Myanmar’s ethnic nationalities, doctors and teachers against the military coup

On 1 February 2021, the Burmese Military – known as the Tatmadaw – staged a coup d’etat, arrested the elected government, including the State Counsellor, Aung San Su Kyi, and imposed a yearlong national state of emergency, all through powers allegedly granted under the 2008 Constitution. The rationale was that mass voter fraud, to the tune of 8 million illegal votes, had taken place during the landslide election win for the National League for Democracy (NLD). Acting President Myint Swe transferred legislative, executive and judicial power to the Commander in Chief.

By Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO) - 1st March 2021

The military began arresting members of Parliament across the country in the early hours of the morning on 1 February. The nation woke up to a complete telecommunications blackout – phone lines and internet servers were down throughout the day. In Hakha, the capital of Chin State, the ministers and house speaker from the Chin State Hluttaw (legislative assembly) were arrested at 4 in the morning. They remain detained incommunicado in the Tatmadaw Tactical Command post on Mount Rung, overlooking the city.

Three days later, the military came for the Union Election Commission (UEC) members, the commission that oversaw the 2020 election. At the time of writing, there have been 640 politically motivated arrests since the coup took place, including human rights defenders, writers, journalists and civil servants who engaged in strikes and protests against the coup. Over the last three weeks calls for release of those detained have been ubiquitous.
Nationwide Responses

Since the coup, mass protests, the shutting down of the civil service and widespread boycotts of military products and businesses has taken place throughout the country under a nationwide Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). Despite various textbook tactics by the military to quell the nationwide show of defiance, which include the release of 20,000 prisoners let loose into cities to intimidate peaceful protestors, night-time raids and the blocking of telecommunications, the movement is growing stronger by the day.

The civil service in the form of health workers, school teachers, lawyers, engineers, the banking sector, the garment industry and even the General Administrative Department (GAD) – the administrative framework of the country that used to be under military control – are all on strike and protesting. Likewise, ethnic armed groups have opposed the coup and have widely called for the release of the detained NLD leaders and the restoration of the elected government.

While the clear overriding sentiments of protestors center on the release of the detained elected government and the restoration of democracy, a wider narrative that is increasingly being shared between all ethnic groups, including the majority Bama, is a vision that the time has come to out the military, boycott their business interests and do away with the much-hated, military-drafted 2008 Constitution that provides only the façade of democracy. This has never been more apparent than the military’s current actions to so easily instill yet another Junta administration. The military has seemingly miscalculated the national mood and the generation they are oppressing.

In response to the military’s actions, protests are merging across all ethnic nationalities (*Indigenous Peoples*) and an increasing amount of placards are focusing on atrocities carried out by the military toward the Rohingya population in an apparent recognition that more could, or should have been done, during the clearance operations in 2017. Additionally, Myanmar Radio
and Television (MRTV) and other state-owned news outlets are now being labelled “fake news”. What is becoming clearer is that a return to the previous democratic arrangement organized by the previous Junta seems to be an unlikely acceptable long-term solution to the public outrage.

While media attention has been focused on the ever more practical and cleverly initiated protests – which include “broken down” cars blocking the highways and major roads – taking place in major cities; in Indigenous areas, which never really saw an end to military oppression, communities are also protesting. In Karen State, over 40,000 Karen villagers from some 280 villages bravely staged protests on multiple Tatmadaw military outposts on Karen National Day – 11 February. Their demands were different from those of the larger cities’ dwellers, but echoed the last 70 years of military oppression: *Burma Army, stop attacking us; Burma Army, withdraw from our communities; Abolish military dictatorship; Abolish 2008 constitution; Restore democracy and establish ethnic equality and a genuine federal union.*

**Tatmadaw continues historical divide and rule practices**

Divide and rule practices have been a common theme throughout the history of the Tatmadaw. Since the coup, the Junta has quickly looked to incorporate ethnic parties and figureheads into the new government administration – the State Administration Council (SAC). Since winning the election in 2015, the NLD alienated many ethnic parties and ethnic communities. Promises stemming from the 2015 pre-election manifesto, specifically related to land issues and repealing harmful legislation that disproportionality influenced ethnic human rights defenders were maintained, while the peace process stuttered and faltered, and land confiscation and centralization was maintained.

