



The Civil War in Myanmar

2023 Conflict Diagnostic

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The current conflict in Myanmar began with the 2021 coup d'état. The conflict between the ruling junta and pro-democracy movement has accelerated environmental degradation and hurt Myanmar's economic standing. Demographic stress has also worsened both from the junta's lack of attention to urban infrastructure and its targeting of rural villages, increasing the number of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).¹ The return to military rule has caused a worsening trend for most indicators used to determine the degree of conflict. This diagnostic uses the methodology created by the *Country Indicators for Foreign Policy* to establish possible short-term scenarios based on indicators of conflict determining trend lines and degree of risk. The military coup has destabilized the country which has resulted in a return to military rule causing a worsening conflict trend and making any peaceful settlement unlikely in the near future.

BACKGROUND

Myanmar gained independence from Britain in 1948 as a parliamentary democracy.² A 1964 coup led by the military (the Tatmadaw) installed a military junta and gave the Tatmadaw sweeping constitutional, political, and economic power.³ The Tatmadaw officially handed power over to a civilian government in 2011, but the Tatmadaw retained significant political power and autonomy under the new civilian government.⁴ Following the National League for Democracy's (NLD) victory in the elections of 2021, the military again executed a coup and established the State Administration Council (SAC) as Myanmar's government. In May 2021, the ousted National Unity Government (NUG) declared the creation of a People's Defence Force, igniting the current conflict in Myanmar.⁵ Currently, the NUG is the largest coalition of opposition forces to the junta and are the main group in conflict with them. The 2021 coup has caused heightened violence between other opposition forces and the junta and has exacerbated the ongoing genocide of the Rohingya in the Rakhine State.⁶ There is currently no meaningful international intervention as Western nations do not perceive gains to be had from intervening.⁷

INDICATORS

History of Conflict: Very High Risk, Worsening (Secondary Driver)

Stabilizing Factors: Increased unification between opposition groups increases the possibility of identifying leaders who have the capability to discuss potential negotiations.⁸ Ceasefire attempts have been made between various opposition groups and the Tatmadaw along with some members of opposition groups being released from custody.⁹

Destabilizing Factors: Increase in deaths from state-based violence related to the military coup violently repressing dissent and protests. Political conflict has dramatically increased between the opposition and the Tatmadaw.¹⁰ The military increased the use of public militias which target anti-government groups and are seen as death squads.¹¹ Number of displaced people increased to be 6 times higher than previous years in 2022.¹² Military coup reignited the underlying conflict present since the end of colonial rule and has only increased since 2021.

Assessment: The Tatmadaw continues to persecute opposition groups and members of the NLD. Conflict between political groups continues to escalate since the coup causing an increasing amount of conflict related deaths, leading to the UN Human Rights Chief believing the conflict should be designated as a civil war which is supported by the number of conflict related deaths.¹³ As few stabilizing factors are present to prevent further death, that trend will continue.

Governance and Political Instability: Very High Risk, Worsening (Primary Driver)

Stabilizing Factors: The military coup presented an opportunity for multiple pro-democracy groups to bring their efforts together and present themselves as a tangible alternative to military rule. This factor will take time to realize and as of now has only promoted increased military action against such groups.

Destabilizing Factors: The military coup continues to deny political participation and transparency. Myanmar is ranked as the 9th least-free country in the world.¹⁴ The judiciary is neither transparent nor independent.¹⁵ Press freedom deteriorated, limiting internet access as well as available reporting within the country.¹⁶ Before the military coup, Myanmar was increasing towards a hybrid regime but following the coup, firmly returned to an authoritarian government based on multiple indexes.¹⁷ Corruption increased dramatically from 2017 to 2021, ranking from 23.65 to 4.83.¹⁸

Assessment: The military coup totally controls the government and political institutions. There is little indication that the trend will improve or that democratic transitions will be seen. No civic participation entrenches the government's position by making it difficult for UN or ASEAN humanitarian aid from reaching persecuted populations.

Militarization: Very High Risk, Worsening (Primary Driver)

Stabilizing Factors: There are little evident stabilizing factors in this area. The 2021 coup has resulted in uncertainty and a brutal nationwide crackdown.¹⁹ The only potential stabilizing factor is the long tradition of military regimes exploiting Myanmar's natural resources to keep the economy growing in the face of international disapproval or sanctions.²⁰

