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Personal Narrative

By Ye Myo Hein

Growing up in Yangon in the 1980s and 90s, the repression, injustice, isolation, poverty, and violence that is a common feature of authoritarian rule was a daily reality of my childhood. Although Burma had been a parliamentary democracy after achieving independence from Britain in 1948, a coup led by General Ne Win in 1962 established a military government that ruled the country with an iron fist by violently suppressing all opposition to the regime. When I was five years old, a series of protests by students, monks, children, and people from across Burmese society dubbed the “[8888 Uprising](#)” succeeded in toppling Ne Win but was ultimately suppressed by the military. This led to the death of thousands and the establishment of a military junta that severely restricted civil rights and any political activity while violently and mercilessly suppressing any opposition.

The heroism and dedication to democratic ideals were very inspiring to me as a child, and when I was a sixteen-year-old high school student I started to participate in the underground student movement. I became a youth member of the National League for Democracy (NLD) party led by Aung San Suu Kyi in 2000, and I formed an underground student movement group together with some friends when I attended the Governmental Technological College. We published several underground leaflets and booklets to disseminate our messages and organize students.

I was arrested twice by military intelligence during this time – my first arrest occurred before I was eighteen years old – and I was tortured while in custody. These atrocities were suffered at the hands of my fellow countrymen – members of the military who were supposed to be defending me and my

country. These experiences only convinced me of the need for a more just and democratic system of government in Burma, and it made me more aware of the need for greater knowledge of the military as an institution and why they commit such acts of brutality against their own people.

I therefore began my lifelong study of the military and political history of Burma. At that time, political study was tightly prohibited in universities, and studying abroad was made almost impossible by the isolationist policies of the junta and the sanctions of Western countries. I therefore pursued a self-study of politics by reading any book I could find on the subject. This alone was a dangerous and rebellious act, as I could easily have been jailed for at least seven years by owning, buying, and reading political books - especially English books about Burma. I spent over seven years as a translator and an editor writing and editing about global politics and affairs in local magazines and newspapers.

Opening Up

My life changed abruptly again in 2011 when the new quasi-civilian government led by former military general U Thein Sein launched a political opening-up. I joined several friends and colleagues – including Daw Zin Mar Aung and U Lwin Ko Latt – to establish the Yangon School of Political Science to promote public participation in the nation's political transition by spreading democratic ideas throughout Burmese society. We believed that the top-down transition launched by the military generals was superficial and insubstantial, and it required bottom-up pressure to push the nation toward a real and sustainable democracy. I imparted my knowledge of civil-military relations and democratization to the students in the school, and many of our students became civil society leaders, parliamentary members, and grassroots activists who are leading the current pro-democracy resistance movement today.

In 2015, I founded the Burma Studies Center, a library and study place, in order to create intellectual space for young people who are interested in the study of Burma. Later that year, the military junta allowed for national elections and established a hybrid regime in which the elected civilian, pro-democracy forces shared power with the military (commonly known as the Tatmadaw) that had been running Burmese politics in one form or another since 1962. In this hybrid regime, the Tatmadaw remained in control of the pace, timing, and extent of Burma's political transition and never dropped their decades-old, ruling-class mentality. Civilian control over the military was never established, and undemocratic forces continued to cling to significant portions of political power and authority. To make sure the new civilian government was informed by evidence-based policy recommendations and ideas, and to study and promote democratic civil-military relations and security sector reform, I co-founded and became the Executive Director of one of Burma's first independent think tanks and policy research institutes - the Tagaung Institute of Political Studies.

The institute conducted research and published books, papers and policy briefs on the subjects of civil-military relations, security studies, military diplomacy and peace process of Burma. I wrote several books and papers including *Study of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing's Foreign Trips* and *Security Sector Negotiation in Burmese Peace Process*, as well as opinion pieces in local newspapers. I regularly contributed commentary of my analysis to the *Voice of America*, *The New York Times*, *The Financial Times*, *The Strait Times*, *Reuters* and other international and local media. In 2016, I visited the U.S. for the first time to participate in building Think Tank Influence and Effectiveness Exchange Program.

