



Veneratio Dilligentia Vires

Burma: An Irregular War Consigned to the Shadows

By James R. Armstrong

A

s the civil war in Burma (or Myanmar) approaches its fifth year since the 2021 military coup, the armed violence that has engulfed the state shows no signs of abatement or resolution. To the contrary, as highlighted by the coup group's rigged election (with kudos from the usual suspects, such as China and Russia), the situation appears no closer to conclusion. The elected administration in exile, the National Unity Government (NUG), with its armed wing, the People's Defense Forces (PDF), continues to contest the military hold on power, and most of the majority Burman

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(or Bamar) supports it, as apparently do key organizations of the various ethnic armies which have battled the national government, literally, since independence in 1948. That the dictatorship retains its tenuous position is a result of coercion, looting of the country's ample resources, and external assistance that both provides weapons and neutralizes ethnic insurgent impulse.

Ethnic conflict and misguided military nationalism have been a constant for the three-quarters of a century that mark independence. Administered from British India, Burma – renamed Myanmar by a previous military dictatorship – is comprised of a Burman ethnic core (some 68% of 55-60 million) surrounded by numerous ethnic others (at least 135 official groups; see Figure 1). British rule relied upon the ethnic communities, as well as immigrant South Asians, for its staying power. This was particularly so in the liberation of the conquered country from the Japanese during World War II. Even as key Burman figures and slices of the elite sided with the Japanese, the ethnic communities went the other way. Some groups among their number emerged renowned for their martial prowess.¹

London's betrayals concerning post-war political arrangements meant civil war erupted from the moment of British departure. The same was true across the border in India's Northeast, where names such as Kohima and Imphal had become legends. Put simply, there was no agreement on what "independence" meant. Civil war has been an independence era constant, with the Burman heartland and national politics ruled for more than 60% of that period by the military (the *Tatmadaw*).

Roots of the Problem

From the aforementioned, it is plain enough to see that the present crisis has its roots in a typical coup gone awry. The February 2021 ouster of the latest version civilian democracy predictably unleashed forces the *Tatmadaw* can no longer control

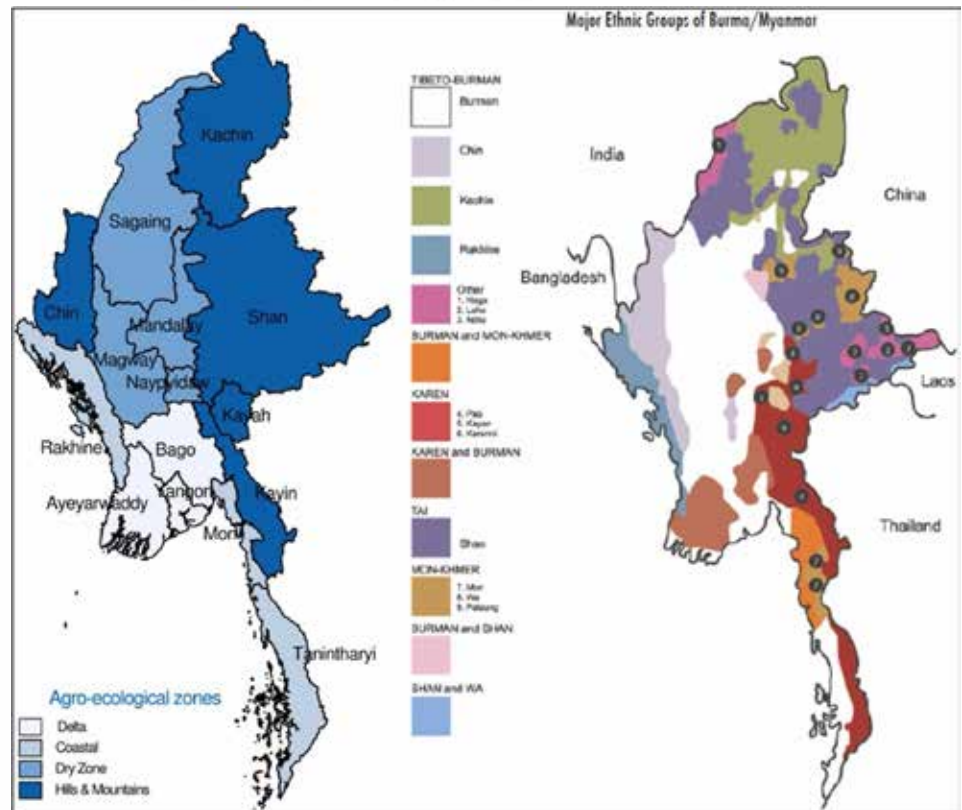


Figure 1: Geography and Ethnic Groups in Burma (Source: Lambrecht, Isabel et al., 2024)

or and exacerbated contradictions it cannot resolve.² By disavowing the 2020 general election results, preventing the seating of the elected government, and reimposing military rule, the so-called State Administration Council (SAC) transformed a fragile civil-military equilibrium into a nationwide contest over authority, sovereignty, and the right to govern.

