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# Research Report

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Addressing the crisis in Myanmar

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## INTRODUCTION

The humanitarian and political crisis in Myanmar is multi-layered and has sent shockwaves across the international community. The origin began on February 1, 2021, when the armed forces of Myanmar, otherwise known as the Tatmadaw, waged a military coup that put an end to what was until then a nascent period of democratic development. The Tatmadaw, based on unsubstantiated allegations of election rigging, removed the democratically elected leaders of the National League for Democracy, headed by Aung San Suu Kyi, despite its clearer victory in the November 2020 elections. Since then, unprecedented citizen resistance and increasing violence have characterized the country while the military ruthlessly cracked down on protests and dissent (McKenna 2024). The crisis has many directions. More million people have been displaced, and Myanmar is effectively a zone of civil war, with the Tatmadaw fighting an array of internal armed forces that term themselves People's Defense Forces. Several thousand lives have been lost, and human rights abuses are widespread, including arbitrary arrests, torture, and extrajudicial killings. The economic consequences have been no less crippling, with millions being pushed into poverty as sanctions from other countries and the suspension of business by major corporations further drain whatever life remains in Myanmar's economy. Healthcare and education systems have buckled under the strain, while the future of an entire generation is now at risk. Regionally, it is in the continuing stream of refugees across borders, further straining the already tenuous resources of neighboring countries and testing the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' policy of non-interference. In this report, an in-depth look is sought as the international community debates how it should respond to events unfolding in Myanmar. It will cover the definition of important terms, a general historical and political background, major parties involved in the dispute, and past attempts to solve the problems. Possible solutions will be outlined in the end, helping the delegates to develop an informed, multifaceted response to the crisis (Maizland 2022).

### Definitions of Key Terms

**Tatmadaw:** The official name for Myanmar's military, which has already remained a powerful political force since independence, has committed numerous human rights abuses, and is the main governing body after the 2021 coup.

**People's Defense Forces:** These are the local militias that have been organized in response to the coup. It is civilians who make up the membership of the PDFs in their attempts to fight against the Tatmadaw. The PDFs have become an intrinsic part of the entire internal resistance of Myanmar, contributing to civil war today.

**Genocide:** A term given to acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group. The treatment of the Rohingya by the Tatmadaw has been referred to as genocide, though not termed as such by all governments, by international observers.

**Ethnic Minorities:** Indeed, Myanmar is an ethnically diverse country, with its major ethnic groups being the Rohingya, Shan, Karen, and Kachin. In fact, many of these have historically been relegated to peripheries and persecuted by the Tatmadaw.

**Sanctions:** Economic and political actions taken by various countries in punishment against the Tatmadaw for refusing to yield back political power to democratically elected leaders. Examples of such sanctions include asset freezes, trade restrictions, and travel bans that have hit Myanmar's military leadership and their economic interests.

**Human Rights Violation:** means general abuses, including extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary detentions, and violence against civilians, well documented since the 2021 coup by human rights organizations.

### General overview

#### Background and Colonial Legacy

Myanmar, as Burma then was, gained independence from British colonial rule in 1948, stepping into nationhood with significant ethnic diversity. Although many longstanding grievances were entrenched prior to British rule, it only exacerbated them. British colonial policy favored the Karen and Kachin among others for administrative and military service, normally excluding the majority Bamar from those positions. The result of this structure was further ethnic tensions that were unresolved by independence and hampered the drive for unity since then. Following independence, differences within the central government, dominated by Bamar, and various ethnic minorities over the quest for autonomy and greater representation led to an autonomy-and-representation struggle that laid the ground for long insurgencies across the country (Harvard).

#### Ne Win's Coup and Long-lasting Military Rule

In 1962, the military coup under General Ne Win ushered in the end of the first democratic experiment of Myanmar under "Burmese Way to Socialism" authoritarian military rule. The economy went into sharp decline under the policies of isolationism, nationalization, and expulsion of foreign businesses adopted by Ne Win. Controls on civil liberty and censorship were tightened, with repression of ethnic minorities through denial of full citizenship to many groups and military action against them. Myanmar remained isolated, economically stagnant, steeped in ethnic conflicts whose divisions precluded national cohesion and nurtured resentment against military rule in the stern grip of the military (Maizland 2022).

