Can Myanmar's civil disobedience movement restore democracy?

17 March 2021

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Since Myanmar's coup on 1 February, Commander-in-Chief of the Tatmadaw General Min Aung Hlaing has been working to remake the country's political landscape by removing the National League for Democracy (NLD), detaining its leadership and installing a military junta. But the success of the coup is not guaranteed, given the junta's lack of control over parts of the state apparatus, population and spiralling economy.

The civil disobedience movement is spreading across key ministries. Staff from the Central Bank of Myanmar and commercial banks are striking and limitations placed on withdrawals indicate a looming liquidity crisis. Foreign trade is frozen with exports down by 90 percent. Medical professionals are striking and two-thirds of the country's hospitals are not properly functioning during a pandemic. Some police have joined protests, refusing to do the dirty work of the military.

A groundswell of protests have swept across the country, with Myanmar's tech-savvy youth proving to be a creative mobilising force the old guard has not faced before. As Min Aung Hlaing sports bulletproof vests in rare outings and uses state media to blast the civil disobedience movement and protesters, the junta's own propaganda machine suggests the resistance is having an impact. Can the military maintain internal cohesion facing off against a nation and multiple crises? Based on 2020 election results, there may even be hints of support for the NLD within the military.

A number of possible scenarios are emerging with different enabling factors, not least of which is the Myanmar people's sheer determination for democracy.

One scenario is a return to absolute military rule. The junta would use the crises, violence and coercion to remove any semblance of social order, and then present a false dichotomy to the population: anarchy or dictatorship. A delay in holding elections for several years would be justified under the guise of restoring stability.

A second scenario follows the path set by Min Aung Hlaing: hold elections within a year and reinstall a semi-elected parliament. The military has likely realised by now that the political system they designed

under the Constitution does not guarantee its political victory. The military-backed Union Solidarity Development Party (USDP) has been unable to secure enough seats to outnumber the NLD, even with the advantage of a quarter of parliamentary seats being assigned to the military.

The junta may attempt to redesign the electoral system from first-past-the-post to proportional representation, framing this as an opportunity for ethnic and other political parties to gain more seats in a new election. A sham election could then take place with the NLD removed from the electoral map.

While ASEAN countries initially seemed tempted by this track, it does not provide a pathway to de-escalate resistance. A rigged military-run election would fail to transfer the electoral legitimacy voters bestowed on 2020-elected officials, some of whom have formed the Committee Representing the Union Parliament in opposition to the junta.

In another, third, scenario, the coup does not either clearly fail or succeed, creating a protracted crisis. For over 70 years, the Myanmar military has failed to win a number of asymmetric internal armed conflicts. The battle for state control would become another front line of drawn-out crises where the use of state-based violence breeds further resistance and new support for the civil disobedience movement.

A protracted crisis could also materialise if there is significant reorganising of power within the military leading to unforeseen contests. Potential stalemates due to the military and civilian blocs not recognising each other for negotiations, as called for by several ASEAN countries, could also prolong events.

In scenario four, the coup fails and there is a return to the hybrid government under the 2008 constitution, with NLD members released and the 2020 election results honoured, as called for by the United Nations and much of the international community. For the coup to fail, the civil disobedience movement would need to sustain popular and financial support and continue to impact the junta's control over the economy and administration. This scenario hinges on support for Min Aung Hlaing's leadership waning as multiple crises hit regular military families and businesses.

But scenario four is unlikely with Min Aung Hlaing at the helm of the armed forces. It would also require Western countries to hold off on normalising relations with the junta, and ASEAN countries pursuing negotiations between the elected government bloc and the military, not just with military-appointed officials.

In a final, fifth, scenario, the coup fails and the civilian government leads a new transition. Many protesters and groups are calling for a new political arrangement through the removal of the military from political life and the military-drafted 2008 constitution. Rather than exclusively supporting the NLD or Aung San Suu Kyi, many in Myanmar are marching for democratic federalism — a system ethnic minorities have been striving for since 1947.

For this scenario to take hold, a counter-coup within the military may be needed to deliver a new leadership willing to work under the civilian government — a tall order. Elected officials would take up their positions and an inclusive constitutional committee could be established, including armed groups, civil society and ethnic political parties, to draft a new constitution. While Nepal provides an example of a federal transition following civil war and a people's movement, this process is complex and loaded with challenges.

Ultimately the people of Myanmar must choose their fate and system of government for it to be legitimate. A prolonged return to military rule or an illegitimate government will only perpetuate continued suffering and instability.

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