



A Turning Point for the Revolution Four Months after the Myanmar Coup: The International Community and Political Turmoil in Myanmar

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The Myanmar military (known as the Tatmadaw) has turned its guns on citizens who oppose the coup d'état. The National Unity Government of Myanmar (NUG), which includes ethnic minorities, has been formed and claims legitimacy over the military, which is expanding its effective rule. The solution is not a choice between two options. It is high time to rethink Japan's Myanmar policy amid moves to mediate.

Four months have passed since the coup d'état in Myanmar on February 1. The Myanmar military staged the coup to depose the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi (hereinafter Suu Kyi). Their tactics were almost perfectly executed to the point of arresting senior government officials, including State Counsellor Suu Kyi, and proclaiming the transfer of sovereign power to the Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Services based on Article 417 of the Constitution. The military seized control of the nerve center of the state without firing a single bullet.

However, subsequent developments eclipsed the assumptions of the Myanmar military. Civil resistance spread across the whole country. The resistance peaked on February 22 when large-scale demonstrations and strikes took place nationwide in the so-called 22222 Revolution, a reference to the five digits in the date 22/02/2021. More people participated than ever before in the history of the country.

Young people born since the mid-1990s, the so-called Generation Z, formed the main body of the resistance. They are the generation that has benefited since childhood from progressive liberalization, democratization, and economic development after the transition to a civilian government in 2011. Seeing citizens opposing the Myanmar military by various means shows how strong civil society has become in the past ten years following the approximately fifty years of military rule that preceded the transition to a civil government.

Increasingly Severe Crackdowns

By March the temperature rises in Yangon and by April the temperature soars above forty degrees centigrade every day. As if tracing this rise in temperature, the Myanmar military intensified its hardline position on the resistance resulting in an increase in the number of victims and detainees.

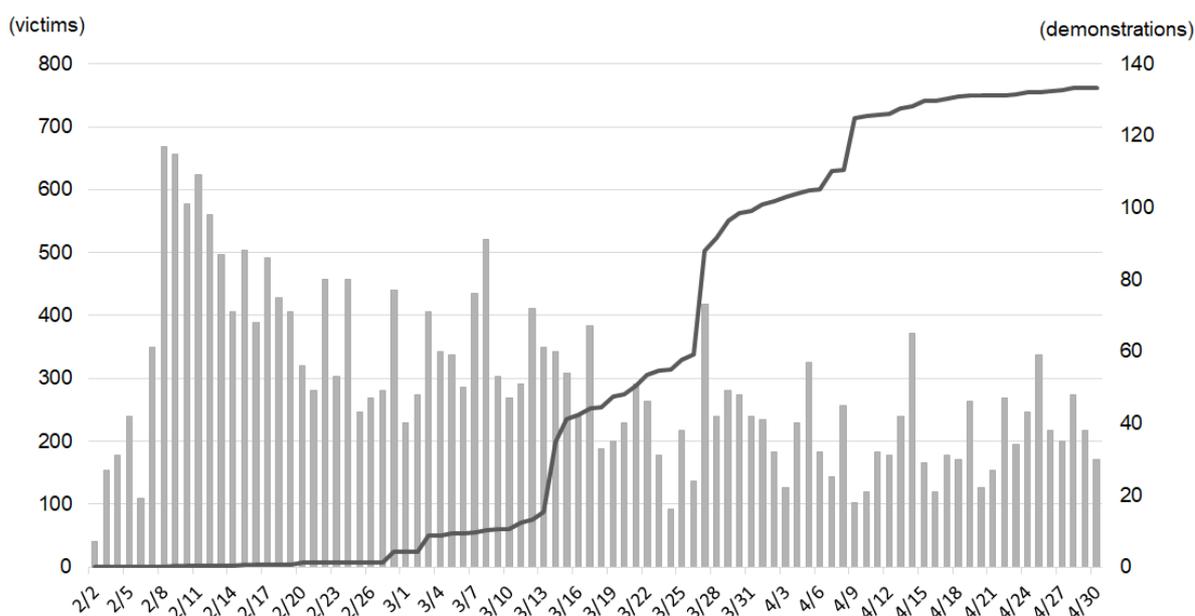
The graph below shows the number of demonstrations and the number of victims who died in the crackdown. We see that the number of victims has risen since the end of February. As of the time of writing



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(May 13), there have been approximately 800 victims. There are noticeable increases in victims as a result of the crackdown in Hlaingtharya Township, a suburb of Yangon, on March 14, a nationwide crackdown on Armed Forces Day on March 27, and a crackdown in the provincial city of Bago on March 9. In all these cases, the Myanmar military and the police used live ammunition resulting in around 100 victims.