As a researcher who primarily studied the security sector reform of Burma, I was invited to serve as the advisor on security sector integration to



the parties in the peace negotiation process between the new hybrid civilian government and many of the ethnic armed organizations that have been sustaining revolts against Yangon for decades. Beginning in 2016, I was a delegate to the Union Peace Conference and offered policy recommendations on the topic of security sector integration to the participating political parties. I also provided technical assistance to the peace process by organizing workshops on security sector reform and presenting policy inputs to several of the ethnic armed groups, including the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Karen National Union (KNU), and Karenni National progressive Party (KNPP). The military disapproved of these efforts and sought to prosecute me in 2018, but the Tatmadaw was prevented from doing so by the NLD-led government.

The Coup

Sadly, the work of the Tagaung Institute of Political Studies ended on February 1st, 2021, after the Tatmadaw arrested democratically-elected members of the ruling NLD and declared power had been transferred to Commander-in-Chief of Defense Services General Min Aung Hlaing. The

junta declared the November 2020 election to be have been invalid, and quickly sought to re-impose military rule across Burma. The coup leaders unexpectedly faced significant public outrage and widespread resistance from the various sectors of the society across the entire country. Faced with the widespread opposition, the coup leaders fell back on the only tactics they know: the excessive use of coercive power and violence.

To consolidate its hold on power, the military launched a brutal crackdown on the opponents by brutally killing civilians on the street, raiding private homes and offices of suspected opponents, and arbitrarily arresting those they thought opposed to the military rule. Nearly 900 people have been killed, and more than 5,000 detained as a result - including the professionals, academics, researchers, media, foreigners and civil society leaders who were considered by the junta as threats to its reign. Within a short period, the country reverted to its past dark times when civilians felt unsafe even in their homes.

Due to my career researching and discussing and advocating subjects that were anathema to the military, and supporting the cause of democracy and freedom in Burma, these developments put



me and my family in danger. Military intelligence frequently came to the neighborhood to ask about and monitor our activities. Faced with the threats of surveillance and arbitrary arrests, my family and I moved from one safe place to another, as did my research staff. As oppression intensified after late April, I decided to get out of the country, and with the aid of some American friends came into contact with the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars – which agreed to bring me on as a scholar associated with their Asia Program.

Yet, to work at the Wilson Center, I first had to get me and my family safely out of the country. While I first considered crossing the border into Thailand to get to the United States, an intensification in fighting between the government and ethnic armed groups in the area forced us to change our plans – eventually realizing we just had to risk flying out of the airport in Yangon. On June 7, the military junta issued an executive order to the airlines requesting detailed information about passengers planning to travel abroad. There were several incidents before we left involving the arrest of several individuals, including American journalists, at the Yangon airport. My family and I went to the airport on June 16 full of anxiety, and fortunately the airlines did not follow the junta's order and we were able to slip through their net.

Since Leaving

I am thrilled to have escaped safely with my family. Yet in spite of my escape, I have also felt profound sadness for my colleagues and my country. Some of my colleagues are still in detention while others are in hiding. Likewise, the country is on the path to become a failed state with an impending explosion of security, economic, health, and humanitarian crises. Although public defiance against the military coup began as non-violent resistance, the military's brutal crackdown and

indiscriminate killing unleashed revolutionary energy among the people, especially the youth, who came to the determination that only armed struggle can restore democracy in the country.

While groups of mostly young people still continue the flash-protests across the whole country on a near-daily basis, more militant elements have taken to launching shadowy attacks on military targets even in urban areas, as well as assassinating police, military informants, and members of military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). The ethnic armed groups, especially KIA, KNPP and some elements of the KNU, have also carried out the widespread attacks against the military in their areas of operation, while others such as Chinese-backed Arakan Army (AA), Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), Shan State Progressive Party/Shan State Army (SSPP/SSA) took advantage of the situation to consolidate their control over their territory and to speed up their strides towards self-determination. As the country is sliding down to the "full-blown failed state," outlying areas are now increasingly asserting their autonomy against the central government. Myanmar's armed struggles, until now confined mainly to the periphery area of ethnic regions, are now spreading into the country's heartland and urban areas.

