

NIAS-IPRI Brief

Myanmar Military: Annihilation as a Domination Strategy¹

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In July 2022, the *Tatmadaw* executed four democracy activists. Such sanctioned annihilation of dissenters needs to be contextualized within the *Tatmadaw's* strategy of quelling the opposition demanding restoration of democracy. International condemnation of the executions may prevent further prison executions but will do little to deter the *Tatmadaw* from further pursuing its annihilation strategy.

The Military Junta (*Tatmadaw*), which set up the State Administrative Council (SAC) governing entity in Myanmar after orchestrating a coup in February 2021, has proved time and again that it will not shy away from drawing red lines. These include how much democracy will it allow flourishing, how much curtailment of its own power will it tolerate, and how much expression of dissent can it condone. Its every action, ever since it reluctantly started loosening its control over the country's political process in the early 2000s, has been guided by considerations of survivability. While nearly a decade of experiment with democracy raised hopes for further progress, it was evident that the growth of liberal democracy in the country would not only be constrained, but could be reversed the moment the *Tatmadaw* perceives a danger to its paramountcy. Hence, the coup that upended the results in the 2020 parliamentary elections and the ruthless stabilisation project undertaken since then by the junta are parts of its strategy to remain relevant, powerful, and the ultimate arbitrator of Myanmar's body polity.

On 25 July, the *Tatmadaw* went a step further, and executed four democracy activists, after they were sentenced to death in a closed-door trial. All four, including activist Ko Jimmy and former member of parliament Phyo Zeya Thaw, had been convicted of 'terrorism', a phrase the junta has conveniently used to describe activities centered on restoring democracy in the country. While these executions, the first in at least three decades in Myanmar, can be considered a new low in the *Tatmadaw's* war on pro-democracy activists and have evoked shock and anger across Myanmar, and have been condemned by the UNSC, ASEAN, and several countries, such sanctioned annihilation of dissenters need to be contextualized within the *Tatmadaw's* strategy of quelling the opposition demanding restoration of democracy.

The future of democracy in Myanmar, therefore, remains linked with the *Tatmadaw's* capacity to orchestrate violence as well as its perceived sense of impunity. While the *Tatmadaw's* history is replete with waging unending wars against its own people, past months have demonstrated that such capacity to target the opposition can falter and needs

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reinforcements by external sources. This analysis attempts to bring to focus the multiple sources behind such strength which fuels the *Tatmadaw's* annihilation strategy. It also underlines the strengths and vulnerabilities of the opposition. The analysis argues that as long as the SAC continues to be empowered by external sources, it will fancy its chances of getting away with mass-scale human rights violations and crushing democracy in Myanmar permanently.

I

Junta-sponsored Violence

Since orchestrating the coup on 1 February 2021, the *Tatmadaw* has implemented a two-prong strategy against pro-democracy politicians and civilian activists. One of them is political as well as seemingly legal. Over 13,000 people, including politicians and activists remain in detention for opposing the military's seizure of power, according to the rights group Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP); 117 people, including two children, have been sentenced to death including 41 sentenced in absentia. A large number of legal cases have been filed by the *Tatmadaw* in courts against former state counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, in which she gets periodically convicted with her sentences stretched. Under a carefully scripted strategy, Suu Kyi, former ministers and office bearers of the deposed civilian government, and her several colleagues from the National League for Democracy (NLD) are being driven to a point of political redundancy.

The macabre and grotesque, however, continue to take place on the second level. The wrath of the military has been unleashed on hundreds of the civilian resistance People's Defence Forces (PDFs), which have sprung up across the country and the Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) in the periphery. Initially, the *Tatmadaw's* soldiers were in charge of the campaign against the PDFs and the EAOs. Subsequently, however, replicating the PDFs and also to fill in the vacancies by deserting soldiers and police personnel, a large number of militia groups were created by the *Tatmadaw*. As a result, *Pyusawhtis* (paramilitary militias) and the shadowy *Thway Thauk Apwe* pro-military groups have become an integral part of the official scorched earth policy. The military also recruited a large number of *Anghar-Sit-Thar* (hired soldiers), paying them a monthly salary of approximately USD 100. These groups, consisting of disposable and largely untrained fighters, have not only economized the war, but with a mandate to burn villages, loot, kill and torture civilians and rape women, have wreaked havoc in the EAO-dominated areas, which shelter many of the PDFs.

In a conflict-ridden country, where ground-level reporting is either difficult or largely unverifiable, Planet Labs and Google Earth images bear testimony to vacated and burnt villages. On rare occasions, deserter soldiers have narrated how they were ordered to round up and kill innocent people by their commanders. The military has supplanted its ground-level weakness by using attack helicopters to open aerial fire. Such unceasing hostility has resulted in the internal displacement of 700,000 and the killing of scores. A group of open-source researchers tracking human rights abuses, Myanmar Witness, has verified more than 200 reports of villages being burnt between September 2021 and May 2022 in the north-west Sagaing and Magway region, allegedly in retaliation for their support to PDFs and the National Unity Government (NUG), the shadow government of the ousted civilian administration. The increasing intensity of attacks is clear from the fact that 146 of these incidents have taken place between January and May 2022.²

² *Burning Myanmar*, Myanmar Witness, 22 July 2022, <https://www.myanmarwitness.org/reports/burning-myanmar>.