#### The Uprising of 8888 and Military Consolidation

Sharp economic problems and political discontent among the masses forced a gigantic pro-democratic movement in the year 1988, it is well-known as the uprising of 8888. The Tatmadaw in turn responded with merciless crackdowns the protests left several thousand slaughtered, including students, workers, and monks who took to the streets together in demand of political reform. After the uprising, the military then reconstituted itself into the State Law and Order Restoration Council, still in control but promising democratic reforms. Elections held in 1990 saw Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy return a landslide victory, but the military refused to yield power, placing Suu Kyi under house arrest to demonstrate that it would not yield before the people's will (Renaud 2009).

#### Steps Towards Democracy and Military Reforms

The military passed a new constitution in 2008, giving it a tight grip on power with 25 percent of parliamentary seats reserved for Tatmadaw members, including critical ministries. This law provided the legal basis for a quasi-democratic transition in 2011, after which Myanmar began its journey toward civilian governance. In the first-ever landmark elections back in 2015, the NLD managed to sweep to a majority, with Suu Kyi gaining a powerful position that put her as head of state if not by name, a constitutional mandate against her ever assuming the presidency. The reforms kindled hope for democracy, but the military retained structural control, a limitation against civilian oversight (Bulmer).

#### 2021 Military Coup and Civil Disobedience Movement

In November 2020, the NLD gained a landslide victory in national elections, as it did previously. The Tatmadaw, however led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing berated widespread electoral fraud, which was widely discredited by international observers. On February 1, 2021, the military carried out a coup. Suu Kyi and other leaders of the NLD were

taken into custody, civilian government structures were dissolved, and a state of emergency was declared. This coup, marking the end of a ten-year democratic experiment in Myanmar (Maizland 2022), brought outrage across the nation and subsequently gave rise to what has been termed the Civil Disobedience Movement, a broad peaceful resistance involving protests, boycotts, and strikes. Support for the CDM was widespread as students joined health workers, civil servants, and ethnic minorities in opposition to the autocratic rule of the Tatmadaw ([progressivevoicemyanmar.org](http://progressivevoicemyanmar.org)). In response, the military imposed internet blackouts, arrested thousands, and resorted to lethal force to suppress dissent-in what human rights organizations have documented as possible crimes against humanity.

### **Economic Collapse and International Sanctions**

The coup threw Myanmar into deepening economic crisis, already battered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many significant industries such as garment manufacturing and tourism contracted sharply, heavy in the loss of jobs. Consequently, inflation has sky-rocketed and made most commodities unaffordable for the greater part of the population. In response, Western countries levied targeted sanctions on Myanmar's military leadership and military connected businesses to cut off the Tatmadaw from sources of revenue. Yet, these measures have done little so far in reducing the influence of the military but have caused further economic damage in Myanmar and an effect on civilians. Whereas most key sectors continue to struggle in Myanmar, the crisis has pushed many people into poverty, increasing social and economic instability.

### **People's Defense Forces Formation and Intensification of Civil War (BBC 2021)**

Consequently, due to the Tatmadaw's brutalities, people started organizing civilian militias, known as People's Defense Forces, and launched a guerrilla war against them. These armed groups of civilians, often allied with longstanding ethnic armed organizations in Myanmar's border areas, have marked a new phase in the intensification of Myanmar's civil war. Clashes between the Tatmadaw and these groups have further intensified, especially in Kayah, Kachin, and Shan states, hence driving Myanmar closer to a full-scale civil war. The humanitarian crisis brought on by conflict has resulted in millions of people being internally displaced. Thousands have fled to Thailand, Bangladesh, and India for refuge, putting a burden on regional resources. ASEAN has largely stuck to a principle of non-interference, though countries like Malaysia and Indonesia have called for stronger action against Myanmar. (Mathieson 2024).