Under the current situation, the Tatmadaw has found it extremely difficult to consolidate its power, institutionalize its rule, and return normalcy to the country with only coercive power at its disposal. The key challenges to the junta are that the morale of its fighting forces has been dramatically declining, as it is fighting on several fronts and the basic administrative mechanisms of state remain unimplemented as public cooperation is almost absent, and even strong supporters of the coup are reluctant to publicly collaborate with the military for fear of retaliation.





However, the “shadow government” National Unity Government (NUG), mostly consisting of ousted parliament members from the National League for Democracy (NLD) that the junta failed to arrest, is not yet strong enough to topple the junta itself. Despite its decision to organize armed resistance, the NUG has not been able to forge a united front with the ethnic armed groups to form the much-expected federal army. The People’s Defense Force (PDF), announced and organized by the NUG, has not been fully activated due to lack of arms and ammunitions, while locally-organized militias have been mushrooming throughout the country and operating independently.

Under the current situation, the junta has been unable to defeat the rebels and its opponents, none of the opposition has enough strength to topple the junta, and coordination between the myriad opponents to the regime has been lacking. Burma is therefore trapped in a stalemate, and its history of decades-long insurgencies, civil wars, and political crises that no side can overcome continues. Instability is prevalent and armed violence is intensifying. A widening security vacuum increases the potential for

territorial fragmentation, economic catastrophe, skyrocketing poverty, and the breakdown of an already troubled health system with the resurgence of COVID-19.

These problems will not be contained in Myanmar’s borders – the spillover effects of the worsening situation in Burma will pose serious challenges for regional stability. However, ASEAN and Burma’s largest neighbors - China and India - have largely turned a blind eye to this tragedy. China has been playing a complex game in the crisis by supporting its proxy ethnic armed forces to take hold of their controlled areas, providing limited assistances to the junta behind the scenes while not offering the blank check of support to the junta as before, and keeping the West out of the game. Although ASEAN sought to take the lead in addressing the crisis in Burma with its [“five-point consensus plan,”](#) division and inaction has diminished ASEAN’s relevance in addressing the situation. Meanwhile, the United States, European Union, Japan and South Korea are standing together with the democratic movement, but they have not been able to formulate a concrete, consistent, and coordinated policy on the crisis.



In my view, the European Union, Japan, Australia, Canada, South Korea, and particularly the United States have a crucial role to play as they have both the values to support a democratic system in Burma and the means to ensure each critical player in Burma comes to the table. Washington should therefore consider the following three actions:

1. Appoint a special envoy for the Burma crisis that reports directly to the Secretary of State and the President. The broad-based dialogue among the friendly countries to the Burmese people is necessary to forge a united front, to develop a concrete and consistent policy, and to launch the coordinated action for the restoration of democracy in Burma. [Per Derek Mitchell](#), former special envoy and ambassador of Burma, “there is no substitute for the symbolic and practical impact of assigning a special U.S. diplomat to such a specific, labor-intensive tasks.” The special envoy’s first task would be to work with critical democratic allies to develop a concrete, consistent, and coordinated policy consisting of carrots (engagement, dialogue, negotiation, and humanitarian aid) and sticks (pressure, sanctions, and punishment).
2. The special envoy and democratic counterparts should coordinate their recognition of the NUG as the legitimate government of Burma, and ensure that such representation is reflected in their diplomatic postings as well as in international institutions – especially the UN. This will require close engagement with Beijing especially, and convincing them that the threat of continued instability in Burma threatens regional stability and China’s own interests.

3. Urge the UN General Assembly to halt the flow of arms into Burma and cut the junta and its collaborators off external financial sources until they meet specific expectations related to the ending of violence and the return of democratic governance in Burma.
4. Work with the pro-democratic movement in Burma to enhance coordination among opposition groups and establish a joint vision for a new federal democratic system in Burma that protects the rights and security of all people across Burma.

Such an approach would send a clear signal to the Tatmadaw that the cause of democracy has friends across the world. The junta will be more willing to accept genuine negotiations, and end the violence, when they know their opponents are not weak and their death-grip on political power is unsustainable.



Yo Myo Hein is the Executive Director of the Tagaung Institute of Political Studies and a Public Policy Fellow with the Wilson Center.