Fig. Cumulative total fatalities as a result of military crackdown (line, left axis) and number of demonstrations (bar graph, right axis) (February 2 - April 30)



Source: The number of victims is based on the list of victims on the AAPP website. The number of demonstrations is based on the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project

Basically, resistance by the citizens is non-violent. Even if they are armed, the weapons are air guns, Molotov cocktails, daggers, metal shields, home-made explosives, or hunting rifles. In contrast, the Myanmar military and police units are even using machine guns, mortars, and other weapons with high capacity for killing and wounding against the citizens. The protesters are at a disadvantage and there has clearly been a decrease in large-scale and lengthy demonstrations. The conflict locales have also shifted from the major urban areas to the central Magway Region and Sagaing Region, the Tanintharyi Region in the south, and Chin State in the northwest, thus expanding the scope of effective rule by the Myanmar military.

But, the Myanmar military has by no means completely immobilized the resistance. As the graph indicates, there has been no major fluctuation in the number of demonstrations since March. This is because there has been an increase in guerilla-like flash mob protests where demonstrators march and then disperse. These demonstrations break up in about ten minutes, but the message is broadcast internationally by posting and sharing video and images on social media.

Meanwhile, the Myanmar military has stepped up the crackdowns. They have proceeded to put the leaders and participants in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) on wanted lists and to arrest them. The CDM is a movement that boycotts the workplace with the aim of expressing its opposition to the

government. After the coup, the movement spread among civil servants, medical staff, bank employees, and workers in the manufacturing and building industries. It had enough momentum to bring government agencies and financial institutions to a standstill. Wanting to normalize government functions and the economy as soon as possible, the Myanmar military has dealt forcefully with the CDM.

For example, national railway employees who participated in the CDM immediately after the coup have been dismissed and forced out of their housing. The Myanmar Ministry of Resources and Energy, which has a large number of staff at affiliated agencies across the country, has so far dismissed 3,712 individuals. By May 5, universities affiliated with the Ministry of Education had suspended at least 11,000 teaching staff who had not reported for work.

The Myanmar military is dealing even more harshly with medical professionals participating in the CDM. They are not only suspended, but also prosecuted for criminal offenses.

The context for this is probably the Myanmar military's irritation with COVID-19 countermeasures that make no headway because medical institutions are paralyzed. Since February 3 when 573 new cases of coronavirus were reported, there has been a sharp decrease in the number of tests as the demonstrations and the CDM have expanded. Inoculation with vaccines procured from India and China are also lagging behind. If the situation remains the same, the damage will be catastrophic in view of the rapid rise in infections in neighboring India and Thailand. Therefore, the military is aiming to normalize the medical establishment by force.

The National Unity Government of Myanmar (NUG) Against the Myanmar Military

Ten years ago such heavy-handed rule by the Myanmar military might not have been contested. However, Myanmar civil society has undergone major changes. The Internet has become a powerful weapon for democratization.

Even with Suu Kyi and other leaders under arrest, the NLD created the National Unity Government of Myanmar (NUG) as the opposition government on April 16. The parent organization is the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) formed by NLD parliamentarians four days after the coup. Announcing the formation of the NUG, Min Ko Naing, a student activist in the democracy movement of 1988, declared that the aim is for a true federal government that transcends ethnic and religious boundaries.

The NUG Cabinet lineup includes the detained State Counsellor Suu Kyi and President Win Myint, who were reappointed to their posts, and Vice President Duwa Lashi La from Kachin, who is the de-facto leader for the time being. As leader, Duwa Lashi La was involved in cultural and charitable activities for many years in the minority ethnic states of Kachin and Shan. Looking at the rest of the lineup, we see that a group of people with more awareness of ethnic reconciliation have taken over from the Suu Kyi administration. In addition, the People's Defense Force (PDF), a military wing of the NUG, was formed on May 5. The PDF aims to use force against the Myanmar military by consolidating the opposition forces in urban areas with the ethnic insurgency groups that have long been fighting in the mountainous regions of the country.

