

**[ADRN Issue Briefing]**

## **Restoring Democracy in Myanmar: A Call for Bolstered Anti-Junta Resistance Forces**

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Two years have passed since the Myanmar's junta (State Administration Council (SAC)) toppled its civilian government in a coup; however, the resistance movement has not lost its momentum. In light of the second anniversary of the Spring Revolution, pro-democracy activists in Myanmar have recently held a nationwide "silent strike," rejecting any form of oppressive and predatory military rule.

Meanwhile, the coup leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing displays no intent to relinquish his power through negotiation. The current military regime has accepted neither the conditions outlined in the speech by the Acting President of the National Unity Government (Mcpherson 2022) nor the ASEAN's '5-Point Consensus.' While the ASEAN has been attempting to appease the SAC, this controversial effort has a bleak outlook. Min Aung Hlaing seeks for a total victory, which resembles the goal of Bashar al-Assad's Syrian regime.

In such context, unless the international community changes its approach to the crisis, Myanmar will inevitably face protracted stalemate and civil war creating millions of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), approximately 1.5 million people have been internally displaced; 39,000 civilian properties have been destroyed; and one-third of the population is in need of critical humanitarian assistance. (Humanitarian Update No. 26 2023) Moreover, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) reports that nearly 3,000 people, including pro-democracy activists and civilians, have been killed by the junta, while more than 13,000 remain imprisoned.

### **Call for A New Approach by the International Community**

In order to restore democracy in Myanmar, the following actions are suggested:

1. The international community, particularly neighboring countries and the ASEAN, must jettison the "inclusive national dialogue" that engages Min Aung Hlaing and his junta to resolve the Myanmar crisis.

Min Aung Hlaing and his military loyalists are the root cause of the crisis and the main culprits of all crimes against humanity committed in Myanmar. In other words, Min Aung Hlaing must not be considered as a stakeholder in seeking peaceful resolution. This article wholeheartedly identifies with Igor Blazevik, a long-time Myanmar observer and human rights campaigner in Prague

who argues that the Myanmar junta is “not and can never be a part of any solution.”

International players must free themselves from the illusion that the junta will abide by the ASEAN’s 5-Point Consensus. As predicted by Lucas Myers from the Wilson Center, the SAC “has crossed the Rubicon, and it is likely to do everything to stay in power.” (Myers 2021) Settlement through negotiation is not on the junta’s agenda. According to Ye Myo Hein from Wilson Center, “the only way to bring the generals to the negotiating table may be to force them to realize that they cannot win by military means.” (Hein 2022) As such, the SAC and its chief are not rational negotiating partners for the resolution of the ongoing political crisis.

2. The international community must proactively engage with the National Unity Government (NUG), National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), ethnic resistance organizations (EROs), and other anti-junta alliances to bring about genuine dialogues and pave way for peaceful and prosperous democracy in Myanmar.

The U.S. Government must take the lead in embedding the Burma Act in the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). This act enables the United States to provide non-lethal assistance to the NUG and other anti-junta armed groups, such as the People’s Defense Force (PDFs) and EROs. The anti-junta forces in Myanmar needs material assistance, not merely trainings and statements of concern.

Furthermore, as Chulalongkorn University analyst Thitinan Pongsudhirak recommends, Western democracies should provide anti-aircraft rocket launchers to neutralize airstrikes (Pongsudhirak 2023). Once the balance is reached on the battlefield, the overstretched junta segments will dramatically lose its capacity to conduct a 4-cut strategy, mainly constituting burning down villages.

In many areas controlled by the NUG/PDFs and EROs, the governance bodies like the People’s Administrations (PaAPha) currently provide services to the IDPs and local communities with highly limited resources (Lipes 2022). However, once the SAC’s airpower is balanced, Burman-majority, ethnic communities will be able to implement humanitarian assistance and resettlement programs effectively. Neutralized airpower would critically weaken both the SAC soldiers’ capacity and morale, compelling the army to engage in negotiations with all stakeholders.

3. The international community should provide humanitarian assistance through every available channel and increase the levels of cross-border aid with flexible banking and reporting rules, as UN Secretary General’s Special Envoy to Myanmar Noleen Heyzer suggests. Measures to protect IDPs and refugees both in and outside mainland Myanmar must be employed in accordance with the ASEAN’s ‘5-Point Consensus’ and other regional frameworks.

UN, U.S., ASEAN, China, India, and other Western democracies should engage and support the NUG, NUCC, and EROs’ alliance platforms to improve coordination with regards to organizing humanitarian assistance and military operations. Doing so will pave the way for genuine negotiations and establishment of federal democratic union of Myanmar once the military is placed under civilian control in the future. Formation of cohesive alliance networks is the key to success for the anti-junta resistance forces.

## Call for Internal Reconciliation

As of now, there exists the “Federal Democracy Charter (FDC),” which is a political framework that clearly defines the steps toward the establishment of future federal democratic union in Myanmar (Analysis And Prospects 2022). This charter has been drafted by the Committee Represent People’s Parliament (CRPH), mandated by 80% of the MPs elected in the 2020 general election to represent the Union Parliament, and revised by the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), and approved

by the People Assembly held on January 27-29, 2022.

Yet while meaningful progress is being made to address the long-simmering grievances between Myanmar's ethnic majority and the minorities, the key to success of the Spring Revolution lies with improved cooperation and coordination among NUG PDFs, local PDFs, and EROs (Hein 2023). Ye Myo Hein points out that the anti-junta forces should not overly focus on the details of the political agreement, as they are unrealistic. Instead, they should increase the military cooperation among within the alliance network and build trust for an inclusive federal state in the future. The NUG must step up to build more viable command-and-control structures, while enforcing a more inclusive code of conduct. This point merits attention, for as explained above, genuine negotiations are only possible when the Myanmar's military junta is weakened.

The NUG and some EROs have already established the Central Command and Control Committee (C3C); however, some observers point out that although the NUG's Ministry of Defense (MOD) and the EROs are cooperating at an operational level, strategic cooperation is not implemented. This current situation must change in order to win the revolution.

## Conclusion

Some questions brought up by the international players are as follows: What will happen when the SAC loses power? Will the country descend into a failed state? Will the irregular army of PDFs turn against each other? In addressing these questions, Igor Blazevic consistently points out the international community's need to address what he calls the "stability bias (authoritarian stability is better than chaos caused by anarchy)", "David and Goliath bias (the asymmetrically powerful junta will inevitably crush all resistance forces)", and "authoritarian bias (authoritarianism supports authoritarianism)."

Considering the aforementioned biases, the international community is unlikely to exclude the junta and its chief from the negotiation process (Press Statement by the Chair of the 32nd ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC) Meeting and ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat 2023). Therefore, anti-junta resistance forces are better to focus on institutionalizing and developing the intra-dialogue among key stakeholders to a new level. In doing so, the alliance must prove that they can govern and maintain stability once the current military junta is removed from power and that there will be no power vacuum. Strengthened national-level coalition will provide greater credibility and legitimacy for the anti-junta forces to govern a democratic Myanmar in the future.

Myanmar's resistance forces deserve no less global attention than those of Ukraine. Creating a peaceful democratic Myanmar is not merely a domestic issue—it is closely intertwined with achieving regional stability. As long as Min Aung Hlaing's junta retains power, there will be more refugees, IDPs, narcotic drug production, and transnational crimes that will spill over to neighboring countries. ■

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