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**Myanmar**

# **Bamars and national minorities – a new political situation**

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**This article was written the day after Saturday 27 March 2021, the date of Myanmar's traditional "Armed Forces Day" commemorating the uprising against the Japanese occupation in 1945, inaugurated with a martial parade worthy of a French 14 July in the administrative capital of Naypyidaw. The celebration came as the army murdered at least 102 people, including some children and a good number of young adolescents - the heaviest daily toll since the putsch of 1 February. [1]**

Once again, we were talking about concerted action: according to figures provided by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, a regional NGO, the army fired live ammunition in more than 40 cantons in nine regions, including in residential areas and in Yangon, the economic capital and the largest city in the country. Those living in various peripheral national states were not spared.

*The Irrawaddy* has published numerous photos of (very) young people killed in various circumstances by the military. Such as Zue Wint War, 15, shot dead on 14 March in the Yangon region. The high school student died instantly after being shot in the head during a night raid in the township of South Dagon. Her family shared her handwritten note, which read, "If I die in a protest, don't rescue my body and leave it. And Keep Fight. If our revolution [succeeds], I will be happy to die."

The escalation of violence continues, inexorably, as at least 423 people have already lost their lives. Some three thousand others have been imprisoned since 1 February, with two thousand still in detention.

## A clear policy of terror

The ruling junta wants to break democratic resistance, whatever the human cost. To this end, it deploys a veritable policy of terror. A dictatorship generally tends to deny or relativize its crimes. The junta is following that rule internationally, but in Burma itself, this is not the case. Certainly, it will denounce non-violent demonstrators as dangerous rioters, but its words must also terrorize. "We are aiming for the head" the soldiers proclaim on social networks. Army patrols announce over loudspeakers, "If you build barricades, you will be shot!" On this black Saturday, during the military parade, General Min Aung Hlaing, chief putschist and number one in the junta, speaking on state television, unambiguously threatened the people: "Learn the lesson from those who have brutally died ... do not die for nothing." [2]

Centres of opposition such as high schools, universities and hospitals are occupied by the army. Civil servants and other strikers are threatened with severe reprisals. For refusing to take orders from the junta, they are driven out of their homes and forced to live in precarious conditions. Rape is used as a weapon of war. Under armed threat, the inhabitants of the neighbourhoods and localities are forced to dismantle the makeshift barricades that had been erected. Gone are the days of face-to-face, when the determination of the demonstrators was enough to stop the advance of the repressive units. Young people still take to the streets, but if their makeshift shields protect them from rubber bullets, they can do nothing against live ammunition. What use are slingshots, or even a few sabres, against snipers and tanks? The army is inexorably extending its grip. National minorities have an effective armed self-defence capacity, but there is nothing like this in Bamar country. [3]

Martial law has been declared in the popular districts, formally endowing the military command with full power,

including that of ordering summary executions. Private banks that refuse to reopen their branches are threatened with forced nationalization. The junta has threatened to imprison supermarket owners who dare to close their stores. The assets of organizations suspected of financing the resistance, such as the Soros Foundation, have been seized. The regime seeks to ensure full control over information and communications; independent printed newspapers can no longer be published. Major military operations are underway in the territories of ethnic minorities, causing the first massive, forced displacements of populations. The country is in a state of war.

## The resistance continues

The civil disobedience movement continues, however. Strikes still paralyze a part of the administration, banks and businesses. Especially since in terms of public services, the know-how of the army seems limited, as noted railway worker: it is unable for the time being to run the trains and operate the rail system in their place. Young people still take to the streets waving the colours of the resistance. They hold lightning demonstrations, on foot or on two wheels, then disperse before the arrival of the repressive forces (who have set up motorized brigades to intervene more quickly). Neighbourhoods are adorned with “innocuous” symbols indicating their entry into dissent. “Ghost town” operations are being carried out. Journalists and photographers are founding collectives to inform the world, despite the arrests and brutalities of which this profession is the victim. Women make devices in their homes using sugar and potassium nitrate, producing a cloud of smoke that prevents the soldiers from aiming accurately. The funerals of the victims are an opportunity to engage, three fingers raised (a sign of support for the democratic struggle in the region), to continue the fight until victory, namely, to end once and for all the military power established in 1962.

