The Conflict in Myanmar is Escalating

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Jokin Sola



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By Jokin de Carlos Sola

The year 2024 might be when the Myanmar Military Junta loses its power. After a series of numerous defeats against the non-Burmese ethnic militias, which have been fighting against the state ever since independence but that in 2021 allied with the overthrow democratic government, the military government is facing its hardest moments, with defeat after defeat.

The Burmese military, also known as the Tatmadaw, headed by General Min Aung Hlaing has always been better at making coups rather than fighting guerrillas and militias. Still, the defeats that they are facing this time could be fatal. Meanwhile, the different foreign powers are trying to keep the situation under control, with priorities that go from maintaining peace to restoring democracy.

The sins of the Junta

When the Tatmadaw took over the control of Myanmar, back in 2021, they likely thought that the coup would be carried out in the same way that other coups had been implemented in the past. However, this time was different. Despite that Aung San Suu Kyi was arrested, members of her government were able to form a government in exile, gather their supporters in the country and launch a war against the Junta, all together with the different paramilitary groups that had been in rebellion for decades, including against Aung San Suu Kyi.

As the repression of the Tatmadaw increased, many of the urban youth who had supported the democracy decided to flee the areas controlled by the Junta to join resistance paramilitary groups. Meanwhile, the Generals of the Tatmadaw made one mistake after another. As the different ethnic rebel groups start coming down the jungles and mountains and approach the urban centres of Myanmar the Tatmadaw has become more and more reckless. It has begun to target civilian populations as a way of slowing down the rebels and it has taken a lot of effort to forcibly enlist thousands of young men to fight the rebels. Not only that but the different diplomatic blunders and lack of ability to keep control of the region is making diplomacy for the Tatmadaw ever more complicated.

Risks for the Future

Back in the 1990s, another cruel and brutal dictator, guiding an overall incompetent and ineffective regime was overthrown. His name was Mobutu and had been ruling the country of Zaire, now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo for decades. This was until he was overthrown by an alliance of rebel groups, led by his long-time opponent Laurent Kabila, who was being supported by the armies of Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi.

Although Mobutu, an overwhelmingly hated man had been overthrown, ending decades of tyranny and bad governance, the problems had just begun for the new Kabila regime. Because the anti-Mobutu forces were nothing more than a group of different paramilitary ethnic groups, as well as foreign armies, the order in the regime was something far from guaranteed. This chaos led to a second war, much longer and more violent, a conflict that still impacts the Congo to this day.

The reason why this comparison is important is that it showcases what happens when a resistance alliance does not establish clear structures that

are overseen also by political actors. It is possible that if by the end of this year, the Myanmar junta has not stabilised the region their own continuation might be all but damned. However, even if the Tatmadaw falls this does not guarantee peace in the region. A new government would likely need to find a political solution to the ethnic conflict in Myanmar so in the long term militias could be disarmed to guarantee peace in the region. The closer the Tatmadaw is to collapse the sooner this conversation should be held.

Role of Foreign Actors

ASEAN

Back in 2021 at the time President of Indonesia, Joko Widodo had made it clear to the international community that the nations of Southeast Asia and more precisely, his own country of Indonesia are the ones that try to guide the situation. This was to avoid having countries like China but especially the US intervene in the region.

Ever since the beginning the ASEAN nations favoured a negotiated settlement and have tried to find compromises with the military Junta. However, it can be said that after almost four years of conflict, this has brought in little results. Mostly because the military junta refuses to concede power and they are also unable to defeat the different forces.

As seen before, a continuation of the conflict could lead to even more conflict between the different ethnic groups of Myanmar. This does not only risk making the area into a zone of perpetual conflict but it also risks expanding the hostilities to neighbouring countries, especially Thailand, which is also facing political turmoil.

CHINA

China is the only major power that borders Myanmar and therefore it is the most interested in keeping some sort of control over the situation. Because of that the Chinese are the main power interested in the conflict and similar to the ASEAN are interested in a negotiated settlement. For the past year, the Chinese have been trying to maintain contact with both the junta and the rebels, fearful that the conflict could go across the Chinese border.

UNITED STATES

The United States, overall, has shown a mixture of diplomatic concern with a lack of focus on the area. Their strategy concerns mostly economic sanctions but apart from that there is a general sense of lack of decision making. The reason might be that American policymaking is much more concerned with the position of China and so far neither the Tatmadaw nor the rebels have shown a particular pro-Chinese stance. Therefore the attitude of the Americans is perceived as more reactive than anything else.

EU

The EU leaders have expressed support for those Burmese who fight for reinstatement of democracy in the country but their focus has been mostly

on guaranteeing the continuation of the humanitarian aid rather than in a specific In a report done by the International Crisis Group however, it is explained to great detailed different ways in which the European Union could try to affect the situation in Myanmar, whether it is through further sanctions or pressure in international organisations. Overall, however, the EU's presence in Southeast Asia is very limited and is mostly focused on economic sanctions, so any actions they wanna take will face its problems.

Conclusion

It is yet to be seen how this conflict will conclude or even if it will conclude this year. The Tatmadaw might collapse but it is yet to be seen whether the rebel groups will decide to march on cities like Yangon. Nevertheless, foreign actors might have to consider supporting the government in exile if they want to avoid further hostilities once the Junta has fallen if it falls.

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