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One Year On from the Myanmar Coup

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The 1 February 2021 coup in Myanmar removed Aung San Suu Kyi's democratically elected government. A broad spectrum of society continues to resist the coup in various ways. In this Q&A, Crisis Group expert Richard Horsey assesses the situation and what the future may hold.

What is the situation in Myanmar today?

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing clearly did not anticipate that his power grab would face such strong, determined resistance when he engineered the coup a year ago. The resistance emerged almost immediately after his junta deposed the democratically elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi, charging her with numerous offences most regard as trumped-up. Since then, despite its brutal repression of opposition, the military regime has been unable to consolidate control of the country. It is resorting to increasingly extreme violence to try terrorising the population into submission. It has [killed](#) some 1,500 civilians in the past year – including some who were summarily executed or tortured to death in interrogation centres – and arrested, charged or jailed nearly 9,000 more.

Just in the last several weeks, soldiers drove an [army truck](#) at full speed into a group of peaceful demonstrators and bystanders in downtown Yangon, killing several people and injuring others; in Sagaing Region, the military incinerated a group of [eleven villagers](#), including children, some apparently while they were still alive; and on Christmas Eve in Kayah State (a predominantly Christian area), regime troops burned 31 people [in their vehicles](#) after stopping them at a checkpoint as they tried to flee fighting between the army and resistance forces. In this last incident, four members of a local military-aligned militia were also shot dead when they tried to negotiate safe passage for the civilians.

These shocking events have not diminished the will of a wide section of Myanmar society to continue resisting. Rather, they have prompted increased defiance among ordinary citizens. After the Yangon attack, residents across the city took to their balconies to bang pots and pans, a traditional way of driving out evil that was widespread across the country in the coup's immediate aftermath, until troops began shooting at those participating. Now again, troops took aim at balconies and vandalised houses and parked cars in the streets. On 10 December, following the Sagaing massacre, activists called a nationwide silent strike. Despite threats from the authorities not to take part, nearly every business in Yangon and most other cities shuttered their doors and people stayed at home, leaving the streets [eerily silent](#).

Violent resistance has also continued to escalate in various parts of the country. After the Christmas Eve massacre in Kayah State, local defence forces that formed in the aftermath of the coup allied with an ethnic armed group to retaliate. The regime responded by launching [airstrikes](#) on the state capital Loikaw in early January, forcing more than half the population to flee. Local defence forces that have sprung up across the country in reaction to regime violence have also continued to step up attacks on military targets in Sagaing Region and adjacent areas after the massacre there. In the south east, one of the oldest ethnic armed groups in the country (and the world) – the Karen National Union (KNU) – is taking a more assertive military posture following raids by regime forces searching for dissidents and striking civil servants to whom the KNU had provided sanctuary. This shift of some ethnic armed groups toward more proactively supporting resistance forces is gathering pace, putting greater [pressure on the military](#).

Instead of reaping the expected rewards of power, Min Aung Hlaing and his generals are now locked into a spiralling crisis, deploying extreme violence to try to ensure the survival of their regime. Despite incurring significant losses, they still appear to believe that their military might and counter-insurgency experience will allow them to prevail in the end. With local resistance forces and the National Unity Government (NUG) – a parallel administration formed by lawmakers elected in November 2020 – determined to prevent that at all costs, violence looks set to further escalate over the coming months.

What impact is the post-coup crisis having on ordinary people?

The double blow of COVID-19 and the coup has devastated Myanmar's economy, with millions of people losing their jobs or sources of livelihood over the last year. The prices of many essential food items have surged as the national currency, the kyat, has plummeted in value, pushing up the cost of imports including cooking oil, agricultural inputs such as fertiliser, and refined fuels – and hence, domestic transport costs. A large proportion of the population, including in the cities, is slipping into [poverty](#) and food insecurity, wiping out a decade of progress and exacting a terrible cost on the most vulnerable.

Public services have collapsed. Doctors, medical staff and teachers have been at the forefront of the civil disobedience movement, with the majority continuing to refuse to work under the junta. Those on strike have been targeted for beatings and arrest, while those who have continued working face violent retaliation from their communities and local defence forces. The upshot is a health system in disarray and schools likewise disrupted, with few teachers in classrooms and few students in attendance. There are widespread blackouts across the country as the regime has been forced to cancel power generation projects pegged to the U.S. dollar that it can no longer afford.

Conflict across large swathes of the country has forced hundreds of thousands of people to flee their homes since the coup, with more than [320,000 newly displaced](#) by the end of 2021 – likely an underestimate given problems with humanitarian access and the fact that much new displacement is in areas with no recent history of conflict and thus no established reporting network. The newly displaced come on top of another 340,000 people who were uprooted by conflict prior to the coup, mostly in ethnic areas. With violence escalating, the number of displaced civilians is only likely to rise, with devastating humanitarian consequences as cutting off aid to civilians is part of the regime's counter-insurgency strategy. Intensified fighting could also result in refugee flows into neighbouring Thailand and India.

What has been the international response?