### **Current Situation and Future Prospects**

Today, Myanmar remains in crisis. The Tatmadaw clings to power on the back of revenues derived from natural gas exports and the protection extended by China and Russia. The NLD operates now in secrecy as the National Unity Government, or NUG, has sworn it will be representative of all ethnics and pursue a federal democracy that would likely enshrine inclusivity. The NUG has garnered some international recognition, but without territorial control, it has little way of challenging the military. (N. Oo 2024)(Al Jazeera 2024)

### **Major parties involved**

#### **Tatmadaw (Myanmar's Military)**

The Tatmadaw is Myanmar's powerful military that has been in command for most of the time since independence from British colonial rule in 1948. After the February 1, 2021, putsch, the Tatmadaw, which is headed by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing took full control of power on unsubstantiated claims of election fraud. Known for its history of human rights abuses, the Tatmadaw suppresses public dissent with violent crackdowns on protests and mass arrests. They frequently use targeted attacks against ethnic minority regions. Military influence even

extends into economic holdings and national industries, as a mean to maintain tight control by using resources to fund operations (BBC 2022).

### **National League for Democracy (NLD)**

NLD was the political party in Myanmar that advocated for pro-democratic ideas. The leader of the party is Aung San Suu Kyi, an internationally known icon for democracy. It achieved back-to-back landslide victories in the 2015 and 2020 elections. Following the Tatmadaw's denial to recognize the results of the 2020 elections, prominent NLD leaders were detained, including Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint. Despite such suppression, the NLD still symbolizes the democratic pursuits of many citizens and enjoys massive support within the CDM.

### **Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)**

Countering the coup, this is a loose coalition of activists, students, professionals, and government employees. It also contests military rule through protests, strikes, and boycotts. It has an extremely loose structure and can move and organize rapidly despite brutal clampdowns by the Tatmadaw. CDM has garnered international attention since it has been leading the resistance against the military, which tends to portray the protesters as supporters of civilian opposition to military rule (Walker 2021).

### **People's Defense Forces (PDFs)**

The PDFs are armed civilian militias created in response to the violence by the Tatmadaw. Many of them are allied with EAOs and have community-based defense operations against the military's attacks. They represent a serious escalation of the internal conflict in Myanmar, where the civil war between military forces and ethnic and civilian militias has engulfed the whole country (Rising).

### **National Unity Government (NUG)**

NUG was formed in April 2021 and has been serving as a "shadow government" in opposition to the military regime. The NUG was formed by ousted members of the NLD, ethnic representatives, and leaders of civil society-the majority of whom work either in exile or from areas along the border controlled by ethnic groups. The NUG has pledged to protect minority rights, including those of the Rohingya, and is seeking international recognition as Myanmar's legitimate government. With no control over much territory, it is a symbol of resistance to democracy, trying to get international backing (Strangio 2021).

### **Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)**

Critics have further slammed ASEAN, the main regional body in Southeast Asia, for doing too little in response to the crisis, with its guiding principle of non-interference holding it back. In April 2021, ASEAN had come up with a Five Point Consensus that called, among others, for peace and dialogue, but its implementation has not been consistent. ASEAN reflects internal division where some member states like Indonesia and Malaysia are pushing for stronger action, while others avoid directly confronting Myanmar (Al Jazeera 2022).

### **United Nations and the International Community**

The UN, particularly the Human Rights Office, has denounced such actions by Tatmadaw and chronicled probable crimes against humanity. Its Security Council's efforts, however, are limited due to vetoes by China and Russia. The United States, the EU, and other Western countries have placed targeted sanctions against the junta targeting military leaders and revenue streams including oil and gas. Yet, these steps have not forced significant change thus far, with the military retaining economic control and allies within ASEAN and its neighbors (UN press 2022).



### Timeline of Key Events

1948

Myanmar gained independence from British colonial rule, establishing itself as a democratic state.

1962

The Tatmadaw, Myanmar's army, seized power through a coup, ushering in military rule and ending democratic governance.