From the strategic point of view, the central issue is that the military regime can survive through force but cannot govern without legitimacy, while its principal challenger, the National Unity Government (NUG), which like the regime is also principally Burman, possesses a greater promise for legitimacy but fails to provide a viable alternative to mobilize sufficient power to regain rule. The SAC's approach prioritizes regime survival through repression, managed political processes, and selective international engagement.³

While these measures enable endurance, the experiences that they produce systematically erode the regime's narrative and

claim to authority. Indiscriminate violence, collective punishment, and the criminalization of dissent have collapsed political discourse and conversations on reform, galvanizing broad segments of society to resist.⁴ Rather than restoring order, the SAC's actions expand the scope and intensity of conflict, entrenching resistance across ethnic, geographic, and social lines. In the absence of redress, opposition transforms from protest into armed resistance.

The SAC justifies its rule through a self-generated heroic narrative that equates its supremacy with national unity and the survival of Burma. Through its eyes, civilian politicians, democratic reform, and ethnic armed groups pose existential threats to the nation and its sovereignty. This framing once resonated with portions of the population, but it now competes with a powerful counter-narrative that casts the *Tatmadaw* as an illegitimate, predatory institution sustained by violence rather than consent.⁵ Intense repression in fact highlights the gap between the regime's claims of guardianship and the population's lived experience.

In opposition to the SAC is the NUG, which justifies its cause as a lawful struggle to restore democratic governance and reconstitute the nation around federal principles. Drawing legitimacy from the 2020 election results and widespread popular rejection of military rule, the NUG positions itself as a government in exile rather than as a rebel movement. However, while a degree of legitimacy enables political mobilization, financial resourcing, and cooperation with ethnic resistance organizations, it has not fully overcome internal contradictions or translated into decisive authority or unified control. The NUG's efforts to perform government functions remain uneven and vulnerable, constantly contested and threatened by the SAC's superior coercive power.

The resulting conflict fails to produce a clear path to victory for either side. Both face strategic constraints. The SAC's narrative fails to mobilize a sufficient portion of the population to exert total control, while its aggressive violence accelerates its own illegitimacy and state fragmentation. The NUG cannot fully replace the regime without overcoming significant resource constraints and demonstrating the capacity to address structural limits to enforcement, coordination, and territorial administration. Dynamically opposed narratives of the relationship between civil and military authorities complicate compromise, rendering negotiated settlement virtually impossible.

Enduring Legacies of Colonialism

The coup and ongoing civil war thus represent the latest violent rupture of a system that has never resolved the question of political authority, civil–military relations, or national identity. Structurally, Burma inherited an authoritarian and militarized conception of statehood from its years as a British colony and the cauldron of World War II.⁶ This experience gave rise to a conception of rule that privileged order and unity over popular consent. From its formative years, the *Tatmadaw* translated its external conflicts into an internalized

belief that it was the only institution capable of holding the post-colonial state together. Decades of direct military rule and the failure of civilian governments to establish credible control over the armed forces reinforced this self-conception.⁷ As a result, civilian authority was never fully consolidated, and the military remained autonomous, politicized, and economically entrenched.⁸

Persistent ethnic and territorial fragmentation stemming from historical settlement patterns, colonial racial hierarchies, and the nation's geography compounded this condition. The state's inability to reconcile center–periphery relations created in colonial times, or to deliver meaningful federalism to replace the repressive and exclusionary colonial practices, produced decades of armed conflict with ethnic armed organizations.⁹ Within Burma, sovereignty was never fully monopolized by the state but instead remained dispersed among multiple armed actors exercising de facto authority in peripheral regions. Rather than resolving this fragmentation through reform, the *Tatmadaw* consistently employed coercion, ceasefire capitalism, and selective co-option to manage it. These actions entrenched parallel power structures and normalized violence as a tool of governance.