## General strikes to oppose the military coup

The “Battle of Hlaing Thar Yar” represented a turning point in the modalities of resistance. Hlaing Thar Ya is a large industrial area located northwest of Yangon where the response to the call from the CDM and the CTUM trade union federation for a general strike was massive. This industrial zone developed in the wake of the economic opening initiated in 2011. More than 700,000 migrants from the interior work there: they are rural people, 80% of them women, living in dormitories and bamboo huts in a huge slum. Textile factories have sprung up like mushrooms and employ most of the workforce. Their exports represent 30% of the country's total. The investors are 60% Chinese, but 75% of this production is destined for the European Union and Japan, with exemption from customs duties in Europe.

Street mobilizations continued in Hlaing Thar Yar until 14 March. On that day, demonstrators were killed by soldiers armed with machine guns and snipers. In response to the repression, the strikers attacked the factories, torching them (we do not know how many) and in doing so settling their accounts with Chinese employers adept at overexploitation: lack of toilets, extended hours, repression of unions and so on. [4]

Some observers wonder if these fires were a provocation, to push China to react, but nothing seems to confirm this hypothesis. Anti-China sentiment has been evident since the beginnings of the democratic resistance, which blames the CCP for calling at the United Nations for an impossible “dialogue” between the junta and the Civil Disobedience Movement. China is also the main supplier of arms to the Burmese army (along with Russia) – though it also sells them to the ethnic minorities of the north, at its border, who more or less sporadically fight the Federal Army (whose official name is Tatmadaw).

# The peculiarities of the Burmese army

The first question that arose after the 1 February putsch was: why did the army do this in a country where it already controlled most of the power? Partly to guarantee the future of General-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing, whose retirement age was approaching, but mostly to regain control as, following successive electoral failures, Tatmadaw's political legitimacy was declining to the benefit of the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi which won the elections easily. The Burmese military chose to emulate Trump: we never envisioned it happening, so it didn't happen.

The power of the military has never been properly threatened. It was guaranteed by the 2008 Constitution which had endowed it with a 25% bloc of unelected legislators and a blocking minority, any amendment to the Constitution requiring at least 75% of the votes. Key ministries like defence, the interior and border security were automatically assigned to Tatmadaw. It was not subject to any civilian control; on the other hand, it could oppose any decision deemed contrary to its interests. In terms of general political orientation, no policy disagreement with the NLD justified any break.

On the strength of its electoral legitimacy, the NLD wanted to move the lines within the unequal balance of power by gradually expanding the sphere of competence of civilian government. It was careful not to question the generals' sources of enrichment and obviously did not anticipate the violence of their reaction. Tatmadaw has indeed decided to end for good any sharing of prerogatives. The putsch of 1 February put an end to the coexistence between the army and a government elected following free elections, which inexorably gave the majority to a competing party, as it stands, the one led by "State Counsellor" Aung San Suu Kyi. [5] More generally, the junta attacked the entire "civil society" which had developed following the economic opening of the country a decade earlier: associations and unions, civil rights and so on. If the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) was immediately formed in the aftermath of the putsch, it was not only to protest against the overthrow of an elected government, but because their freedoms were directly targeted - the precedent of 1988 had not been forgotten. [6]

The second question that had arisen abroad, the day after the putsch, concerned precisely this question: would the generation of generals represented by General-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing act with the same brutality as the previous one or would it be more moderate. We quickly got the answer. Tatmadaw has not changed. Tatmadaw cannot change. Comprising at least 350,000 men, it is a state within a state, a form of "total power", a world apart. It represents a social lift for young people educated in the cult of the chief, the families of soldiers live in a closed circuit, the officers benefit from privileges which make them a caste overhanging society (the same is true, by the way, for sectors of the globalized bourgeoisie). It has built a myth that makes it the guarantor of the interests of the nation. More prosaically, the officer corps derives immense benefits from its control over the state bureaucracy and over two large conglomerates, the Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC) and Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL), as well as trafficking in precious stones or wood. [7] They sometimes constitute quasi-monopolies and encompass many sectors: aviation, banking and insurance, energy, pharmaceuticals, imports, construction, tourism, mines (notably jade), and so on.

The military grants authorizations and licenses in many industries. The "khaki economy" is not unique to Burma, far from it, but it is particularly developed here, giving rise to "client capitalism", an instrument of corruption and control. Tatmadaw's power is not only organized nationally. The army constitutes a parallel authority which doubles, from top to bottom, the civil administration, giving it at each level a strong capacity of influence on society. Even in times of crisis, it is uncertain to expect significant defections within it (unlike the police, where they have occurred). Past experience gives it confidence in its ability to endure, in the face of stigma and (albeit relative) international sanctions.