However, it should be noted that these pro-democracy forces basically exist online (in particular, on Facebook). The reality is that they are currently non-existent as a governing body. In short, no matter what statements the NUG issues, nothing will be implemented immediately. The leadership of the CRPH and

NUG are on the run because they are wanted for treason and other crimes so their whereabouts are unknown. As far as the PDF is concerned, it is true that fighting between the Myanmar military and ethnic insurgents in mountainous areas (mainly Kachin State in the north and Kayah State in the southeast) has intensified in part, but there are nearly twenty unaligned insurgencies. It would be difficult for these forces to coordinate with the young protesters in far-flung urban areas to mount an all-out confrontation with the Myanmar military.

Online communication, which has become the global standard amid the coronavirus crisis, makes up for the weakness of the NUG. In a way, the Internet is a sideline of the current coronavirus crisis that has tipped the balance in favor of growing international recognition and support for the NUG. The NUG is asking the international community to recognize it as the legitimate government. On May 4, the NUG envoy to the United Nations, Kyaw Moe Tun, testified before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs in the United States, asking for the support and recognition of the lawmakers. The following day Zin Mar Aung, Union Minister of Foreign Affairs for the NUG, engaged in dialog with thirty-six parliamentarians in Europe. She has also had conversations with Diet members in Japan.

The International Community Is Sitting on the Fence Where Allegiance Is Concerned

Seen in this light, it is clear that the situation in Myanmar is entering a new phase. In a nutshell, there is a split between effective rule and legitimacy. On the one hand, the Myanmar military is using the threat of violence to gradually expand the scope of its effective rule. Street protests have decreased. Faced with the risk of suspension or dismissal, an increasing number of people in the CDM are returning to the workplace. Even though the rule is unstable, the Myanmar military is restoring government functions. On the other hand, in addition to domestic support for the NLD, the NUG is steadily gaining support from the international community (especially the West) and from people who are opposed to the Myanmar military.

Inherently, a state is only stable when it has achieved effective rule and legitimacy. In Myanmar today, the military has the upper hand with regard to effective rule and the NUG prevails where legitimacy is concerned. The two elements of the state are split between political forces.

What is the role of diplomacy in the case of such a split? First, we must confirm that it is not possible to approach the issue as a choice between supporting the Myanmar military or the citizens. This is because we cannot anticipate the impact on international relations or on the citizens of Myanmar of supporting and endorsing the NUG. As a result, many countries are exploring ways to handle the situation without declaring allegiance to the Myanmar military or the NUG.

Next, let us take a look at developments in the United States, China, and the ASEAN countries. The United States has taken a hardline approach to the Myanmar military, imposing sanctions on the senior leadership of the Myanmar military, two corporations with ties to the military (UMEHL and MEC), and a state-owned gem company (MUG). The United States has also announced that it is suspending trade with Myanmar based on the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA). Myanmar government assets in the United States of about one billion dollars have also been frozen. Sanctions will be strengthened in the future, and the pressure has increased since President Joe Biden and others strongly criticized the actions of the Myanmar military as “a direct assault on the country’s transition to democracy and the rule of law” immediately after the coup. However, if the aim of this position is to change the conduct of the Myanmar military, the approach has not yielded any results yet.

On the other hand, China opposed a condemnation by the United Nations Security Council immediately after the coup and is sticking to the principle of non-intervention in the domestic affairs of other nations. China has a record of deepening relations with the democratic government in Myanmar, including getting the Suu Kyi administration to agree to the Belt and Road initiative, so the country hardly welcomes the destabilizing effect of a coup d'état. China has not recognized the Myanmar military coup due to warnings from the international community and rising anti-Chinese sentiments in Myanmar. However, China has consistently opposed the kind of pressure diplomacy practiced by the West. For example, in a meeting with the foreign secretary of the Philippines on April 2, the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi sought to restrain the United Nations and the West when he referred to the “three avoids,” which he defined as avoiding further bloodshed and civilian casualties, inappropriate intervention by the United Nations Security Council, and external forces fueling the unrest in Myanmar and seeking private gains. China wants to settle the matter, but they do not recognize the preferred approach of the West. But, after all, China has also failed to deliver.

