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Myanmar

A new stage in the fight against the military order – the resistance calls for solidarity!

- IV Online magazine - 2021 - IV554 - March 2021 -

Publication date: Friday 12 March 2021

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Six long weeks after the 1 February coup, the vast movement of civil disobedience in Myanmar has won a first significant victory: preventing the junta from claiming to control the country. The army has responded by resorting, in particular, to a policy of multifaceted terror. We have entered a new stage in the confrontation between the military order and the democratic movement. In the face of the violence of the assault, the resistance continues its fight under very difficult circumstances. It must be able to count on international solidarity.

From 1 February, the junta carried out increasingly massive arrests: some 2,000 people were imprisoned (temporarily or permanently). The killings began in mid-February, then became systematic from the end of the month; to date, the online daily Irrawaddy counts more than 60 people killed and the number continues to rise. The spectre of the 1988 massacres and their 3,000 dead haunts the country, although the situation has changed. The country was at the time isolated from the world by the ruling junta, and it took a year for the full extent of the bloodshed to become fully known. We are now informed of the day-to-day situation and the army has not yet succeeded, despite its best efforts, in ensuring effective censorship. A collective of photojournalists, The Myanmar Project, has been set up and many newspapers are still covering the events as I write this article.

Preventing “internal normalization”

The civil disobedience movement has won a first and decisive victory: through its massive size, it prevented the putschists from imposing their *fait accompli*. No one can be unaware that this is an illegitimate regime; the military have lost the battle for communication. Domestically, they are struggling to normalize the situation. The functioning of the administration is hampered by the civil servants' strike. The public and private banking system is at a standstill, businesses (including those owned by the military) are paralyzed. Rail transport is severely disrupted, as well as gas production and oil refining according to the CTUM union. Magnates worry about the economic consequences of the coup and quietly support the resistance. Personalities organize fundraisers to help strikers who have lost all income. Some 600 police have defected, some finding refuge in India. A large number of diplomats and embassies have refused to recognise the putschists, which restricted the junta's international contacts.

In this Buddhist country where the monastic order has 500,000 members divided into 9 sects, the clergy has until now remained on the side-lines, unlike what happened in 2017. Groups of bhikkus (monks) did rally to the demonstrations, waving placards, but this remained anecdotal - they were fewer in number than the pro-army monks who publicly supported the putsch a few days before it happened. The official religious authorities (the Sangha) are not supposed to engage in politics, but this is not observed in practice. Movements with Buddhist reference points cover the entire political spectrum, down to the fascist far right, as was the case with the Organization for the Defence of Race and Nation (Ma Ba Tha) which played a very significant role at the time of the Rohingya genocide in 2014.

The Sangha is usually close to the government, without making its dictatorial character a bone of contention. Since the coup, the military leadership has taken care to court the hierarchy of orders more than ever. There are pro-democracy monks, probably more numerous than they appear today, but they do not identify with the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK, a highly authoritarian figure) with whom they have had a very tense relationship. A monk from Rangoon told Bruno Philip, a journalist at *Le Monde*: “It is a pity that the highly respected General Aug San Mrs. Suu Kyi's father, leader of the anti-colonial movement] gave birth to such a woman!”. [1] One of the most influential Buddhist leaders, Sitagu Sayada, who is said to enjoy the high life and is

very close to the General-in-Chief, has suffered a flurry of criticism on social media. His sect, the Shwe Kyin, finally called on the military to be more restrained in repression. [2]

The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) continues to organize day long general strikes and one of its components, the Confederation of Trade Unions, Myanmar (CTUM) has launched an urgent appeal for solidarity with the particular objective of obtaining a “a harsh comprehensive sanction that can finish off the regime and its structure” so as “to rebuild Burma from scratch — without any interference from the military”. [3] The stakes are clear. It is about putting an end once and for all to the military order imposed almost continuously on Burma since 1962. The peoples of the Union of Burma need strong international action to do so.

Isolate, sanction the junta

The junta probably thought that the foreseeable international condemnations of the putsch would not have great consequences. A mistake. The civil disobedience movement has changed the rules of the game. Many established powers cannot simply turn a blind eye or be content with formal protests. Indeed, sanctions have been taken which carry some weight.

“How to break the deadlock?” asks Mediapart journalist Laure Siegel. She responds in a remarkable article calling for “International support, embargo, boycott, internal resistance, cross-border citizen alliances”. A good summary! [4]

The military is seeking to exhaust the civic movement, terrorize the population and divide the opposition. The democratic resistance has a vital need for solidarity, it is a question of survival - but today it is possible to deal the junta some very hard blows if political pressure is maintained, just as it is possible to bring concrete support for popular struggles. The following examples show this.

Myanmar’s representative at the United Nations denounced the coup, which made de facto recognition of the junta more difficult. Embassies are seceding, maintaining their allegiance to the (now underground) government of the National League for Democracy (NLD). The junta has not been recognized by international bodies, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). US President Joe Biden has blocked a \$1 billion transfer from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York to the Central Bank of Myanmar. Freezing Burmese assets abroad is therefore possible. It must be generalized and the travel abroad of dignitaries of the putschist regime forbidden!

