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Research Report

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SWP Comment

NO. 35 MAY 2021

Civil War in Myanmar

A Further Escalation of Violence Looms on the Horizon

Felix Heiduk

Military installations have been attacked in various towns in Myanmar's interior over the past few days. Among other things, military airfields that the air force had used to attack ethnic minority rebel bases in the east and north of the country were fired upon. So far, no one has claimed responsibility for the attacks, but it can be assumed that they are connected to the newly formed alliance between the former democratic government and ethnic minorities. In view of this development, the violent conflicts in Myanmar threaten to spread from the border regions to the entire country, including large urban centres. If the violence were indeed to escalate in the coming weeks, Myanmar would be further destabilised politically, economically, and socially.

Since its independence in 1948, Myanmar (which was called Burma until three decades ago) has experienced a series of bloody civil wars in its border regions. The opponents have been the central government – dominated by the largest ethnic group, the Bamar – and various armed groups recruited primarily from ethnic minorities. More than two dozen “ethnic armed organisations” (EAOs) emerged over time – some with only several hundred members, others with tens of thousands – waging guerrilla warfare against the central government and the military, the Tatmadaw. Ethnic minorities predominantly live in the inaccessible mountainous terrain of Myanmar's hinterland. They perceive themselves to be marginalised politically, socially, and economically and exposed to brutal crackdowns by the security forces, which often target the civilian population.

Against this background, the civil wars in the country's hinterland, which are often interlinked with illicit economic activities, have been perpetuated for decades.

Over time, some EAOs even succeeded in establishing state-like structures and administered the territories under their control largely autonomously from the central government. In 2015, the government and 10 predominantly smaller EAOs signed a ceasefire (the NCA – National Ceasefire Agreement). In the same year, Aung San Suu Kyi emerged victorious in the country's first free elections since 1990. During her first term as de facto head of government, she tried several times, following up on the NCA, to initiate a national peace and reconciliation process within the framework of the “Union Peace Conference – 21st Century Panglong”, but with little success. This was mainly because the Tatmadaw, who see



themselves as praetorians and guardians of the unity of the nation, continued the fight against alleged “separatists” militarily. Since 1962, the military has been the de facto dominant political and economic actor in the country. The generals initiated a liberalisation process in 2010, which brought free elections, freedom of the press, and the formation of a civilian government. But they seized power again on 1 February 2021 after the National League of Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, swept the elections in November of the previous year.

The coup prevented the formation of an NLD-led government with an absolute majority in parliament. As a result of the coup, there are now signs of a further escalation of violent conflicts. A de facto counter-government has emerged from the NLD in the form of the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH). It has not only called for armed resistance against the military, but has also closed ranks with the ethnic minority parties. A National Unity Government (NUG) was formed for this purpose. In addition, some of the EAOs have already signalled their support for the NUG. Leading opposition politicians made calls from the underground or from exile for democracy activists to move to areas controlled by EAOs, be trained there as guerrillas, and then take up the armed struggle against the military government together with the EAOs. The opposition members remaining in the cities of central Myanmar were told they should continue demonstrations and civil disobedience actions in parallel.

The military junta does not recognise the unity government, and security forces continue to crack down on the ongoing mass protests. Only recently did junta leader General Min Aung Hlaing again announce that the democratic opposition was solely to blame for the escalation of violence. According to press reports, more than 750 people have been killed by the police and military in recent weeks, in many cases by targeted shots to the head. Thousands are in detention or under house arrest, including almost the entire leadership of the NLD.

Little Chance for Negotiations

Against this background, it seems highly unrealistic that constructive negotiations can be initiated between the military government and the opposition in the near future. Both sides operate according to a zero-sum logic, thus perceiving the conflict as an existential dispute about the future of the country. This leaves little room for understanding or compromise. There is also a lack of political incentives to compromise on either side. The generals are unwilling to abandon power after a military coup that brought months of unrest and hundreds of deaths. This is also true for the rank-and-file soldiers and police officers, who would have to fear extensive reprisals if civilian rule were to be restored. Additionally, many of their families are housed in military bases; the generals use them as bargaining chips to deter potential deserters. Thus, the junta is still counting on the loyalty of its rank and file. A split of the armed forces between hardliners and reformers would only be conceivable if the power of the generals around Min Aung Hlaing were to erode. However, such a scenario does not seem very likely at present.

On the other hand, the CRPH leadership, with hundreds of its supporters having been killed, has no incentive to make a compromise either. The majority of the opposition – which, unlike in previous protests, is broadly anchored in society and includes students and monks as well as, among others, administrative staff, doctors, and trade unionists – accepts neither the coup nor would it accept any future government in which the military is involved. Members of the counter-government have repeatedly stated in public that they are currently ruling out negotiations with the military leadership. Moreover, the closing of ranks with the ethnic minorities under the unity government increases the pressure on the CRPH to be tough on the Tatmadaw. In the view of many minority representatives, this is precisely what the NLD, which forms the core of the CRPH, failed to do during Aung San Suu Kyi’s first

term in office. Instead the NLD entered a fragile truce with the military. Minority rights, they argue, were sold out by Aung San Suu Kyi in favour of a power-sharing arrangement with the Tatmadaw. As a result, the peace process, the expansion of autonomy rights, and plans for a new federalism made little progress between 2015 and 2020. Hence, if the CRPH were to agree to any compromise with the Tatmadaw, representatives of the ethnic minorities in the NUG would most likely interpret it as another sell-out of their rights and interests.