Destabilizing Factors: Myanmar's military expenditure (% of GDP) in 2021 was 3.33% according to the SIPRI Military Index.²¹ The military expenditure in current USD was \$2,107,821,054.8 in 2021, and the total military personnel in 2019 was 513,000,²² which has likely grown since 2021. SIPRI Military Index data for Myanmar is uncertain from 2012 onward, as is the 2021 data from the World Bank. However, reports of the Tatmadaw's actions provide a picture of the military reality. The Tatmadaw's scorched earth tactics in the Magway and Sagaing regions, and against ethnic minority populations in the states of Kachin, Karen, Karenni, and Shan.²³ Independent human rights experts appointed by the United Nations calculate that there are 1.3 million displaced people; 28,000 destroyed homes; more than 13,000 children killed and a rising death toll; a looming food crisis; and 130,000 Rohingya placed in de facto internment camps.²⁴ Finally, a report by the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar indicates that the military junta has increased arms production, and that companies from at least 13 countries – including the US, and from Europe, Asia, and the Middle East – are supporting Myanmar's military supply chain.^{25,26}

Assessment: Given the lack of international response to the coup, the unequally armed opposition, and the Tatmadaw's scorched earth tactics, it is likely that the Tatmadaw escalate by producing weapons, destroying villages, and displacing people. The coup and its resulting military government is one of the main drivers of conflict in Myanmar at the moment.

Population and Heterogeneity: High Risk, Worsening (Secondary Driver)

Stabilizing Factors: Following the 2021 Military Coup, many of the ethnic groups in the outer regions of Myanmar have been united in defending their territorial integrity from Tatmadaw.²⁷

Destabilizing Factors: Gender inequality is a continued concern.²⁸ The ongoing Rohingya genocide continues to force population displacement both internally and externally.²⁹

Assessment: In a post-conflict setting, meaningful gender equality will be important in rebuilding the economy and achieving reconciliation in Myanmar. A major area of concern is currently with the persecution of the Rohingya Muslim population, which has continued to escalate in severity.³⁰ The situation will be important to monitor for both the human rights implications and to determine whether it will impact the overall demographic composition of Myanmar.

Demographic Stress: Very High Risk, Worsening (Primary Driver)

Stabilizing Factors: In 2021, the population growth rate reduced to 0.6, previously 0.8 in 2015.³¹ Population age distribution remains steady and fertility rates were reported at 2.2 for both 2021 and 2015.³² The percentage of the working population, represented by the old-age dependency ratio, was recorded at 46 in 2021.³³

Destabilizing Factors: Continued conflict has increased pressures on urban growth and caused further internal displacement.³⁴ It will be important to monitor the capacity of urban infrastructure to facilitate continued growth, as Myanmar is still in an early phase of urbanization.³⁵ Myanmar is particularly vulnerable to climate change, and natural disasters are rising in frequency and severity.³⁶ In 2019, there were 61, 219.0 people with destroyed dwellings due to natural disasters.³⁷ Gender inequality remains an area of concern, particularly for post-conflict reconciliation.³⁸

Assessment: The urban population of Myanmar continues to grow, and conflict continues to increase the levels of displacement both internally and externally.³⁹ The UNHCR continues to monitor the situation in Myanmar, reporting growing violence and increases in forced displacement.⁴⁰ The continued conflict and the Rohingya crisis will continue to

be important to monitor in any situation of demographic stress in Myanmar. There are a reported 600, 000 stateless Rohingya persons in Myanmar and over 900, 000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.⁴¹ The reintegration and repatriation of the Rohingya in a post-conflict setting will have a significant impact on the demographic composition of Myanmar, and the region, including the government's capacity to facilitate the population.

Economic Performance: Medium Risk, Worsening (Secondary Driver)

Stabilizing Factors: Myanmar's foreign direct investment (net inflows) increased from 2.42% in 2020 to 3.17% in 2021. The total debt service also increased significantly.⁴² It is thought that the military junta will recommence significant exploitation of Myanmar's natural resources,⁴³ which may help economic performance in the short-run.

Destabilizing Factors: The GDP growth rate fell from 3.17% in 2020 to -17.91% in 2021; while GDP is projected to increase by 2% or 3% for 2022, the economy is likely still heavily contracted following the 2021 coup. Myanmar's GDP per capita (PPP) fell from \$5218.025 in 2020 to \$4430.222 in 2021, as did trade (% of GDP), from 55.10% in 2020 to 53.10% in 2021. Finally, the official exchange rate fell from \$1518.255 in 2019 to \$1381.619 in 2020.⁴⁴

Assessment: While these indicators show significantly declining economic performance, there have been improvements in certain sectors, and it is expected that GDP growth will increase by a few percent in the coming years. While it is very likely that the economy will be highly volatile in the next few years, the available data suggests short-term stability.

Human Development: Medium Risk, Worsening (Secondary Driver)

Stabilizing Factors: In May of 2022, ASEAN officials coordinating the Centre for Humanitarian Assistance met with junta officials regarding the potential dangers of continued disruption of humanitarian supply lines.⁴⁵ While no steps were taken to ensure changes in this area, it shows a willingness of Tatmadaw officials to listen to international actors.

