

Hopes for a New Democracy in Myanmar: Multiethnic Unity against Military Power

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Helene Kyed argues that multiethnic unity is paramount for the success of civilian resistance to the military.

This article was written in collaboration with researchers from the Nyan Corridor, who wish to remain anonymous.

After its coup d'état on February 1, 2021, the military is doing everything to cling to power, and every day, the violence against civilians is growing and becoming more brutal. The situation is horrendous, and no one knows when and how it will end. Yet, the massive popular resistance to military rule, across ethnic, religious, and generational divides, gives hope for a new democracy in Myanmar with ethnic equality and inclusion.

What at first appeared as a power struggle between the military top brass and Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), has become a broad-based popular resistance on social media, on streets of cities, and in rural and ethnic border areas. The hundreds of thousands of protesters and civil servants on strike across Myanmar agree on one thing: they reject the military takeover. So far, this has not resulted in one single movement or a single source of clear leadership, but multiple enactments of resistance. The challenge now is to persist against the brutal crackdowns by the security forces and unite around a common message and strategy that is broadly inclusive. Here, multiethnic unity is crucial and presents a challenge to overcome in a country that has been ethnically and religiously divided for so long. However, important signs of unity are emerging through a shared rejection of the military and calls for a federal democracy.

Diversity in resistance efforts – towards a united call for federal democracy

The nationwide scale and diversity of anti-coup protests have been growing ever since the first action on February 2 when, at 8 pm, people in Yangon—and later in many other places—started to bang pots and pans to “drive out the evil spirits” (in

this case, the military). On the same day, [a leaderless civil disobedience movement \(CDM\)](#) launched a Facebook campaign, inspiring first doctors and nurses and then many other public and private sector workers to refuse to work for the military regime. Most recently, on March 16, the powerful government-appointed State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (Mahana), which oversees the country's Buddhist monkhood, also [decided to stop its activities in support of the CDM](#). The strikes have now paralyzed almost all civil services, banks, and ports, making it difficult for the military to run the country and the economy.

A few days into the strikes, on February 6, we saw the first mass street protests in Yangon organized by [young people](#) – now known as [Generation Z](#). These were soon replicated in other cities and [joined by various other groups](#) like unions, Buddhist monks, Catholic nuns, LGBT groups, punks, artists, traditional spirit worshipers, and women's groups.

As the protests have developed, the resistance narrative has increasingly moved from a demand to return the NLD to power towards much more fundamental societal changes with a focus on minority rights and inclusion. This move is likely informed by the extraordinary diversity of people across ethnic, religious, gendered, and generational divides who have joined the resistance, including people who are not NLD supporters. Not only have ethnic groups, even including the Rohingya, [declared solidarity with](#) and joined the anti-coup protesters. We have also seen some Bamar protesters with placards [apologizing to the Rohingya and other minorities](#) for being silent about the military atrocities against them in the past.

If we look at the [photos and footage from the first days](#) of anti-coup street protest in big cities like Yangon and Mandalay, it is evident that the demands, placards, and slogans mainly were about freeing Aung San Suu Kyi and returning to the NLD's November 2020 electoral victory. But there were also already then signs of ethnic minority voices. In fact, the first rally in Yangon on February 6 was led by two young female activists marching in Karen shirts, Esther Ze Naw and Ei Thinzar Maung. They are known as critics of the NLD government and have both participated in previous [campaigns against the military's brutal treatment of the Rohingya](#) and been linked to the Kachin and Karen struggles. Esther Ze Naw is Kachin, and Ei Thinzar Maung, who is Bamar, was an electoral candidate for the progressive Democratic Party for a New Society (DPNS), which is linked to the 88 Generation. In media interviews, they have argued that [the fight against the coup is not just an NLD issue, but a national one](#), and that [we want to establish a real federal union where all citizens, all ethnicities are treated equally](#)." This demand for federal democracy has gained more and more traction since the second week of the street protests, and as more ethnic groups joined.