Escalation of Violence

The initial calculus of the coup plotters seemed to be to take power with minimal use of force by arresting the NLD leadership, banning protests, censoring the media, and shutting down the internet. This was to be followed by a transition to a “disciplined democracy” that would have culminated in an election victory in 2022 for the military-backed parties, most notably the Union Solidarity and Development Party. Such calculus certainly did not work out. Within days after the coup, there were mass protests in many cities, which were violently put down by the security forces. Recently, democracy activists fought back with home-made weapons. In the country’s largest city, Yangon, but also in other cities, bombs were detonated in front of police stations and administrative buildings: 21 members of the security forces were killed according to state media. Moreover, the coup completely destroyed the already fragile peace process with the EAOs. Back in February, the military attacked posts of the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), one of the 10 EAOs that had signed the ceasefire agreement in 2015. The RCSS then declared that the Tatmadaw had broken the agreement. The Karen National Union (KNU), which, as one of the largest ethnic rebel groups, was also part of the agreement, also declared it null and void as a result of the coup. In recent weeks, the Karen National Liberation Army, the armed wing of the

KNU, and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) have attacked military posts, killing about 30 soldiers. In early May 2021, KIA fighters even claimed to have shot down an air force attack helicopter. The KIA was never party to the ceasefire agreement.

The military responded to the attacks by bombing several villages in areas controlled by EAOs. Thousands of civilians fled. There are also increasing reports that new armed groups are emerging. In response to the coup, for example, the Chinland Defense Force was formed, which claims to have killed dozens of military personnel. In addition, established EAOs have announced that they will cooperate with the unity government and other ethnic military associations in the fight against the military. This applies, for example, to the recently strengthened Brotherhood Alliance, which consists of the Arakan Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and the Ta’ang National Liberation Army. There are even reports of increased efforts to forge a coalition of ethnic militias against the junta and to lead them together against the army.

It would be a nightmare scenario for the military if the newly formed political alliance of the CRPH and the ethnic minority parties were to be extended to include a broad military alliance of EAOs. Such a political and military alliance, which would transcend ethnic boundaries and include the ousted government, would be a first in Myanmar’s recent history. To be sure, it is still a pipe dream at present. On the one hand, this is because some of the EAOs have fought the military as well as each other in the past. On the other hand, the Tatmadaw have always managed to conclude bilateral pacts with certain EAOs as part of a “divide and conquer” strategy. This has prevented the formation of any overarching alliance of the major ethnic rebel groups. For example, the military has tied the largest of these groups, the United Wa State Army, to itself through extensive autonomy rights and a bilateral ceasefire. Accordingly, the leadership of the organisation, which is externally supported by China, has so far not voiced any criticism of the coup.

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It therefore appears unlikely that the Tatmadaw could suffer a military defeat by the EAOs anytime soon. This is not to say, however, that the links between the democratic opposition and at least some militarily strong EAOs will not have any consequences. Quite the contrary, it seems plausible to assume that it will not only lead to an escalation of violence in the border regions, but also gradually affect the central areas of Myanmar. The extent and duration of the violence is likely to depend heavily on how durable the alliance between the ousted NLD government and the ethnic minorities will be.

What is more, a further escalation of violence is likely to exacerbate the downward political and economic trends in Myanmar. The country is already on the brink of economic collapse. According to UN estimates, more than half of the population will be living in poverty by 2022. Politically, the country is currently largely ungovernable for the junta. Demonstrations, strikes, and civil disobedience have left, among other sectors, education, public health, and parts of Myanmar's industry dysfunctional, making it increasingly difficult for the military leadership to provide key public services and keep the economy going.

ASEAN as a Mediator

With a continuing standoff in Myanmar and the UN Security Council stopping short of condemning the coup as well as any further action due to opposition from Russia and China, there have been increasing calls at home and abroad for weeks for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to take on a mediating role. Some member states of the organisation had criticised the coup in an unusually direct manner. Many of the ASEAN countries fear that the crisis in Myanmar could have far-reaching negative consequences for regional stability.

A first ASEAN meeting on the situation in Myanmar, which took place in Jakarta at

the end of April, was publicly lauded a success by the participants. The result of the summit was a "five-point consensus", which, in accordance with the ASEAN unanimity principle, was also agreed to by junta leader Min Aung Hlaing. It stipulated an end to violence, dialogue between all parties to the conflict, facilitation of the consensus by an ASEAN special envoy, humanitarian aid to be provided by ASEAN, and a visit to Myanmar by an ASEAN delegation, including a special ambassador. However, neither a condemnation of the coup was given, nor sanctions imposed. The CRPH and human rights organisations offered the criticism that, by inviting Min Aung Hlaing to the meeting, ASEAN had effectively given legitimacy to the junta on the international stage. Representatives of the CRPH were not invited. To make matters worse, just days after the summit, the junta declared that it would have to establish "stability" in Myanmar before the five-point consensus could be implemented. The generals thus showed how little they are interested in mediation attempts, even if these are procured by neighbouring states.

It is therefore unlikely that external actors will be able to significantly influence the Tatmadaw's strategic calculus or behaviour on the ground. Even if existing sanctions were to be tightened by, for example, the United States and the European Union (EU), this is unlikely to change. For one thing, not all of Myanmar's neighbouring states support meddling in what they perceive to be Myanmar's internal affairs. For another, the military has learnt since the 1980s to maintain its power grip in the face of international sanctions. In 2021, the military leadership around General Min Aung Hlaing seems determined to turn the country back into a military dictatorship by force. A further escalation of violence seems inevitable. Further displacements and a humanitarian crisis would be just some of the direct consequences. Germany and the EU would therefore be well-advised to prepare for such scenarios now.

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