In attempting to leverage this, the Junta immediately approached ethnic parties. In Mon State, one of the two ethnic Mon parties – the Mon Unity Party – accepted Tatmadaw’s offer to join the SAC. In a local media interview, party leader Banya Aung Moe stated that the decision was made on the basis of “reviewing the attitude of the previous NLD government toward the Mon
People”. Similarly, the Arakan National Party (ANP) – which won a majority in Rakhine State in 2015, but was blocked from forming a state government by the NLD who appointed an NLD member as Chief Minister – also has representatives on the SAC.

The ANP’s conditions were set out in short-term gains, including the release of high-profile Rakhine figures and the rescinding of the Arakan Army (AA) as a terrorist group under national legislation, among other things. Dr Aye Maung, the high profile Rakhine nationalist imprisoned for treason, has since been released. The internet ban, instilled in 2019 in Paletwa township in Chin state and Northern Rakhine state - areas affected by Tatmadaw’s counterinsurgency operations carried out by the military was suddenly lifted. The AA and Tatmadaw are currently at the negotiating table.

Meanwhile, Tatmadaw’s military focus has since shifted to Karen State. After the coup, positions were reinforced. Currently, the shelling of villages in Muttraw Township is widespread and an estimated 5,400 Internally Displaced People (IDPs) are stranded in northern Karen State as the military is blocking aid into the region.

In Karen State, four ethnic nationals who competed against the NLD in 2020 took up offers to join the SAC. In Chin State, Terrence San Mawi Khuai, the Chin State Supreme Court Judge who served during NLD’s last five years in office, accepted the position of Chin State SAC Chief. Having recently passed away from a heart attack, people close to him said that he was torn between resigning his newly acquired post under the Junta or staying put in order serve the Chin people during the coup administration.

**Overwhelming rejection**

The willingness to enter into political collaboration with the Junta, whether strategic or not, has been widely condemned by the general public and civil society. Forty-seven civil society organizations from Rakhine State denounced ANP’s decision to coordinate under the SAC.
People’s outrage has been widespread on social media against the decision of the Mon Unity Party and representatives from the Karen parties.

Generally speaking, however, the majority of ethnic leaders who have been approached by the Tatmadaw have refused to engage. Such actions are not seen to be acceptable in the overwhelming spirit of unity in rejecting the coup. The Chin National League for Democracy (CNLD) has been approached several times by the Junta to take positions on the SAC; each time they have refused. Similarly, the Kachin National Congress Party refused approaches by the Junta, stating that the party’s goal is to get a mandate from the people and not simply to obtain power through the Junta. The Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) has also strongly denounced the coup.

Away from party politics, denunciation of the coup by ethnic armed groups has been widespread. The Chin National Front (CNF), the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) have all rejected the actions of the military, penning demands for the release of the detained elected government, restoration of the democratic process and the rejection of the actions of the military in relation to the peace process.

On 19 February the CNF joined protests in Chin State and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) guarded protestors as they engaged in marches in Karen State. The irony of the situation was summed up on social media by an Indigenous activist and Chin political figurehead: “I live in a country where the elected government was imprisoned by the national military and it is the rebel groups advocating for their release.”

Seven decades of Burmanization does not disappear overnight. But as the protests grow, there is a general feeling on the streets that this generation will no longer entertain the military grip on national institutions. The CDM will continue to encourage a reconciliation spirit that allows communities and ethnic groups across the country to feel welcomed under the banner of
change. With such collective agency and continued support from the international community, its stated aims may be achieved.

This article was produced by the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO). CHRO works to protect and promote human rights through monitoring, research, documentation, education and advocacy on behalf of Indigenous Chin people and other ethnic/Indigenous communities in Myanmar. The organisation is a founding member of the Indigenous Peoples’ Network of Myanmar, made up of over 20 non-governmental organisations engaged in Indigenous Peoples’ issues in the country.