

Myanmar's democracy protesters may need more than Milk Tea

Alliance tactics to defeat the military coup

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The determination and size of Myanmar's peaceful anti-coup protests are impressive; three weeks after the coup and despite draconian new laws, crowds have continued to grow. (Ye Aung Thu / AFP via Getty Images)

A brutal crackdown could happen any day. Military violence is expected every day. Soldiers have casually killed peaceful protesters throughout the four weeks since Myanmar's military undertook a coup to remove the country's civilian government. Military violence has incrementally, but steadily increased. Bravely, millions of peaceful protesters still take to Myanmar's streets to oppose the military coup and demand the release of the country's civilian leaders including Aung San Suu Kyi. By employing tactics learned from other recent Asian protest movements, they have seemingly confounded Myanmar's military, which has struggled to deal with the nature of protests and their scale.

But Myanmar's military leaders are cunning and may well have foreseen elements of the protesters' strategy and adopted their own plans accordingly. The success of anti-coup campaigners may well depend on their preparedness to continue searching for outside examples of how to successfully defeat entrenched but illegitimate rulers.

The determination and size of Myanmar's peaceful anti-coup protests are impressive. Three weeks after the coup and despite draconian new laws that threaten to punish with twenty years jail the act of inciting "hatred or contempt" towards coup leaders, crowds have continued to grow. Protesters have numbered in the millions, with new groups joining the movement daily. A nationwide civil disobedience movement is under way, and the country's bureaucracy, banking, and transport systems have ceased to function. The military's legitimacy as competent managers is in tatters.

Protesters know they are facing off with one of the world's most vicious militaries, a force with more than half a million active personnel that is known to routinely turn weapons on civilians. A 2018 UN Human Rights Council report described how the military routinely committed crimes against humanity and war crimes against ethnic minority groups. Myanmar's military stands accused of genocide against the Rohingya during a 2017 campaign that included mass murder, widespread gang rapes of women and girls as a military tactic, and the razing of hundreds of towns and villages. Soldiers commit atrocities with impunity — those few that might ever be found guilty of crimes by Myanmar's courts are routinely pardoned soon after.

The worst military violence is usually reserved for Myanmar's ethnic minorities, but historically the military has also been prepared to meet popular peaceful uprisings — like the 1988 protests that first brought Aung San Suu Kyi to political prominence — with brutal force. In 1988, the military put down protests by killing thousands, making widespread arrests, and imposing decades-long prison sentences. Similar tactics were employed to end the 2007 monk-led Saffron Revolution.

A grim indication of what Myanmar's protesters expect is that many have taken to writing their blood type on their forearms with permanent markers so medical teams can better care for them when the violence comes.



UN Special Rapporteur Tom Andrews

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How many of us can imagine starting our day by writing our blood type on our arm? That's what protesters across Myanmar did on Monday. Why? Because the junta had threatened them. They weren't intimidated. They were prepared. And that's why they, and their courage, will prevail.

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7:37 AM · Feb 24, 2021



Already the military has used live rounds to kill peaceful protesters in Mandalay and the capital Naypyitaw. There are also reports that soldiers fired on ambulances and medical teams that came to assist the injured. Troops from the 33rd Light Infantry Division, infamous for their genocidal actions against Rohingya civilians, have been prominently deployed in Mandalay. Their unconcealed presence can only have been intended to instil fear in the protesters about what future violence might soon come.

So far, the military's use of violence has not been overwhelming; they have focussed more on mass arrests than mass murder, with killings of peaceful protesters in the dozens rather than the thousands. Several hundred new political prisoners are now refilling the jails that were emptied during a recent prisoner amnesty. More are arrested daily. One explanation for the military's seeming reluctance to meet the current protests with the same brutality they demonstrated in 1988 or 2007 is that this time the protest movement is much, much larger and represents a wider cross-section of the national population.



The success of Myanmar's popular uprising may now depend on its leaders' ability to swiftly refine the approach of the Milk Tea Alliance. (Jack Taylor / AFP via Getty Images)

The protesters' new strategies

Myanmar's youthful protest movement has adopted strategies learned from Asia's other youth-infused activist movements — particularly those in Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Protesters often style themselves as part of the Milk Tea Alliance of democracy campaigners. Originally symbolic of opposition to Chinese encroachment in domestic affairs and anti-authoritarianism, the Milk Tea Alliance derived its name from a perceived cultural similarity between the places from which it drew its membership — namely, an affinity for milky tea products, marking a distinction with China's traditional love of black tea. Since the coup, #milkteaalliance has been widely used in Myanmar.

Shrewdly, protest leaders have adopted similarly diversified leadership strategies to those of other Milk Tea Alliance groups. This, and widespread participation in a national civil disobedience movement, has presented the military with genuine challenges in identifying and arresting individual movement leaders. From Thailand, Myanmar's protesters adopted the three-finger salute as a symbol of opposition to the coup. Images of Myanmar's frustrated population staring down armoured vehicles in the streets of Yangon while defiantly saluting for democracy appeared in media worldwide and helped keep the eyes of the world focussed on Myanmar for weeks after the coup.