## The role of Buddhism

In this Buddhist country where the monastic order is divided into nine sects which group together some five hundred thousand monks, the clergy have long avoided contestation. The official authorities (the Sangha) are not supposed to engage in politics, but traditionally support the regime in power. After 1 February, the army leaders took care to court the religious hierarchy more than ever. However, movements of Buddhist reference can, depending on the period or the issue, cover the entire political spectrum.

In 2007, the then ruling junta decided to increase fuel prices without warning, causing a social crisis. The activists of the 1988 generation, immediately mobilized, were repressed. The leadership of the mass protests was then taken over by Buddhist monks and their underground organization, the All Burma Monks' Alliance. In other movements, in other times or on other issues, the predominant role has been occupied by a fascist Buddhist far right, as was the case with the Organization for the Defence of Race and Nation (Ma Ba Tha) which played a key role in the Rohingya genocide.

Today, under continued pressure from the civil disobedience movement, the conservative alliance between religious authorities and the military regime is crumbling. One of the most influential figures, Sitagu Sayada, very close to the General-in-Chief, has suffered a flurry of criticism on social media. His sect, the Shwe Kyin, ended up calling on the military to be more restrained in the repression. Pro-democracy monks are now making their voices heard, especially in Mandalay, Burma's second urban centre, where several monasteries have entered into open dissent. In this city, every day, the monks take the lead in a lightning demonstration, knowing that their presence constitutes a protection. Most recently, the chairman of the National Sangha Committee - a structure set up by the junta to which it has appointed "venerables" of its choice - announced that it was ceasing all activities. Bad news for the junta!

## A geopolitical impact

If the civil disobedience movement had been quickly broken, the junta probably could have gotten away with it internationally without too much damage. In terms of investments and trade, the integration of the Burmese economy is above all regional: Singapore, China, Thailand, India... (the Western country most involved is Great Britain). ASEAN's golden rule is non-interference in the internal affairs of its member countries (this association is a club of authoritarian regimes). This is also the position traditionally defended by China on the UN Security Council. Western firms (of which Total is a prime example) play a considerable economic and financial role, but they are used to working without qualms with dictatorships.

The civil disobedience movement has not died out and has suddenly changed the rules of the diplomatic game. China's attitude bears witness to this. In "normal" times, it would have been content, with Russia, to oppose any "interference" in the internal affairs of Burma by the UN Security Council (the Chinese press initially described the putsch as a big ministerial reshuffle). This time, if it opposed the council condemning the junta, it had to accept it expressing its "serious concern" and calls for the "immediate release" of all those detained as well as the end of restrictions on journalists and activists.

More generally, Beijing must reconcile conflicting interests, which becomes difficult in times of acute crisis. Aung San Su Kyi had excellent relations with Xi Jinping; she is now incarcerated and her trial for high treason has been announced. The CCP considers the border territories occupied in the north by national minorities to be part of its geostrategic security perimeter and sells them arms. It nevertheless needs to secure the very significant investments made in the country, which requires an agreement with the ruling military. Access to the Indian Ocean remains a major objective, the "Burmese corridor" (in addition to the Pakistani "corridor") offers it one. Under these conditions, the country's "stability", currently threatened, is probably its priority.

There is no love between Beijing and the very anti-Communist Tatmadaw (there is no longer anything “Communist” about the Chinese state, but it is not certain that the Burmese generals have noticed this). However, in heavy weather, the putschists can count on the more or less enthusiastic support of China, Russia, Vietnam, and Cambodia. These countries were all represented on the stage during the celebration of “Army Day”, Beijing a little more quietly than Moscow. The junta has appointed a government that includes Burmese civilian figures known for their links with the CCP (in the field of economic or cultural cooperation). [8] A measure aimed, probably, at facilitating the deployment of the Chinese protective shield. It seems that Xi Jinping had nothing to do with the 1 February coup (could he have prevented it?), But it is certain that the Chinese card was seen as a master asset by the junta, nurturing its intransigence. It can count on its two main arms suppliers, China and Russia.