On February 11—Karen National Day—several ethnic minority groups came together in anti-coup street protests in Yangon and other cities, [waving the flags of the different ethnic nationalities](#). On the same day, ethnic youth founded a [General Strike Committee of Nationalities \(GSCN\)](#) that encompasses 27 ethnic groups, including representatives from the Bamar majority. Following this, more and more ethnic minorities have staged protests in rural areas and provincial towns. Like the GSCN, the general ethnic minority position is that they [do not want a return to the pre-coup status quo](#). While they do not reject the NLD's electoral victory in November, they want to abolish the 2008 constitution, which secures military power-sharing with any elected government, and they want a federal democracy with ethnic minority inclusion.

In the last couple of weeks, we have seen an increasing number of Bamar protesters joining this ethnic anti-coup call for a new federal democracy, which many, especially youth, are now describing as a revolution. On February 20, for instance, another [General Strike Committee \(GSC\)](#) in support of the CDM articulated the same demands. It comprises 29 groups, including members from the NLD, the Saffron Monks network, New Society Democratic Party (NSDP), the National Unity Party (NUP), and the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFS).

Alongside this diversity in resistance efforts, the *Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH)* that consists of mainly NLD MPs-elect from the 2020 election, is gradually reaching out to the different protest movements, the CDM and ethnic groups in its efforts to seek recognition as the legitimate government—inside Myanmar as well as internationally. They are also collaborating with a group of Myanmar CSOs. In a significant move, on March 5, the CRPH also [made a statement](#) in support of the demand for federal democracy and abolition of the 2008 Constitution. These moves give hope for a more united and organized resistance to the military regime beyond simply returning the NLD to power.

CRPH and NLD's consolidation with ethnic minorities

[15 of the CRPH's 17 members are from the NLD](#)—two are from ethnic political parties (Kayah and Shan)—and they are much older and politically more homogenous than most of the protesters. The members themselves are in hiding and can only meet online due to fears of arrest by the military forces. They regularly post statements on their [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) accounts. They have also declared support for the CDM and they daily share footage of police and military brutality against protesters. The CRPH has recently also [engaged an international law firm](#) to pursue international legal proceedings against the military regime.

These moves make it evident that the CRPH seeks to consolidate a position as the legitimate government and representative of the people of Myanmar, and it seems that [it enjoys considerable support](#), especially among NLD supporters. But it is yet unclear how much support it has among ethnic minorities and activists—Bamar as well as non-Bamar. According to personal conversations with activists and ethnic minority people, there is still a certain skepticism towards the extent to which CRPH will in reality support ethnic inclusion or mainly work in the interests of the NLD. This skepticism is tightly connected with experiences over the past five years.

When Aung San Suu Kyi came to power in 2016, many ethnic minorities had high confidence in her ability to ensure their rights, but [they became disappointed](#). Undeniably under military pressure, she failed to broker peace with the ethnic armed groups, adequately include the ethnic political parties, and stop military atrocities against minority groups. Most [international critiques](#) were directed at Aung San Suu Kyi's failure to publicly condemn the brutal onslaught on the stateless Rohingya Muslims. But other minorities suffered too and felt that she favored the majority and allowed Buddhist Bamar nationalism to flourish. For instance, the NLD government's construction of statues of Aung San sparked strong resentment in Kachin, Chin, Karen and Kayah states, as did the [naming of a bridge after him in Mon state](#).

Despite Aung San Suu Kyi's continued popularity as the safest bet against military power, which was confirmed by the November 2020 elections, the disappointments among minorities—supported by both ethnic and Bamar activists and intellectuals—reinforced deep historical splits in society. Aung San Suu Kyi also became unpopular with [several of the ethnic political parties](#) for not sharing power adequately, for example, not allowing them to appoint their own state ministers.