Arbitration by the ASEAN

With no country being able to change the conduct of the Myanmar military and a rising sense of stalemate in the international community, expectations have focused on the ASEAN countries. On April 24, an emergency session of the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting was convened in Jakarta, Indonesia. Talks were held among the heads of state and foreign ministers of all ASEAN countries, and Min Aung Hlaing, Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services of Myanmar, participated in the meeting. As a result, a Five-Point Consensus was announced.

- First, there shall be immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar and all parties shall exercise utmost restraint.
- Second, constructive dialogue among all parties concerned shall commence to seek a peaceful solution in the interests of the people.
- Third, a special envoy of the ASEAN Chair shall facilitate mediation of the dialogue process, with the assistance of the Secretary General of ASEAN.
- Fourth, ASEAN shall provide humanitarian assistance through the AHA Centre.
- Fifth, the special envoy and delegation shall visit Myanmar to meet with all parties concerned.

Somehow the ASEAN managed to produce something concrete out of the Leaders' Meeting. Whether or not this consensus will be implemented is unclear. Many governments, including the United States, China, EU, and Japan, support the moves by the ASEAN since the key will be to apply pressure persistently. The issue is a challenge for the ASEAN with its principle of non-intervention in the domestic affairs of other countries. There are indications of a conflict of interest between the countries on the Asian continent and the island nations, so it would be difficult to continue to apply consistent pressure without the support of the major powers.

What Is the Real Role of Japan?

What about the Japanese government? The government has been critical of the Myanmar military and has consistently made three demands: to stop resorting to violence against civilians, to release detainees including State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and to swiftly restore Myanmar's democratic political

system. These demands are definitely not weak. If they are the conditions for normalizing relations with the Myanmar military, the hurdles are quite high. The US-Japan Joint Leaders' Statement (issued on April 16) includes similar language. Such language will allow Japan to work together with the United States, which is taking a strong stance on the issue.

On the other hand, it should be said that the government's repeated emphasis on "Japan's unique role" has been imprudent. If the Japanese government had had insider knowledge of the Myanmar government, they should have been able to predict that diplomacy will be ineffective for a while and that the situation will become protracted. At the very least, there should have been no expectation that the Japanese government could mediate.

Of course we should not wash our hands of involvement with Myanmar because of the prolonged chaos, and naturally, we must not accept the rule of the Myanmar military. We should take various steps to urge the Myanmar military to change their policies. However, the phrase "Japan's unique role" suggests unilateral action and there are limits to how much influence you can exert on your own. Japan should use its channels to the Myanmar military and official development assistance (ODA), its diplomatic card, to the maximum extent, but the basic approach is likely to be to work with ASEAN on exerting influence, and with the United States on applying pressure. It is necessary to explore realistic compromises and common ground and to keep repeating the message that the present situation and the plans of the Myanmar military are not welcomed by the international community or the majority of Myanmar citizens.

Another urgent matter is to revise Japan's aid policy. As I have shown in this paper, Myanmar is unlikely to return to the situation before the coup. Over the decade since 2011, there has been a virtuous circle where changes in the internal administration of Myanmar, support from other nations, and private-sector investment became interlocked with economic progress and democratization in Myanmar. Although relations with the West deteriorated in 2017 when the Muslim Rohingya people streamed across the border into Bangladesh, Myanmar still remained one of the fastest growing nations in Asia. But, we cannot expect the virtuous cycle to recover in the near future.

The Development Cooperation Charter, which lays out the guiding principles for ODA, states that Japan will pay attention to the "situation regarding consolidation of democratization, the rule of law and the protection of basic human rights" to ensure that development cooperation is appropriate. If the Myanmar military continues the current rule, it is clearly a transgression of this principle. Even if the Myanmar military holds the promised repeat elections, it will be difficult to recognize any transition of power unless the elections are free and fair. Public opinion in Myanmar and Japan would hardly be supportive.

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, thirty-five international yen loan ODA projects worth 739.6 billion yen and twenty-six gratis fund aid ODA projects worth 58.5 billion yen are already underway. These amounts indicate how the Japanese government has gambled on the potential of Myanmar. But, the argument was that the Myanmar government was stable and that there was potential for economic growth. Now, there is no longer a question of economic growth, rather the urgent issue is the humanitarian crisis.

What is needed now is to study scenarios for future development and to revise the policies on Myanmar in line with the situation. The bottom line is to minimize the adverse effects on the citizens of Myanmar and the national interests of Japan while formulating rollback tactics that look at the conditions and organization of aid.

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