Institutionalized Military Dominance

At the institutional level, the 2008 Constitution formalized the military's dominance within Burma's society and codified the contradiction between democratic participation and military supremacy. Designed by the *Tatmadaw* as the endpoint of reform, the constitution guaranteed the military veto power, control of key ministries, and insulation from civilian oversight. This arrangement created the perception of electoral competition. Still, it was intended to ensure that civilian governments could not meaningfully challenge military supremacy or deviate substantively from the military's vision for the nation.¹⁰ Despite their efforts to produce a system fully within their control, the *Tatmadaw* im-

plemented something inherently unstable as popular mandate for reform expanded even as the power to execute it remained constrained.

This instability reached a tipping point following the National League for Democracy's (NLD) electoral victories by increasing margins in 2015 and 2020. The NLD's continued popular support and growing electoral representation, despite controversial policies and failures to deliver on campaign promises, represented a mandate for reform rather than approval of its governance. Attempts by the civilian government to amend the constitution, constrain military budgets, and bypass military-controlled economic mechanisms challenged the military's entrenched power.¹¹ Coupled with incremental efforts to reduce military influence, this wave of politics directly threatened the *Tatmadaw's* institutional and financial interests.

The military's dominance over key sectors through state-backed conglomerates entrenched a form of predatory "khaki capitalism" that bound political power to economic privilege.¹² Civilian governance risked disrupting this system. The 2020 election results became more than a routine political competition to the *Tatmadaw*. They represented an existential threat to its privileged position. The consequent 2021 coup served as a preemptive measure to preserve both political authority and economic control amid an electorate increasingly rejecting military rule.

Constricting Individual Agency

Individual and popular grievance served as catalysts for conflict. For many, the NLD's failure to meaningfully address minority grievances or advance federal reform created disillusionment. Despite the promises of democratic reform, tangible results proved difficult to deliver. For those who saw no mobility in the structures offered by the *Tatmadaw* or the NLD government, the long-running ethnic insurgencies provided a possible alternative.

Seeing its options dwindling, the military, under Senior General Min Aung Hlaing,

used spurious claims of vote irregularities in the 2020 elections as a pretext for intervention. Heavy-handed response to the protests that erupted transformed the political crisis into mass resistance. Decades of repression produced widespread civilian revulsion and ended any remaining tolerance for military rule. While some initially remained ambivalent toward a Bamar-centric democracy movement, the Tatmadaw's indiscriminate violence and scorched-earth tactics ultimately forged new alignments between the post-coup opposition and ethnic resistance organizations.¹³

Worldview of the Tatmadaw

Tatmadaw framing is central to this process, with skewed narratives derived from its history and mythology reinforcing the military's self-conception as the indispensable guardian of Burma's sovereignty. The frames that emerge from these narratives serve to mobilize internal loyalty, justify repression, and delegitimize opposition by presenting *Tatmadaw* supremacy and military control as essential to national survival. The result is a closed loop in which perpetual conflict is both expected and necessary, and where dissent is framed not as political disagreement but as an existential threat.

The SAC's diagnostic frame identifies the central problem facing Burma as the risk of national disintegration arising from unchecked democratic reform efforts that challenge the *Tatmadaw*-led political order. According to constituent narratives, civilian politicians – particularly Aung San Suu Kyi¹⁴ and the National League for Democracy – and resistance forces bear the responsibility for destabilizing the state, creating political disorder, ethnic fragmentation, and vulnerability to external influence. Ethnic insurgencies threaten sovereignty, while armed opponents are labeled as “terrorists.” Through this lens, threats are constant and all-encompassing. Therefore, repression is a defensive necessity rather than a political choice, and the responsibility for monopolizing violence becomes a duty. This framing has been

employed by the *Tatmadaw* throughout its existence, now but modified to support the current situation.¹⁵

In response to the diagnosis, the prognostic frame presents the solution as obedience to the 2008 Constitution, which in fact was drafted by the military. Adherence to this document is claimed as the sole viable solution to disorder. The *Tatmadaw* portrays this constitutional framework as the culmination of political reform, legitimizing its control over key ministries and its veto power over change. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing portrays the solution as “disciplined democracy” through managed political processes, even as these processes primarily serve to preserve military dominance.¹⁶ Political authority is thus conditional on military oversight. Organizations that attempt to operate outside this frame or change it cannot be reformed, since reform has ceased. Therefore, they must be challenged and dominated.