## Sanctions

Some sanctions taken in the aftermath of the putsch hurt, such as President Biden's freezing of a billion dollar transfer from the US Federal Bank to Burma. Others show what could be done and are an encouragement to international solidarity which can, in the present context, be effective. Overall, however, the measures target only members of the junta or sales to the forces of repression; they do not concern the economic empire of Tatmadaw and do not apply, for the moment, to the main firms trading with the state and the khaki economy.

As early as 2017 and the persecution of the Rohingya, companies had started to leave Burma, such as the cement company LafargeHolcim. The Franco-Swiss company announced in summer 2020 the liquidation of its Burmese subsidiary, when it was cited in the report of independent UN experts as having contractual or commercial links with the army. Japanese brewer Kirin announced in early February that it planned to end its relations with the Burmese army quickly (it operates two breweries locally). The European Union, however, remains lagging behind on this issue, as is the case with, in particular, French companies.

The Accor hotel group is playing the innocent, as it partners with a conglomerate of the “khaki economy” in the construction of a 366-room five-star hotel in Yangon, the Novotel Yangon Max. Its partner is the Max Myanmar Group. The company helped the military build infrastructure to prevent the Rohingya from returning to their land in Rakhine (Arakan) state after the 2017 persecutions that drove them into exodus. In 2019, independent UN experts concluded an investigation ruling that Accor's partner should be the subject of a criminal investigation which could lead it to be prosecuted for contributing to a crime against humanity.

Since 1992, Total has been operating part of the Yadana gas field, off the Burmese coast. In 2020, the Burmese president awarded Moattama Gas Transportation Co, the Bermuda-registered subsidiary of the international group Total, the “largest taxpayer award” in the “foreign companies” category for the 2018-2019 fiscal year. More generally, Total is the largest, or one of the largest, financial contributors to the Burmese state, paying it \$257 million (€213 million) in 2019. From now on, as denounced by the NGO Justice for Myanmar, “foreign investors will finance a brutal and illegitimate military regime, as was the case before 2011”. The CPHR, which represents the continuation of the elected parliament, hence the country's legal authority, demanded that Total stop paying income in any form to the junta and the military. By refusing to do so, Total endorses the putsch.

Canal + (a French television group, subsidiary of Vivendi) has a holding company registered in Singapore. It broadcasts, among other things, the state television channel Myanmar Radio and Television (MRTV). It claims to be technically unable to remove it from its package (which Facebook has done). Online travel agencies Hotels.com and Oui.sncf continue to offer stays in Burma in a beachfront hotel believed to be owned by General Min Aung Hlaing's son. Other French companies are looking to enter the Burmese cybersecurity and biometric identification systems market. In fact, the number of French and European companies engaged in Burma with the state or the khaki economy is very significant. They should not be able to continue pursuing their business discreetly.

# The European Union and sanctions

The European Union relies on a simplistic definition of sanctions. According to a diplomat, the foreign ministers of the 27 EU member states said on Monday 22 February that they were “ready to adopt restrictive measures targeting those directly responsible for the military coup and their economic interests”. “Sanctions can only target certain administrations or certain people, military or otherwise, but it is first necessary to gather the evidence and constitute a legal basis for these sanctions”. [9] As emphasized by Sophie Brondel, of the Info Birmanie association “We must not only target the military, whose savings are often invested in Singapore, but the large companies that strengthen their power”.

## Bamars and National Minorities

The arrival at the forefront of a new activist generation, the so-called “Generation Z”, very young (high school students) and the power of the civil disobedience movement makes it possible to pose in new terms the crucial question of the relationship between the Bamars in the center of the country (68% of the population), and the national minorities on its peripheries. The Burmese authorities, including the National League for Democracy (NLD), have never implemented common development plans. Bamar ethno-nationalism is very powerful, as is the sense of alienation from the ethnic groups, often armed, that populate the borders. The issue of federalism has never been settled, despite the country's official name being the Union of Burma or the Republic of the Union of Myanmar. The relations between the military regime and the minority states are, above all, punctuated by peace or ceasefire agreements that fluctuate according to the circumstances and the priorities of the regime.

On the whole, in the face of the putsch of 1 February, the official authorities (parliaments) of the national states took a wait and see attitude. In contrast, spontaneous protests against the coup have taken place almost everywhere, with some young people in particular identifying with the global movement of civil disobedience.