The NLD-dominated CRPH seems now to be trying to rectify some of these splits, not least since its [March 5 statement](#) to support federal democracy, where it also mentioned an oath to “~~sa~~ steadfastly work hand-in-hand with all ethnic nationalities.” While still belonging to the NLD party, it also [appointed a Chin leader, Dr. Sasa](#), as its special envoy to the United Nations on February 22, and on March 9, [Mahn](#) Win Khaing Than, who is ethnic Karen was [appointed as CRPH's vice-president](#). While it is still unclear how much dialogue CRPH has with ethnic political parties, Dr. Sasa has, since early March, met online with at least three of the ethnic armed organizations to discuss federal democracy, including the [Karen National Union \(KNU\)](#), the [Restoration Council of Shan State \(RCSS\)](#), and the [Chin National Front \(CNF\)](#).

These activities and the changing political narrative among NLD representatives of the CRPH and beyond gives hope for a more united stand against the military than would an exclusive focus on returning to the pre-coup situation. This unity could also be very significant in obstructing the military regime's current divide and rule tactic.

Military exploits ethnic divisions with low success

Divide and rule practices have been a common theme throughout the history of the Myanmar military, the Tatmadaw. It has been a recurring theme in previous coups and in recent years in the campaigns against especially Muslim minorities who have been [repressed and scapegoated](#). Similarly, since the February 1 coup, the military top brass has tried hard to exploit the splits between the NLD and ethnic minorities as part of its political strategy to secure its powerbase and prepare for the elections that it has planned to conduct, likely [at the end of its declared one-year state of emergency](#). This strategy is pursued alongside concerted efforts to push the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi out of the political game, partly through accusations of electoral fraud and partly through [legal charges](#) that could send Aung San Suu Kyi and the president to jail for several years.

Shortly after the coup, the military invited ethnic political party leaders and electoral candidates to sit on its new State Administrative Council (SAC), but with patchy success. Only [four ethnic party leaders accepted the offer](#), from the Kayin People's Party (KPP), the Kayah State Democratic Party (KSDP), the Mon Unity Party (MUP), and the Arakan National Party (ANP). While the former two are relatively insignificant, the latter two have large voter constituencies in Mon and Rakhine states. Given that [the ANP won the fourth largest number of parliamentary seats in the 2020 elections](#), its leader's decision to join the SAC could have a significant impact on political developments. However, it has so far met with sharp critique from ordinary people—including shaming on social media. 47 civil society organizations from Rakhine state also [denounced the move to join the SAC](#). ANP's youth members have quit the party in protest, just as some established party members have [expressed dissatisfaction on social media](#). MUP has suffered a similar level of critique. Some of MUP's executive members have tried to convince their constituencies that they have joined the SAC to further the collective right of the Mon people for greater autonomy, but few Mon people seem to believe this.

While most other ethnic political parties have kept silent and seem to have adopted a 'wait-and-see' position, many have rejected invitations by the military. A few among them—especially those who have good relations with the NLD—have publicly condemned the coup. When the new military-appointed Union Election Committee (UEC) invited the country's 91 political parties to a meeting

on February 26 where [it annulled the NLDs November 2020 electoral victory](#), 38 parties refused to join. Among these were, apart from the NLD, several of the largest ethnic political parties. [Those 53 that did join](#) were mainly the military's proxy, the USDP, and its allies, but there were also those ethnic political parties that maintain a wait-and-see position. It seems likely that these parties feel caught between their dissatisfaction with the NLD and their insecurity about what the military will do. The Kayan National Party's (KNP) chair, for instance, told *Frontier* that, while his party refused to join the military SAC, it has not condemned the coup, because he did not feel that the NLD treated the ethnic nationalities with respect or considered their needs. "We have suffered because of both sides [the Tatmadaw and the NLD] and we feel it is better to remain silent and not become involved," he said to *Frontier*. In short, parties like the KNP could be open to joining different sides, but with an increasingly unified popular resistance to military rule, choosing the military side would likely mean losing their constituencies' support.