The motivational frame seeks to sustain compliance and sacrifice through appeals to duty, nationalism, and moral obligation. *Tatmadaw* statements trace the current struggle against the NUG to the Burmese national cause. Patriotism mandates loyalty to the *Tatmadaw*. Meanwhile, dissent is cast as a betrayal of country and family. This framing is encapsulated in the ideology of “Our Three National Causes,”¹⁷ which conflates regime survival with national survival. Since soldiers are the party, and the party's collapse equates to the state's collapse, they are portrayed as self-sacrificing guardians of the state. Nationalist pride demands participation in the armed forces. The motivational frame eliminates fence-sitters, renders neutrality suspect, and shrinks the space for apolitical existence. Identity becomes binary, and society bifurcates into patriots or traitors.

The resonance of the *Tatmadaw* framing varies tremendously depending upon the audience. Within the officer corps and segments of the Burman Buddhist majority, the *Tatmadaw*'s frames resonated

historically due to their emphasis on order, nationalism, and religious protection. Buddhist monks, for instance, have been central to support of the military role in the Rohingya genocide.¹⁸ Institutional privileges, insularity, and welfare benefits reinforce loyalty within the ranks and discourage defection.¹⁹ Yet among the broader population, these frames appear to have lost credibility due to the lived experience of the population. Landslide electoral results in 2015 and 2020, and overwhelming public participation in anti-coup demonstrations that brought the country to a standstill, serve as evidence of a clear rejection of the military's political project and discredit its claim to represent the popular will.²⁰

Since the 2021 coup, repression has further eroded frame resonance. *Tatmadaw* prosecution of its campaign to defeat the NUG through indiscriminate violence, mass arrests, and attacks on civilians causes rejection of the military as guardians. To the contrary, overreliance on coercion has sparked nationwide resistance and empowered an opposition counter-narrative, which frames the *Tatmadaw* as a fascist, illegitimate institution. This counter-narrative appears to have gained traction across ethnic and social lines, weakening the military's long-standing divide-and-rule strategy.

Regime Strategy

With the prognosis delimited as obedience to the military-drafted 2008 Constitution, the strategy to achieve this is straightforward – at least in theory. In fact, the regime's approach is best described as one of regime survival rather than an effort to achieve a decisive military victory or political reconciliation. Its strategic objective is the reassertion and institutionalization of the *Tatmadaw*'s political, economic, and ideological dominance over the state, ensuring the permanence of military rule regardless of popular consent. To this end, its strategy may be conceptualized as consisting of five components, each comprised

of distinct building blocks designed to maximize coercion, fragmentation, and managed political performance to compensate for the regime's deficit in popular legitimacy.

Political Component

Exercising power so as to control the state is the critical component for the *Tatmadaw*, with governance exercised to the extent that the state functions. In the exercise of control, the military mobilizes manpower, resources, and institutional loyalty to dominate key population centers and government services. This takes place in the Burman core area displayed on Figure 1. Forced conscription, coercive retention, and the recruitment of proxies compensate for declining voluntary enlistment.²¹

Economic survival is ensured through taxation and revenues generated by military-owned conglomerates. State enterprises, especially the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, generate the preponderance of the *Tatmadaw's* operating funds.²² The annual budget is \$2.7 billion (2023), which places the country among the poorest in the world (the annual budget of Nepal, for instance, is \$14.4 billion). Additional funding is gained through resource extraction focused on jade and timber, land seizures, and financial strong-arming. These mechanisms provide off-budget funding and bind personnel to the regime in a material way. This gives rise to an exclusive military social order that reinforces cohesion and loyalty, insulating the armed forces from broader societal collapse.²³

Governance is exercised through legal and administrative control rather than service provision. The 2008 Constitution serves as the foundation of political authority. The recently held sham election in December 2025 created a façade of legitimacy. In the first round, conducted in the areas under regime control, official figures put turnout at 52%. Other areas, however, reported massive boycotting of the process.