Karen State (or Kayin State) is at the forefront in opposing the dictatorship. It is on the border with Thailand. The Fifth Brigade of the Karen National Union (KNU) is one of the largest armed groups in the country which immediately declared itself ready to welcome and protect underground members of the CPHR. Heavy fighting broke out, with the army bombarding Papun district. More than ten thousand people have fled their villages, some taking refuge in Thailand, where they are being turned away. [10]

In Kachin State, in the far north with India and China as its border countries, the Kachin Independence Army attacked a remote army post as a retaliation after the armed forces killed protesters from the Civil Disobedience Movement. In the town of Shwegu, more than 400 government employees, including police officers, are said to be involved in the movement. [11] In Arakan (Rakhine State), the junta removed the Arakan Army (AA) from the list of terrorist organizations and a ceasefire was signed. However, the AA threatens to break it if the army continues to attack the democratic opposition in its territory. The same is true in other minority states. Self-defence forces remain in a wait-and-see posture but react when the military assassinates protesters.

For national minorities, the issue of federalism is essential. In the face of adversity, the National League for Democracy (finally) pledged to effectively address this issue. If this commitment takes shape, it can be a geopolitical game-changer in Burma itself. If not, some minorities threaten to demand independence. For now, China continues to influence the positioning of the northern border states. As for the junta, it does everything to co-opt the social elites of the minorities to win their support. A complex standoff is underway, the outcome of which will help shape the country's future. We can hope that the dramatic (and very specific) story of the long persecution and genocide of 2017 against the Rohingya, a predominantly Muslim population living in Rakhine (Arakan) state, can finally be

revisited by the younger generations.

# A new political situation and the imperative of solidarity

The massive opposition to the putsch of 1 February gave birth to the Civil Disobedience Movement which originally included healthcare workers and “generation Z” whose entry into the struggle was immediate, as well as trade unionists, including members of the CTUM federation which called for the general strike of 8 February. It constitutes a framework of self-organization of the resistance which is not under the authority of the National League for Democracy. Its rapid constitution shows to what extent we have entered into a new period in Burma, providing a foundational experience for the younger generations.

In Bamar country, mobilizations are often carried out in the name of the electoral legitimacy of the National League for Democracy and Aung San Suu Kyi (75 years old), but the CDM is a structure independent of this party and locally, the democratic resistance must in part self-organize in the face of adversity. All of this will affect the relationship between the NLD and the people. How and to what extent?

For those who do not know the country intimately (as is the case with me!), It is difficult to understand in all its complexity. However, the broad outlines appear clear. No other country today has such a murderous dictatorship at work attempting to shatter such an exceptionally broad democratic resistance. A situation which implies an imperative duty of solidarity. For its part, the ESSF association offers continuous information on its website on developments in the situation and has launched an appeal for financial solidarity. [12].

28 April 2021

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[1] *The Irrawaddy* via ESSF ) [“Saturday – ‘Day of Terror and Dishonor’ Sees More Than 100 Slain by Myanmar Military Regime”](#).

[2] <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210327-myanmar-junta-puts-on-show-of-force-as-protest-hit-nation-resists>

[3] In this article, the word Burmese refers to the entire population of the state and the word Bamar refers to the members of the majority ethnic group who mainly populate the Irrawaddy basin.

[4] See the article by Arthur Poras in *Le Monde*, 23 March 2021.

[5] She was de facto head of state, but as the military had introduced a constitutional clause barring this post to people who had a spouse or children of foreign nationality, she held the title of State Counsellor.

[6] A crisis very similar to that of today when the democratic opposition was crushed in a bloodbath, with some three thousand dead in three months.

[7] According to an Amnesty International report, MEHL distributed 18 billion dollars in dividends to retired or active soldiers between 1990 and 2011.

[8] *The Irrawaddy*, ESSF (article 57422), Realpolitik: Myanmar Regime's Cabinet Includes Some Old China Hands.

[9] Cited by Bruno Philip and Julien Bouissou, *Le Monde* 3 March 2021.

[10] *The Irrawaddy*, ESSF (article 57407), 10,000 Karen Flee Myanmar Military Airstrikes.

[11] *The Irrawaddy*, 31 March 2021 "[Kachin Independence Army Attacks a Myanmar Regime Police Station](#)".

[12] See "[In the face of a murderous military dictatorship, an urgent appeal for financial solidarity with grass roots resistance in Myanmar/Burma](#)".