely to be higher.⁵⁰ The Tatmadaw has deliberately obstructed lifesaving care to COVID-19 patients, targeted medical workers, and banned sales of oxygen to civilians not supported by the SAC, leading many to accuse the Tatmadaw of weaponizing the pandemic.⁵¹ In parts of the country, insurgent groups are fulfilling the role of public health authorities. In Rakhine State, for example, the Arakan Army has enacted lockdown measures in the state's 17 townships and has threatened punitive action against those not abiding by health instructions.⁵² Some observers have expressed hope that COVID-19 could deal a serious blow to the stability of the SAC, however, given that the junta has consistently reserved vaccinations for its soldiers, hoarded oxygen supplies, and controlled access to lifesaving care, this appears to be unlikely.⁵³

The February military coup and ensuing violence have pushed many citizens toward armed resistance. Civilian militias have emerged in the cities and countryside as a means for citizens to protect themselves from the SAC's harsh crackdown on protests. Established ethnic insurgent groups have also offered sanctuary to political dissidents, as well as combat training to activists looking to oppose the military junta. In a grim turn, the SAC and security forces have also utilized the COVID-19 pandemic to their advantage as best they can. By restricting critical oxygen supplies and reserving vaccinations for its rank-and-file members, the Tatmadaw has found yet another means of rewarding those loyal to the SAC and controlling those expressing resistance. ❖

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