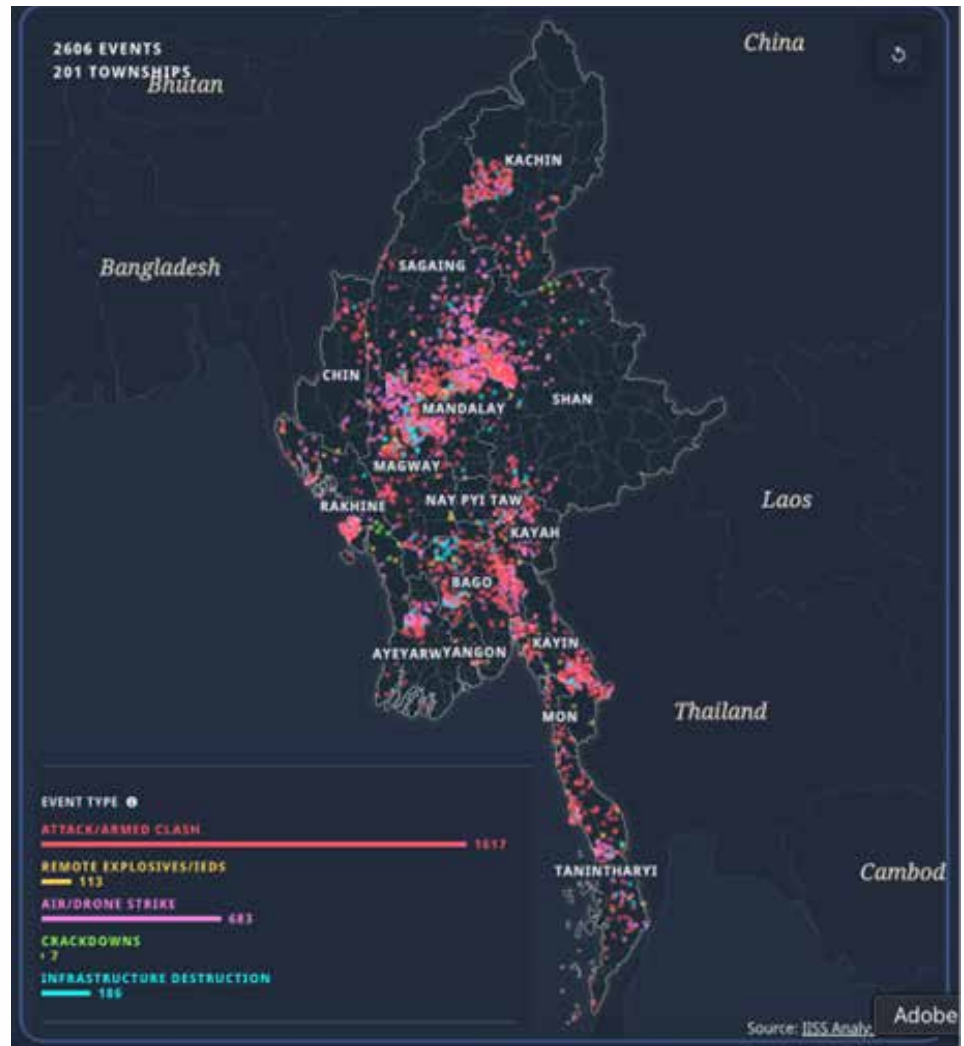


Figure 2: Concentration of Violence by Type (Source: Myanmar Conflict Map)

Violence Component

Violence remains the *Tatmadaw's* trump card, supplanting a need to foster legitimacy. Coercion in the form of repression enforces compliance in the Burman areas dominated by the regime, while military action of various types attacks opponent forces. (For type and distribution of violent action, see Figure 2.) A relentless campaign of repression shapes civilian behavior and negates efforts to maintain political neutrality. Through arrests, torture, sexual violence, intimidation, and legal abuse, the regime seeks to raise the cost of resistance participation and deter material or moral support to its opponents. Thus, coercion serves a strategic purpose by isolating resistance networks, suppressing dissent, and compelling passive compliance in areas where sustained military control cannot be achieved or is not desired.

Military assault is the essence of a counterinsurgency effort focused on the NUG and those ethnic groups which remain hostile (a number have been co-opted), the so-called “Four Cuts” strategy, which targets food, funds, intelligence, and recruits.²⁴ Scorched-earth tactics, forced displacement of populations, destruction of civilian infrastructure, and proxy militia violence keep resistance groups divided and deny them access to popular support.

Nevertheless, its overwhelming firepower notwithstanding, the *Tatmadaw's* military effort serves an economy-of-force role. The regime's current capacity is insufficient to sustain a nationwide campaign. Therefore, artillery and airstrikes (to include use of drones), as well as targeted ground operations, are employed in an effort to strike at opponents and keep them from advancing, which occurs with some

regularity. Inflicting civilian casualties is judged as irrelevant. Predictably, while at times tactically effective in the short term, this approach accelerates legitimacy erosion and furthers resistance mobilization.