Destabilizing Factors: UNICEF WASH program for 2020 indicated that urban populations had a higher degree of sanitation and access to improved water sources than rural populations with little to no oversight implementations from the Tatmadaw.⁴⁶ The environmental performance index placed Myanmar at 179 out of 180 and is deteriorating.⁴⁷ Myanmar's HDI began deteriorating in 2021 due to the increase in death and violence following the military coup.⁴⁸ Life expectancy steadily increased from the latest data of 2020 but remained low at 67.⁴⁹ Increasing violence and removal of government aid to development would suggest that the trend is now either stabilizing or deteriorating.

Assessment: The Tatmadaw has focused on maintaining control over the country to the neglect of human development. Lacking in the capability or will to distribute aid received from other states also has led to its deterioration.

Environmental Stress: High Risk, Worsening (Primary Driver)

Stabilizing Factors: There are not many stabilizing factors in this area. While Myanmar is rich in natural resources and biodiversity, this has been exploited heavily for many years. The forestry and the fisheries, despite how important they are to Myanmar's development and economy, are under extreme pressure.⁵⁰

Destabilizing Factors: Myanmar is one of the most vulnerable countries in the world when it comes to being impacted by climate change; they do not have the infrastructure to withstand the more frequent floods, cyclones, and droughts.⁵¹ The forest cover declined at an average rate of 1.2 percent a year from 1990-2015 – around 10 million hectares. Overfishing has led to an important decline in this resource, reported to be almost 90% since 1979. Air quality has been increasingly compromised; air pollution has been attributed to about 45,000 deaths or more in 2017. Myanmar has struggled with solid waste management, landfills are almost at full capacity, there is hardly any regulation surrounding waste dumping, and there is significant surface and groundwater contamination.⁵² While there had been progress recently, such as UNEP involvement in a project aiming to help integrate climate change adaptation and mitigation in Myanmar's policies, and investments for renewable energy projects,⁵³ the 2021 military coup caused private investors to withdraw and current environmental projects to stop.⁵⁴ Finally, the junta is likely to scale up the exploitation of natural resources, expanding palm oil plantations, and restarting the controversial Myitsone Dam backed by China.⁵⁵

Assessment: Myanmar, already facing looming environmental issues, will likely devolve further in this area. The Tatmadaw’s current and announced policies will aggravate the already-overexploited resources. They will have trouble implementing renewable energy projects, as seen by failing to secure its own solar power tender, and will likely not focus on environmental protection policies. This policy of exploitation will increase the risk of food insecurity, poverty, and displacement for Myanmar’s population, worsened by the junta’s scorched earth tactics.

International Linkages: Medium Risk, Stable (Secondary Driver)

Stabilizing Factors: Myanmar’s relationship with the surrounding region is currently stable. It has been complicated by the displacement of the Rohingya peoples funneling into countries like Bangladesh, but the situation is not irreversible. India and China are both constructing expansive projects in Myanmar that will have significant impacts on trade and the economy in the region, meaning both states maintain an interest in peace in Myanmar.⁵⁶

Destabilizing Factors: Massive demographic shifts will continue to impact the region because of conflict violence and the Rohingya persecution, creating security concerns and aggravating relations with surrounding states.

Assessment: Myanmar’s stability will have direct impacts on the surrounding region due to the country’s geographic positioning. Bangladesh is eager to begin repatriating displaced Rohingya populations.⁵⁷ However, an agreement is increasingly unlikely to happen following the events of 2021.⁵⁸ This has complicated relations between Myanmar and Bangladesh, but the situation is not irreversible. Additionally, projects in Myanmar with transnational implications ensure that India and China maintain interest in a stable Myanmar, which could be a significant stabilizing factor. The election scheduled in 2023 is predicted to decrease overall democratization in Myanmar regardless of the results.⁵⁹ Regional support for the Rohingya people will be an important factor in ensuring that human rights are upheld by the Myanmar government. It is unclear whether that will happen, especially considering China is currently enacting a similarly labelled genocide with their own Uyghur Muslim population.⁶⁰

STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

State Administration Council (SAC) / Tatmadaw: Primary Internal Aggravator

The Tatmadaw are the armed forces of Myanmar and led the coup which seized power in 2021.⁶¹ The SAC is the junta which has governed Myanmar since the coup.⁶² Its primary interest is suppressing opposing factions, particularly the previous government, as well as the various ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) which control ethnic-majority regions.⁶³ To accomplish this, the SAC relies on exploiting and auctioning off Myanmar’s natural resources, destroying rural villages, importing foreign weapons, and strengthening Myanmar’s domestic weapons production.⁶⁴ Numerically, it is the largest faction in the Myanmar conflict, with approximately 350,000 soldiers and security officers.⁶⁵