Less high profile but no less significant has been the protesters' adoption of key tactics from Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement — particularly the "be like water" mantra. This has encouraged protesters to avoid direct confrontation with soldiers and instead adopt a highly agile style of protest that forces the authorities to constantly respond and adapt to the protesters' agenda. By behaving like political flash mobs and frequently changing tactics, protesters have seemed frequently to catch the authorities off guard.



Wai Wai Nu
@waiwainu



#Mandalay: protest against #Myanmar's military coup with Elephants this morning.

#WhatsHappeningInMyanmar #BurmaGeneralStrike
#SaveMyanmar



2:06 PM · Feb 24, 2021



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Over the last three weeks, protesters deployed an astonishing number of different tactics, from traditional marches, to sit ins and music performances outside foreign embassies. They have shut down road transport by parking “broken down” cars at key intersections and driven convoys of vehicles so slowly as to create gridlock. One protest even involved a train of elephants with their mahouts.

Has the military adopted a new strategy, too?

Regardless of the protesters’ agility, the military is yet to attempt to put down this uprising with the same ferocity it used in earlier demonstrations. This suggests the military too might be adopting a new strategy. Rather than using aggressive approaches similar to those deployed by China’s security services in Hong Kong or the Thai authorities’ mass arrest of protesters, Myanmar’s military has attempted to disrupt protests through nightly internet blackouts, by arresting those key leaders they can identify and locate,

and through occasional violence at protest sites. Compared to the speedy and overwhelming violence meted out to Rohingya civilian populations in 2017, the military's approach towards anti-coup protesters seems deliberately unhurried.

The military has used an approach closer to the Kremlin-inspired response to recent protests in Belarus, rather than aping the tactics of China's security forces in Hong Kong. Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko, when facing widespread protests against his rigged August 2020 election, did not immediately use overwhelming force to crush opposition; instead, he hoped the protests would dissipate of their own accord. Protests have continued, but they have failed to dislodge Lukashenko who seems determined to weather the storm through incremental arrests of activists and the targeting of domestic journalists.

The break with Chinese-inspired anti-dissident strategies should not necessarily come as a surprise. Internationally, China is widely regarded as supportive of Myanmar's military, and has worn significant domestic opprobrium for its refusal to condemn the coup. Anti-Chinese feeling within Myanmar is approaching feverish levels, but China has been less than fulsome in its support for the coup. China's Ambassador told Myanmar media that the coup was, "absolutely not what China wants to see." China's authorities had a close relationship with Aung San Suu Kyi's government and have had, at times, a tetchy relationship with Myanmar's military, which may now feel they have some reason to doubt the reliability of Chinese advice.



Myanmar's military has used an approach closer to the Kremlin-inspired response to recent protests in Belarus. (-/TUT.BY / AFP via Getty Images)

That the military might turn to Myanmar's other long-term defender on the United Nations Security Council, Russia, should also not be surprising. Russia has left little doubt that it regards the coup as legitimate, with Russia's representative to the UN Human Rights Council describing it as a "purely domestic affair of the sovereign state."

Russia, while not a major trading partner of Myanmar, is one of its major arms dealers and has extensive experience quelling revolutions in the countries on its own periphery. Myanmar's massive street protests are certainly reminiscent of the colour revolutions of former Soviet states.

In recent years, Myanmar's military have developed much closer ties with Russia. TASS, Russia's official news agency, described this process as "intensive development." Russia's geostrategic interests are certainly served by maintaining close ties with the Myanmar military; and Myanmar, in 2018, agreed to make it easier for Russian naval ships to visit Myanmar ports, thereby enhancing Russian access to the Bay of Bengal. Just weeks before the coup, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu visited Myanmar to discuss military cooperation with coup-leader Min Aung Hlaing. During that visit, extensive arrangements were put in place that would enable Myanmar to purchase new surface-to-air missile systems, intelligence and electronic warfare drones, and radar from Russia. It is possible, moreover, that an understanding was reached between them about intelligence cooperation, and the coup leaders' response to Myanmar's protest movement might now be informed by the Kremlin's experience in undermining popular uprisings.

The protesters' new strategies

Myanmar's anti-coup protesters have successfully adopted many of the tactics and strategies of the Milk Tea Alliance. These tactics — which have peaceful strategies at their core — were developed in the crucible of east and southeast Asian protest. Myanmar has a long history of peaceful anti-military protest; this is the approach Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters have long advocated. However, the close ties that have developed between the militaries of Myanmar and Russia may make peaceful Milk Tea Alliance tactics less useful in the longer-term.

Pre-empting the military tactics derived from Russia's experience of undermining anti-authoritarian uprisings might require a significant tactical rethink by Myanmar's protest movement. For instance, key to the success of Ukraine's 2014 Euromaidan revolution was protesters' preparedness to themselves embrace violence in response to official crackdowns. This avoided prolonged conflict of the kind we see today in Belarus, where Lukashenko remains in power and the protest movement is steadily weakened through arrests.

The success of Myanmar's popular uprising may now depend on its leaders' ability to swiftly refine the approach of the Milk Tea Alliance, and to learn lessons from the experience of Belarus and Ukraine — places where anti-protest tactics inspired by Russia's military have been successful. Afterall, there is strong evidence Myanmar's military has already learned from Russia's tactics.

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