Non-Violence Component

The *Tatmadaw* enhances its violence with the use of nonviolence, whereby it seeks to reinforce coercive control, fragment opposition, and normalize military rule without relying exclusively on kinetic force. These campaigns collectively reinforce its authority, reduce reliance on its physical military forces, and extend control into domains where military presence is limited or counterproductive. An increasingly technologically advanced information warfare effort, for instance, underpins a regime effort to control perception, justify repression, and delegitimize resistance. Likewise, a lawfare campaign embeds repression within legal and administrative frameworks. Courts and bureaucratic mechanisms implement laws that restrict political opposition, make support to the NUG illegal, and discipline opponents. Network warfare targets the social, political, and financial connective tissue of the NUG, the primary opponent. Recognizing the economic limitations of the NUG, a renewed emphasis on digital surveillance and financial monitoring places increased pressure on fundraising.

Simultaneously, a campaign of subversion is implemented through employment of disingenuous ceasefires, political roadmaps, patronage, and dialogue to manage conflict and co-opt elites. “Ceasefire capitalism” offers economic incentives in exchange for compliance while denying recognition to insurgent governance.²⁵ This element of the *Tatmadaw* strategy has been particularly effective in dividing the opposition.

Allies Component

Building upon negotiations and false concessions, the regime works assiduously to develop and control allies within the larger

conflict space; that is, to empower those with whom it can make common cause even if those individuals or groups will not commit to the regime directly. Political proxies, paramilitary forces, and co-opted ethnic elites have proved of special importance, becoming force multipliers and buffers against accountability. Allegiance is gained in particular by farming out slices of the illicit economy (often in return for a slice of the take).²⁶

Of equal importance, such activity constructs a façade of pluralism while never providing a legitimate threat to control. For the strategic objective, regardless of tactical moves, remains not national unity, conflict resolution, or democratic governance, but rather consolidation of power and the resources that accompany this position. In this sense, continued external efforts to mediate ostensible routes to peace can only be assessed as naive.

International Component

Internationally, the *Tatmadaw* seeks to offset isolation and gain external legitimacy by leveraging relationships with authoritarian states and permissive regional actors. Primary supporters, as noted above, include Russia and China, which provide critical military, economic, and diplomatic support, enabling sustained operations and sanctions evasion.²⁷ ASEAN, the United Nations, and other international organizations are also cultivated to neutralize external pressure. China is of special importance due to the sway it holds over some of the strongest ethnic armies, such as the Kachin, which themselves are economically dependent upon their border position and thus commerce with Chinese intermediaries.

This position is complicated by the extensive presence of Chinese criminal elements (such as cyber-scam compounds), which solidify their own position through payment of bribes to all concerned.

Though the situation is not as fraught as that in the likes of Cambodia, which has for decades been a Chinese “bought and

paid for” asset, it can be argued that absent Chinese involvement, the military would be hard-pressed to maintain its position.²⁸

External support is thus imperative for regime survival, even as a culture of dependence further weakens internal standing. This provides material support and diplomatic space but deepens dependence on external patrons rather than on domestic consent. External sources remain crucial for provision of the weapons and material necessary to maintain its rule.

Present Situation

A classic contest of legitimacy is at hand, waged within an irregular warfare strategic framework for which the term “hybrid” seems to have been coined, involving as it does everything from a frozen conflict to extensive criminality. NUG dominates legitimacy as the center of gravity yet operationally does not have the power to unseat the *Tatmadaw*. The National Unity Government’s present response to the conflict reflects an effort to contest the *Tatmadaw*’s military rule by prioritizing legitimacy, governance, and political reconstruction over coercive dominance. NUG appropriately frames the conflict as an existential struggle for the restoration of lawful authority, realignment of civil-military relations, and further movement toward democratic governance, but it has no viable theory of victory. Its approach assumes that the military’s reliance on repression will continue to erode its authority faster than the NUG’s own legitimacy will decay under the strain of prolonged conflict.²⁹ Support for federalism is the ideological linchpin of the NUG position, but this has not translated into operational coordination and armed power.