National Unity Government / People’s Defence Force: Primary Internal Aggravator

The NUG is the government-in-exile deposed in the 2021 coup. It remains the UN-recognized government of Myanmar, though it controls negligible territory in the country.⁶⁶ Though the NUG proclaimed the creation of a People’s Defence Force in May 2021, it has limited control over the local forces which make up the majority of its 65,000-strong military. The PDF operates as an insurgency, utilizing bombings and assassinations to destabilize the Tatmadaw.⁶⁷ In 2023, the NUG escalated its military campaign, declaring its intention to oust the SAC by the end of the year.

Ethnic Armed Organizations: Primary Internal Aggravators

There are approximately 25 armed ethnic organizations operating in Myanmar.⁶⁸ These groups are composed of ethnic minorities in Myanmar’s border regions and operate as local militias which have sought autonomy from the Bamar-dominated central governments. Various EAOs were party to the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement which had already begun to collapse by the 2021 coup.⁶⁹ Most EAOs oppose the majority-Bamar Tatmadaw, but their limited military and economic resources, as well as their limited support outside their co-ethnic Myanma. Because they operate in specific geographic zones, the EAOs are military factions most affected by environmental degradation in Myanmar.

Foreign Arms Exporters: Interested External Aggravators

While they have worked to increase their own production of small arms and explosives, each of the military factions in Myanmar still relies on foreign states to supply them with advanced weapon systems and components.⁷⁰ As the United States, Canada, and EU have enacted embargoes prohibiting the sale of arms to Myanmar, China, India, and Russia are the main arms suppliers to Myanmar's military factions.

SCENARIOS

Best Case

Humanitarian aid and international assistance is given to Myanmar, and the current government allows both UN and ASEAN aid to reach the most persecuted populations. The junta is more willing to listen to international actors. The upcoming elections will demonstrate greater transparency from the current government, such as media engagement and greater access to government proceedings, and will be freer. The National Unity Government (NUG) will be recognized as a political party. In accordance with this, the current military government reduces military buildup and actions, instead focusing on economic concerns. Because the junta is focused on the economy, it is thus able to maintain the economic and infrastructure requirements that come with Myanmar's growing urban population. Moreover, decreased war crimes results in less displacement, and people are not pushed from villages to cities. The military government's pivot to economic concerns also entails a greater focus on climate resilience; international investment and aid for renewable energy technology that stopped with the coup restarts. Finally, there is a greater focus on conservation, and due to the decreased militarization, all factions cut down on the overexploitation of natural resources. Thus, there will be less conflict and resulting displacement of people, and the government will be able to forestall the looming food crisis.

Most Likely

The NUG and SAC both resist ASEAN-led attempts to mediate the conflict. The upcoming elections are marred by accusations of vote rigging and are dismissed as illegitimate by non-Tatmadaw parties. The NUG is denied political participation and continues to be labeled as a terrorist organization by the SAC. All factions continue to increase their military arms manufacturing, though foreign arms embargoes prevent them from acquiring the most advanced weapons and components. Nonetheless, the SAC continues its campaign of ethnic cleansing targeted at ethnic minority regions, continuing the strategy of splitting the NUG from the EAOs. The destruction of rural settlements pushes the population towards urban centers and puts increased stress on urban infrastructure and resources (particularly food supplies). This is exacerbated by the SAC's renewed push to overexploit natural resources by reopening controversial dams and palm oil plantations, and holding gem and other natural resource auctions to fund their militarization efforts.

Worst Case

The staged elections take place in 2023 and result in the junta becoming even more authoritarian, ensuring there are no checks in place for the junta's continued genocidal military policy. Additionally, armaments and their components will continue to flow across the border unchecked and the increased access leads to an increase in violence. This leads to a greater ethnic cleansing and an uptick of war crimes perpetuated throughout Myanmar. In this scenario, there is an increase in continued internal displacement because of violence and persecution. The state's capacity to facilitate their population, including food supply and critical infrastructure, will continue to deteriorate. Myanmar is vulnerable to environmental stress and related consequences, including flooding and disease outbreaks. Monsoon season, occurring from late May to October, exacerbates this issue. As controversial development projects progress, the opponents become more radicalized and militarized as the junta disregards their needs and interests. If other states are impacted by climate disaster, it is also likely that border, rural, and ethnic communities are drawn into the conflict. Other states will be unwilling to assist with humanitarian aid because of continued conflict and persecution, including the genocide against the Rohingya.

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