In December 2021, nearly 35 people, including a child, were killed after army troops deliberately set the people in the trucks on fire in Kayah state, suspecting them to be sympathizers of the Karenni Nationalities Defence Force (KNDF), an insurgent group that pledged support to the NUG. In July 2022, at least 10 villagers were killed during a military raid on a village in Sagaing region.³ Scores have been killed in unreported night raids, secret assassinations and targeted annihilations. According to the United Nations human rights chief Michelle Bachelet, “over 30 percent of over 2,100 people killed since February 2021 have died in military custody – most as a result of ill-treatment.”⁴ The junta’s intention of silencing even an iota of protest in the most depraved manner is no longer a matter of speculation.

II Junta’s Strength

The *Tatmadaw* legitimizes its violent campaign as aimed at the ‘terrorism’ perpetrated by the PDFs and the EAOs, and has vowed to annihilate them.⁵ It has declared its intention of bringing peace and stability to the country before holding another round of elections to elect a new government. And yet, there is little reason to believe such false claims and assurances, as it continues to extend the state of emergency.

The junta’s manpower strength is unknown, with estimates varying from 250,000 to 350,000. The actual number of combat soldiers is far lower—between 80,000 and 120,000. The National Police force is around 80,000 strong.⁶ As mentioned earlier, the junta has added more manpower by enlisting militia members, pro-military groups as well as hired mercenaries. This gives it a tactical advantage vis-a-vis the PDFs and the EAOs. However, the real power behind its campaign comes from two sources: indifference shown by the regional as well as global powers to the rampant human rights violations by the junta and the latter’s continuing ties with military hardware-providing countries such as China and Russia.

Barring repeated statements condemning the Myanmar military, unveiling sanctions against key military figures and demanding that the democratic process be restored in the country major powers such as the United States and United Kingdom have done little to pressure the *Tatmadaw*. The United Nations, time and again, has condemned the junta for committing war crimes and crimes against humanity. It has retained Kyaw Moe Tun, appointed by the deposed civilian government, as the Permanent Representative of Myanmar. And yet, preoccupation with the Ukraine war has pushed Myanmar out of the priority list of most major powers. The ASEAN is peeved with the junta’s refusal to implement the April 2021 five-point consensus agreement for restoration of stability and has refused to include the country in its summits. And yet, Myanmar’s defence minister General Mya Tun Oo has not been stopped from participating in the annual ASEAN Defence Ministers’ meeting in June 2022. In July, Russia and Myanmar co-chaired the ASEAN defense working group on counterterrorism in Kubinka, near Moscow, which was boycotted by the US, Australia and New Zealand, but attended by all ASEAN members.

³ “Myanmar villagers accuse junta troops of massacre”, *The Straits Times*, 22 July 2022, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/myanmar-villagers-accuse-junta-troops-of-massacre>.

⁴ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, “Myanmar: Bachelet condemns executions, calls for release of all political prisoners”, 25 July 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/07/myanmar-bachelet-condemns-executions-calls-release-all-political-prisoners>.

⁵ “Myanmar junta chief vows to annihilate opposition forces”, *CNN*, 28 March 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/28/asia/myanmar-min-aung-hlaing-annihilate-opposition-intl-hnk/index.html>.

⁶ Andrew Selth, “Myanmar’s military numbers”, *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, 17 February 2022, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/myanmar-s-military-numbers>.

Japan, a member of the Quad along with the US, Australia and India, has continued training the Myanmar defence forces in its National Defense Academy and the Air Self-Defense Force Officer Candidate School. Australian embassy in Yangon, has been accused of spending over USD 525,473 with the junta-linked Lotte Hotel and Lotte serviced apartments in Yangon since the February 2021 coup. India was among a handful of countries to participate in the *Tatmadaw's* Armed Forces Day celebrations in March 2021 but has also ordered the deportation⁷ of Myanmar refugees who had crossed over into Indian territory.

While preventing a full-scale civil war situation and pursuing their own national interests may have determined actions of individual countries that have indirectly added to the strength and survival of the *Tatmadaw*, two countries— China and Russia— have been instrumental in not only protecting Myanmar from censorship in the UN but also continue to provide military hardware, which ostensibly used against the PDFs and EAOs. China's links with the *Tatmadaw* have a long history. In the past years, however, the *Tatmadaw* has attempted to diversify its military hardware procurement sources and has reached out to Russia. This explains multiple trips undertaken by SAC Chairman Min Aung Hlaing to Moscow. In the latest week-long trip in July 2022, Aung Hlaing met the director general of Russian state energy company Rosatom and signed an MoU to cooperate on skills development in nuclear energy in Myanmar.⁸ Russian support to the Myanmar Air Force (MAF)—by providing it with two Su-30 Fighter Jets and a Mi-24P attack and transport helicopter, and by stationing a technical assistance team in Myanmar to train and assist the MAF —is believed to be a key enabler in the latter's air raids on the EAOs and PDFs.