Command and control is dependent upon willing coordination of disparate elements, with the historical split between Burman and ethnic forces remaining a critical vulnerability. Survival of the resistance at times produces impulses which seem to endanger the *Tatmadaw* position, but intervening variables inevitably return the

situation to the status quo. The resistance appears to control a majority of the population and national territory, but it has been unable to crack the inner core of the regime position.

To the contrary, NUG faces a significant resource shortage. It has pursued state-like revenue generation through voluntary taxation, asset sales, bond issuance, and the use of digital currencies and blockchain-enabled banking mechanisms.³⁰ These innovations have allowed the NUG to sustain operations outside the junta-controlled financial system and to bind supporters to the project of governance rather than rebellion alone. At the same time, the voluntary nature of these mechanisms makes them sensitive to perceptions of credibility, performance, and unity.

Diplomatically, the NUG's current position is also restricted. Internally and abroad, the NUG remains tarred by its continuing Burman chauvinism.³¹ Similarly, there are no neighboring power centers which have been willing to extend meaningful backing. To the contrary, China, India, and Thailand all remain committed to the regime. NUG is left to urge international sanctions against the military regime while presenting itself as the legitimate representative of Burma. This has not been successful. Still, while formal recognition remains elusive, the NUG has maintained access to international forums, advocacy networks, and sympathetic governments. In this position, the United States was previously an important player but now has left the field.³² Hence, external engagement has yet to produce sufficient material support to alter the balance of material power.

Ironically, NUG's principal strengths are intangible. Its assessment of the problem is correct. Hence, its objective, the establishment of a federal democratic union with civilian supremacy, addresses the fatal flaw that has destroyed the Burmese state since independence. Further, rejection of the autonomy of the military from civilian control is necessary to reduce

the risk that regime change would merely reproduce authoritarian governance under a different coalition. This narrative coherence strengthens the NUG's claim to legitimacy and preserves political space for post-conflict governance.

A second strength is the NUG's operationalization of legitimacy. Unlike prior opposition movements, the NUG functions as a government in exile rather than as an insurgent front. It derives its authority from the results of the 2020 elections and popular rejection of military rule. It has successfully operationalized legitimacy in tangible practices – such as executing judicial responsibilities, tax collection, and education – which reinforce claims to sovereignty.³³ Additionally, the NUG maintains a degree of strategic autonomy by securing funding streams through financial innovations, including digital currencies, bond issuance, and voluntary taxation.³⁴

Delimiting these strengths, however, also exposes the NUG's key vulnerabilities. Most notably, the strategy depends on sustaining legitimacy amidst limited enforceable authority. This is further complicated when the desired future government is federal, requiring extensive cooperation among the partners. While legitimacy enables mobilization and endurance, it does not automatically translate into unified command, territorial administration, or resource generation. As time passes, the 2020 election results become less relevant. Ideological zeal fades, and governance becomes harder to sustain. As a result, voluntary compliance becomes more fragile, and the costs of participation escalate. Institutional performance, therefore, becomes a critical variable. In a contest of legitimate government, the NUG in fact must govern.

It may be tempting to rush to demonstrate performance through armed action. However, this reveals an additional weakness in the tension between decentralized armed resistance and political coherence. The necessity of dispersed, autonomous military action enhances survivability

and individual effectiveness. Still, it significantly complicates the development of campaigns large enough to seize strategic objectives. While the NUG has emphasized coordination over command, variation in behavior among armed actors, both during operations and in negotiations to resolve the conflict, risks undermining legitimacy and blurring the distinction between civilian governance and coercion. In this sense, the contest of legitimacy is who can be first to professionalize the military.

Conclusion

In summary, the NUG's current response aligns with a correct strategic end-state. However, ambiguity in methods to achieve intermediary objectives, as well as significant resource limitations, pose key challenges. Success indeed depends upon maintaining legitimacy during extended periods of violence while gradually increasing governance capacity without overreaching.

The main risk is not conceptual failure but the cumulative pressure from time, repression, and possible fragmentation. Unfortunately, a strategy of survival and prolonging the conflict is precisely what the adversary is pursuing. The NUG requires a revised strategy that leverages its various instruments to exploit internal division within the *Tatmadaw*, challenge its narratives, and create increasingly complex scenarios that strain the organization where it can bear it least.

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- 32 NUG suffered a significant setback due to the U.S. policy decision to dismantle USAID. Further details at Su Myat Thwe and Rosa-Lena Lauterbach, *op.cit.*
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- 34 Ibid.