1988

Pro-democracy uprisings, which swept across the country—expectedly called the 8888 Uprising—were brutally suppressed by the military, leaving several thousand dead.

1990

In general elections, opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy, the NLD, won, but the military declined to give up power.

2011

The Myanmar government adopts a quasi-civilian government and permits democratic reforms, including releasing Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest.

2012

Aung San Suu Kyi gains a parliamentary seat, a possible token of further democratic developments.

2017

The Tatmadaw launches a military campaign against the Rohingya people, accused of genocide, with hundreds of thousands fleeing across the border into Bangladesh.

2020

The NLD wins another landslide election victory, which puts it at loggerheads with the Tatmadaw, which claims there has been electoral fraud.

2021

The Tatmadaw launches a coup, detaining Aung San Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders for alleged electoral fraud.

2021-2022

Mass protests and the formation of the People's Defense Forces mark the beginning of widespread civil resistance, which is rapidly escalating into armed conflict.

2022-2023

The situation deteriorates in a scenario of spiraling violence, international sanctions, and increasing refugee flows affecting neighbors, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis.

### Previous attempts to solve the issue

Various extents of success have addressed both political instability and ethnic conflicts at various levels in Myanmar. The role has especially been played by ASEAN at the regional level in facilitating talks and calls for peace. Consequent to the 2021 coup in Myanmar, the

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grouping did a "Five Point Consensus" calling for an end to violence, dialogue across all parties, humanitarian assistance, and a special ASEAN envoy to facilitate peace talks. Yet, this consensus has been criticized as incapable of being enforced, and the military in Myanmar largely ignored the plan, making the efforts by ASEAN futile (Chen lee 2021).

Several resolutions have been passed by the United Nations, which condemn the constituent human rights abuses in Myanmar and call for a return to democratic rule. The UN has also generally appealed for international assistance to be delivered to the internally displaced populations in Myanmar. However, geopolitical dynamics within the Security Council-peculiarly, resistance from China and Russia-stand in the way of the UN taking hard, united action. This division within the international community thwarted comprehensive sanctions or the undertaking of direct intervention (UN press 2022).

While humanitarian organizations such as the International Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières have tried to reach the area, their efforts reportedly were stymied by Tatmadaw imposed restrictions. Many of these groups have not reached civilians, with military forces controlling access to conflict zones. Much alike, attempts at engagement with Western countries have included targeted economic sanctions and asset freezes intended to tighten the screws on the Tatmadaw. These sanctions thus far have had some bearing on the military's economic status yet have fallen short of changing their behavior or reinstating democratic governance in Myanmar (Red cross).

Finally, civil society organizations and international NGOs have conducted campaigns of advocacy and awareness to highlight the various human rights abuses perpetrated in Myanmar. These organizations, through international protests, social media campaigns, and public fora, are trying to exert further international pressure on the Tatmadaw to show further solidarity with the people of Myanmar. Meanwhile, a lasting solution to the crisis remains a far cry, as these initiatives basically express seriousness for a combined response that should come from the world, which shall cover not only the political but also the humanitarian dimensions.

### Possible solutions

Any genuine panacea to the crisis in Myanmar will necessarily be a complex array of diplomatic pressure, humanitarian support, and intra-regional collaboration. A plausible way in which this might look would be for regional bodies such as ASEAN to press for more stringent diplomatic measures, like the temporary suspension of Myanmar's membership from ASEAN in favor of Tatmadaw's compromise on negotiations with the opposition. Secondly, it could establish humanitarian corridors in coordination with neighbors and the UN to make sure that aid reaches civilians in conflict zones without interference. Targeted sanctions placing pressure on Myanmar's military leaders and their economic interests may also be applied without causing worse civilian suffering. Lastly, an inclusive framework for long-term ethnic reconciliation is what will truly solve Myanmar's historical ethnic divides. This framework may concentrate on protection and representation issues of ethnic minorities within a new democratic structure that would bring cohesion and stability to the country.

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