

# A CLOSER LOOK AT MYANMAR'S DISCONTENT

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'If one objective of the coup was to strengthen national unity, the Myanmar military has failed spectacularly' | Photo Credit: AFP

In February, it will be three years since [the army seized power in Myanmar](#), overthrowing a democratically elected government headed by Aung San Suu Kyi. The coup prompted a massive civil disobedience movement. The deposed members of parliament formed a National Unity Government that constituted the People's Defence Forces (PDFs) and called for an armed uprising. The fragile peace between major ethnic armed organisations and the military collapsed, as the former's objective of establishing federal democracy was no longer feasible under army dictatorship.

Last October, an alliance of the Arakan Army, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and Ta'ang National Liberation Army [launched coordinated attacks on the military](#), and inflicted massive losses on the military in the Shan State. Paletwa town on the country's western borders, and a critical node in India's Kaladan project, is currently under the control of the Arakan Army. At the same time, the regions inhabited by the majority Bamar ethnic community, such as Sagaing, Bago and Magwe, also witnessed a significant spike in resistance, and the PDFs gained ground against the military.

If one objective of the coup was to strengthen national unity, the Myanmar military has failed spectacularly. In fact, the military has conceded large tracts of territory to the ethnic armed organisations and PDFs. But losing control of territory to armed groups is not new for the army; the military has frequently lost ground to ethnic armed groups and the now defunct Communist Party of Burma, but subsequently recovered some of the losses.

It should be noted that when international sanctions were substantially diluted between 2010 and 2020, the military acquired air and army equipment. Numerous reports indicate that the coup leaders have used firepower even on unarmed civilians, resulting in significant internal displacement and neighbouring countries facing refugee crises. The reasons for losing territory now have less to do with military incapacity and more to do with growing popular discontent. Reports suggest that the military finds it difficult to recruit even from the regions dominated by Bamars, who constitute the bulk of army personnel. Since the coup, there have been sporadic reports of government officials, doctors, and police personnel assisting the resistance movement. In the past year, a fairly large number of military personnel have surrendered to the ethnic armed organisations and PDFs. A month ago, to evade an attack by the resistance groups, over 150 Myanmar soldiers moved into India and surrendered. There are reports of

army officers served with severe punishment for failure to stop desertions, suggesting that military cohesion is coming under increasing stress.

Given these circumstances, China has a multi-layered strategy to protect its interests. On international platforms, China robustly defends the Myanmar military from international censure. Simultaneously, various ethnic armed organisations on Myanmar's northern border have close relations with China, and it is unlikely that the uprising in Shan State, given its scale, could have happened without Chinese consent. It is rumoured that Beijing used the ethnic alliance to stamp out online scams and criminal syndicates that were fleecing millions from Chinese citizens. Having achieved its objectives, Beijing was able [to get the rebels and the Myanmar army to agree to a ceasefire](#). With the momentum of the ethnic offensive stalled and the army not recovering lost territory, it is not certain how long this truce will last. Neither ethnic armed organisations nor the coup leaders will be comfortable with Beijing's ability to influence their operations.

The principal regional actor, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), has articulated a five-point consensus and denied the Myanmar military a place at its summits. Despite repeated efforts, the ASEAN special envoy to Myanmar was prevented from having meaningful interactions with all the relevant stakeholders. Therefore ASEAN has not been able to alter the trajectory of Myanmar's politics, but some ASEAN members are shunning their customary reticence and are now sharply critical of the Myanmar coup.

With a shared border of about 2,416 km, Thailand wields significant influence in Myanmar. Last year, Thailand's Foreign Minister not only interacted with Myanmar's military leadership but also with the imprisoned leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Thailand hosts and engages with Myanmar's exile organisations and, in the recent past, has made efforts to scale up its humanitarian assistance.

India could also consider a more proactive humanitarian approach to provide succour to displaced communities in Myanmar. Such an initiative could also reduce the inflow of refugees into India. In its engagement with Myanmar, India should factor in the three political realities.

First, discontent against the coup shows no signs of abating. The military often hinted at the possibility of conducting elections under proportional representation, but has failed to do so because of inability to ensure sufficient stability in the country.

Second, despite the absence of a charismatic leader and meaningful international support, resistance to the coup has demonstrated considerable resilience over the past years.

Third, Myanmar today is politically fragmented, with the military, ethnic armed organisations and PDFs having varying degrees of control in different parts of the country. The military seems to be losing more ground than gaining it. Perhaps it is time for India to re-calibrate its Myanmar policy after consultations with all the relevant stakeholders.

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