The European Union is officially suspending aid that could benefit the military. We must move from declarations to actions. A platform has been set up which tracks down Western firms supplying “sensitive” material. The responsibility of foreign companies equipping the junta’s repressive forces is denounced. An Italian firm sells it light weapons (which escape the controls of the heavy weaponry trade, but which are suitable for repression). [5] Swedish companies offer smartphones while US enterprises sell hacking software. Israel sends surveillance drones or drones capable of dumping tear gas on the population. In terms of investment and trade, the integration of the Burmese economy is above all regional: Singapore, China, Thailand, India... countries not very inclined to interfere in the “internal affairs” of their neighbour. However, some foreign firms have stopped dealing with the junta. This is the case, for example, with Kirin, the Japanese brewing giant, ending a six-year joint venture with an army holding company. The Australian company Woodside has decided to cease its activities in the oil and gas fields, which were worth 920 million euros per year. [6]

The call for an international boycott of “khaki economy” products is being organized, again through Internet platforms. The Federation of General Workers Myanmar (FGWM) has appealed to garment brands to protect their strikers from retaliatory measures by employers or the military for their participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement - “refusing to do so will equate with being silent against the crimes of the Myanmar military junta”. LaborNotes provides a list of

brands using Burmese production. [7]

Among the multinationals on which maximum pressure must be exerted are obviously, in the oil sector, Chevron (United States) and Total (France) who paid nearly 230 million euros in 2019 in taxes and shares to the government. Burmese. Today Total is accountable to the people of Burma. “Doctor Sasa”, a figure in the NLD, said in an interview with Le Monde: “I beg President Emmanuel Macron to grant us his help, including, in the future, military support for our future federal army. I also ask the company Total, present in Burma, to cease collaborating economically with the regime”. [8]

The resistance is reorganizing itself to face up to the qualitative leap in repression. It is testing unarmed self-defence measures in neighbourhoods and villages to stop military movement. Known activists are going into hiding. Contacts are being strengthened with Burmese emigration and solidarity movements in neighbouring countries (mainly Thailand). Millions of kyats (the local currency) have been sent from Thailand, where 70% of Burmese immigrant workers are located. There is a strong sense of proximity between activists on both sides of the border, where youth have led the regional Milk Tea Alliance against authoritarianism. In Burma, the Civil Disobedience Movement constitutes the first framework for cooperation between, in particular, Generation Z (young people in education), the CTUM trade union federation which called on 8 February for a general strike, and local popular committees. For its part, the National League for Democracy has reconstituted a government that is demanding to be recognized by the UN. Finally, a “General Strike Committee of Nationalities”, representing more than 24 groups, was founded on 11 February. Half of the ethnic armed organizations threatened the junta with retaliation in the event of an army or police attack on CDM protesters in their territory, without however supporting Suu Kyi and the NLD. Karen State in particular, in the east of the country, is committed to protecting and supporting any member of the armed forces who sides with the CDM.

On the side of the regime, no defection has been reported from the army, unlike the police. It forms a very homogeneous body where the families of soldiers live in a closed circuit. It constitutes a power that parallels the civil administration from top to bottom and at each level uses its capacity to influence society. Controlling two large conglomerates as well as the traffic in precious stones or wood, the “khaki economy” is a clientele capitalism, able to co-opt even figures from the Bamar opposition (the majority ethnic group living in the delta of the Irrawaddy). A trial of strength is underway to rally the representatives of ethnic minorities. The military have the means to implement a universal “divide and rule” policy.

Military camps are being set up in schools (to monitor Gen Z), universities and hospitals (whose staff have been at the forefront of the resistance and treating the wounded). More than 20,000 common law detainees have been released to make room for political prisoners and wreak havoc on the demonstrators. Obsessive surveillance is exercised on the population. The military boasts of being able to kill and pillage as they wish. The junta could even organize a famine to blame the resistance. By combining terror, corruption and impoverishment of a population already hard hit by Covid, they hope to exhaust it.

The democratic revolution in Myanmar knows that it is engaged in a struggle which can last a long time. It faces a formidable enemy that should not be underestimated. It offers a great lesson in courage and commitment. It is not alone. The democratic demand has taken on a deep resonance at a time when the authoritarianism of regimes is increasing from Asia to Europe, to the Americas ... causing in turn civic uprisings capable of achieving significant victories. Myanmar, with its diverse populations, has become one of the new “warm fronts” in a universal struggle.

10 March 2021

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[1] Bruno Philip, *Le Monde*, 24 February 2021.

[2] *The Irrawaddy*, 5 March 2021.

[3] *Labor Notes*, 5 March 2021 "[Burmese Union Federations Call for International Support Against Coup](#)".

[4] Mediapart, 7 March 2021 "Birmanie: comment sortir de l'impasse", available on [ESSF](#).

[5] Yeshua Moser-Puangsuan, *The Irrawaddy*, 9 March 2021 "[Immediate halt in all arms transfers: ! Italian Ammunition Used in Myanmar Police Assault on Ambulance Raises Questions](#)".

[6] Laure Siegel, Mediapart, 7 March 2021, op. cit.

[7] *Labor Notes*, 5 March 2021 "[Burmese Union Federations Call for International Support Against Coup](#)".

[8] Interview with Bruno Philip, *Le Monde*, 9 March 2021.