There is also a suspicion that the military is trying to create alliances with the ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), who have fought the military for decades but have also been dissatisfied with the NLD government. The military has already [abolished the National Peace and Reconciliation Center](#) set up by the NLD and said it would form a new ceasefire committee, which may aim to serve this purpose. However, so far, its efforts to align with EAOs seem to have been successful only in Rakhine State. Here the military [brokered a ceasefire with the Arakan Army \(AA\)](#) before the coup and has now [removed the AA](#), which has remained silent on the coup, from the 'terrorist organization' list. Along with the ANP joining the SAC, this could mean that the military will have success in consolidating its power in the conflict-ridden and economically significant Rakhine state. The powerful Northern Alliance of EAOs, operating in the Chinese border area, has so far been [silent about the coup](#), and this is cause for worry that the military may try to make deals with them.

Other EAOs like the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and the Karen National Union (KNU) have [explicitly condemned the coup](#). Most EAOs will be unlikely to make alliances with the military, especially after the CRPH has committed itself to federal democracy. On February 20, the group of 10 signatories to the 2015 National Ceasefire Agreement has declared that [it supports the CDM and will not engage in a peace dialogue with the military regime](#). The KNU – the oldest EAO in Myanmar – has been very vocal against the coup and its armed wing, the KNLA, has been seen to [aid civilian protesters in its areas of control](#). The Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) also [sent out a statement](#) on February 17 that supports the people's resistance and calls for the protection of protesters. On February 15, the Committee for Shan State Unity, a [coalition of Shan ethnic armed groups and three political parties](#) also publicly opposed the coup, announcing its

support of the ongoing protests and calling for the abolition of the 2008 constitution.

There is still cause for concern that the military will exploit ethnic splits and succeed in courting some factions of the ethnic armed and political groups wherein personal power and economic interests are certainly also at play. But the more united the population is and the more it can mobilize around shared goals, the harder that will be. There is also a small hope that this unity will generate doubts within the military itself. Even though there are so far no signs of cracks within the higher ranks of the Tatmadaw, several police officers have already since February 9 joined the CDM and some have also fled to India. On March 2, pictures on social media also showed that 12 Tatmadaw soldiers had defected and joined the KNU in southeast Myanmar. Maybe more will join, as they see that the army's institutional legitimacy is vastly eroding in face of an increasingly unified resistance.

Ways forward for multiethnic unity

One crucial element of creating unity against the military is to overcome the splits and distrust between the Bamar majority and the ethnic minorities so that they can stand in solidarity with each other. The joint protests and emerging dialogues across various groups already give hope for a new and more inclusive democratic future, but this also requires a more organized and structured resistance movement.

Another crucial element, therefore, is to forge a shared understanding and strategy on how to move forward through dialogue across the various anti-coup protesters and existing representative bodies, including the CDM, the strike committees, CSOs, Generation Z, the CRPH, the NLD, the EAOs and the ethnic political parties. This will not be an easy task to organize, but CRPH's recent move to scrap the 2008 constitution and pledge for federal democracy could be a significant step in the right direction, especially if it also translates into the inclusion of and power-sharing with the ethnic and other political parties by the NLD.

There will predictably be disagreements on the steps to take, as some may want to begin by going back to the NLD government before the constitution is amended, while others may want to see a new system installed right away. Especially now, we are hearing CSOs and the young people calling for a revolution and a fight that gets rid of the military's power once and for all. There may also be divided views on whether there should be a space for negotiations with the military or whether to opt for counter-violence and the organization of self-defense. The latter option may increasingly win traction as the military is

escalating its brutality by using the police and lethal battalions to crack down on, arrest, and kill peaceful protesters.

On March 13, the CRPH's vice-president in a live Facebook video articulated people's "right to defend themselves" and said that ~~despite~~ our differences in the past, this is the time we must grip our hands together to end the dictatorship for good—referring explicitly to collaboration between different ethnic groups. On the issue of self-defense, some people have in recent days on Twitter and other platforms begun to express the need for the CRPH to create a federal army of Burmese and ethnic armed groups to be able to defeat the military. And on March 17, the CRPH shared a statement on Twitter that it had now removed all EAOs from the list of unlawful associations, in addition to thanking them for protecting protesters. It is still unclear how much support a federal army has among the different protesters and political bodies, who have so far deliberately adopted a strategy of peaceful resistance. However, the important matter is that decisions on ways to move forward are made in an inclusive and broadly representative manner.

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