III Vulnerabilities of the Opposition

In early 2022, the *Tatmadaw* chief indicated that he could have underestimated the power of the opposition. Over 200 PDFs operate in Myanmar's urban centres like Yangon, and in the Sagaing and Magwe regions. The NUG, to which the PDFs pledge support, claims that it controls over 15 per cent of the country's territory. Combined with another 30 to 35 per cent over which the EAOs have dominance over, half of Myanmar's territory is effectively out of the *Tatmadaw's* purview. Attacks, with growing sophistication, are regularly carried out by PDF fighters against the military's regime and its benefactors. The armed resistance has been hailed as a stupendous example of unity among the Bamars and the ethnic groups by analysts. Since the February 2021 coup, over 2,500 army and police forces have deserted the junta and are now reportedly with the opposition. Such assessments and number crunching, while holding a beacon of hope for the pro-democracy-movement, do little to hide its vulnerabilities, mostly at the operational as well as logistical levels.

The NUG is seeking USD 1 billion to sustain its operations including supporting the PDFs. However, with no external financial support, it falls back on innovative methods to raise finances internally as well as from expat Myanmar nationals and other concerned persons/entities. Funds collected outside of Myanmar are channeled unofficially into the country or through cryptocurrencies, to avoid the junta-controlled banking system.⁹

⁷ "Home Ministry Asks Border States In Northeast To Deport Myanmar Refugees", *NDTV*, 12 March 2021, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/home-ministry-asks-border-states-in-northeast-to-deport-myanmar-refugees-2389684>.

⁸ "Myanmar seeks Russian assistance in push for nuclear energy", *Nikkei Asia*, 19 July 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Myanmar-Crisis/Myanmar-seeks-Russian-assistance-in-push-for-nuclear-energy>.

⁹ "Inside the global drive to fund a revolution in Myanmar", *Japan Times*, 23 February 2022, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/02/23/asia-pacific/myanmar-funding-revolution/>.

However, as the war continues, the NUG is bound to discover that private donations alone would not sustain its operations.

The European parliament and the French Senate have adopted resolutions recognizing the NUG as Myanmar's only legitimate government, while US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has tweeted support. However, the NUG and the PDFs would require material support in addition to such pledges. The use of Russian and Soviet-era choppers by the *Tatmadaw* not only for attacks but also for maintaining supply lines, troop deployment, and evacuations have been huge challenges for the PDFs and EAOs, who neither have access to any choppers of their own nor have any advance missile systems to tackle these flying machines. Unless the PDFs receive significant external assistance, in terms of funds, arms, and expertise, their ability to threaten *Tatmadaw's* position would always remain limited.

To force the *Tatmadaw* into accepting their demands, the EAOs and PDFs will have to widen the areas of operations beyond the Sagaing and Mangwe regions. Unless the theatre of conflict is expanded, the *Tatmadaw* will not only have the advantage of carrying out focused area operations, but it will also absorb the recurrent, and yet middling damages inflicted by the opposition. So far, the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), are working with the NUG and fighting alongside resistance forces against *Tatmadaw's* troops. Some other EAOs have either unofficially supported the NUG or have remained uncommitted. Extracting active support from a majority of the 20 EAOs operating in the country would be a challenge for the NUG in the coming months.

So far, the PDFs have done exceedingly well against the troops. Due to the recurrent attacks on official installations and police stations, Yangon has been labelled the most dangerous city in Myanmar. However, sustaining such attacks in the long run may be a challenge. Paradoxically, too much violence unleashed by the PDFs may also make them unworthy of receiving any assistance from external sources.

IV The Future

Insurgency movements or armed uprisings against a conventional military force have rarely succeeded without significant external support. Belief in principles and conviction in a cause can prolong the life of such uprisings, but do not add to their winning probability against an adversary pursuing a strategy of annihilation. Insurgency movements of Myanmar have a prolonged history of confrontation with the *Tatmadaw*, stretching several decades. They have mostly remained undefeated, carving out and ruling over near-autonomous homelands. But for the PDFs, the goal is much larger. Toppling a shadow government of the military or coercing it to send its soldiers back to barracks and restore power to the NLD is a far more difficult task.

Currently, neither *Tatmadaw* nor the armed opposition is willing to accept defeat. The international and regional powers, apprehensive of a full-blown civil war situation at the heart of Asia, are averse to materially assisting the NUG and the PDFs. The stalemate, therefore, is a recipe for continued conflict, tilted in favour of the military. In the coming months, the *Tatmadaw* may continue pursuing a two-prong strategy of increasing the scale and sweep of its operations and trying to avenge its battlefield losses by punishing the softer targets, i.e. the imprisoned politicians and the activists. International condemnation of the July 2022 executions of the four activists may prevent further prison executions but will do little to deter the *Tatmadaw* from further pursuing its annihilation strategy.










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