International efforts to address the crisis have been [lacklustre at best](#), with Myanmar failing to get the attention it deserves. One reason is that major powers have been focused on the global pandemic response, as well as on other crises such as those in Afghanistan, Ethiopia and now Ukraine. The West in particular feels – understandably – that it has little leverage and a lack of good options to influence events on the ground. While the U.S., European Union and UK have imposed a series of sanctions upon regime figures and military-owned companies, these have very limited impact on the regime's capacity to operate.

UN Security Council divisions have been less evident on Myanmar than on many other issues, in part because members have tried to respect each other's sensitivities on this file. The Council has not gone beyond issuing statements of concern, to no real effect. China mostly shares Western concerns about the coup's economic and security implications, which are a threat to its interests, but is much less inclined than other permanent Council members (except Russia) toward sanctions, public condemnation or framing the crisis in human rights terms. Beijing is also reluctant to see an issue in its neighbourhood internationalised, preferring to approach Naypyitaw bilaterally or through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). India, a non-permanent member, has also been increasingly resistant to Council scrutiny and action on this case. For their part, the Western permanent members – the U.S., UK and France – have chosen to keep any disagreement within limits, in order to avoid the toxic divisions that have emerged on issues such as Syria.

While these diverging views are a clear impediment to a more robust international stand against the regime, the fragile modus vivendi that remains among Council members on this issue is not completely without value. It has, for example, allowed the big powers to broker a deal that denies the regime representation at the UN and instead leaves incumbent Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun, who has very publicly sided with the NUG, in Myanmar's seat. This arrangement is a major source of irritation for the regime and provides the NUG with its most important international platform.

Like most Western governments, the UN has been content to outsource most diplomatic efforts to ASEAN, whose member states agreed in April 2021 to a five-point consensus on steps the military regime must take to de-escalate violence. Despite internal differences, the regional grouping has eventually taken a stronger stance than many observers expected, particularly by banning Min Aung Hlaing from attending its summits – an unprecedented step for a group that traditionally prefers consensus and shies away from intervening in its member states' domestic affairs. But its modest diplomatic efforts, under rotating chairs Brunei and now Cambodia, have gained no real traction with a regime unwilling to make concessions. There are now fears that Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen in particular is too idiosyncratic – and maybe too influenced by China – to guide any meaningful [diplomatic initiative](#). It is also tricky for Western countries to back a process led by Hun Sen given his authoritarian tendencies at home.

In any event, while the generals do care about international opinion, to some extent, and crave improved relations with the outside world, nothing so far indicates that they are prepared to change their behaviour or political objectives in order to obtain diplomatic recognition.

In Myanmar, the lack of international action has prompted considerable despondency, and some antagonism toward the outside world, particularly the West and the UN. Gone are the hopeful slogans seen in early protests calling for outside intervention; one [recent banner](#) read: "There is no supreme saviour" (a quote from the left-wing anthem "[The Internationale](#)"). Having come to the conclusion that they are largely on their own, people have taken their destiny into their own hands, including with armed struggle.

While international leverage is undoubtedly limited, there is more that the outside world should do. Myanmar's troubles will not be contained within its borders, and will likely give rise to significant regional and global challenges relating to public health, refugee flows and security, particularly vis-à-vis the drug trade and other illicit activities. There is also no prospect of resolving the Rohingya refugee crisis unless the Myanmar situation is addressed.

Foreign donors must continue to support the Myanmar people through delivery of humanitarian aid, which requires funding but also greater diplomatic dexterity and attention, to navigate the very difficult aid environment and ensure that conflict-affected populations benefit, not the regime. Beyond humanitarian assistance and protection, long-term support for public health, education and livelihoods, as well as for civil society organisations and journalists, will be vital. Technical and financial assistance to strengthen the NUG's administrative capacity can help and is more feasible than formal recognition of the NUG – which many in Myanmar are demanding, but which foreign governments remain very reluctant about, given their need to maintain channels to the regime. The new UN special envoy, Noeleen Heyzer of Singapore, has an important role to play, given her deep knowledge of the UN system and strong diplomatic networks in ASEAN. Governments around the world should do all they can to support her mandate.

How is the situation likely to evolve from here?

The regime has made clear what its plans are, announcing early on a "five-point road map" that it has printed on the front page of state newspapers every day since shortly after the coup. Min Aung Hlaing's plan is focused on holding elections in mid-2023, after which the junta will supposedly hand over power to an elected president – two and a half years after the coup. In the meantime, the regime is doing everything it can to ensure that the electoral playing field is tilted decisively in its favour. Aung San Suu Kyi, who has already been sentenced to years in prison on several dubious counts and faces more criminal charges, is likely to remain in detention indefinitely; her party, the immensely popular National League for Democracy, is facing dissolution; and the regime-appointed election commission is putting in place a contrived new electoral system designed to prevent the emergence of any dominant party, ensuring that the military remains kingmaker thanks to its 25 per cent bloc of seats in parliament.

Yet it is hard to see how the regime could hold elections when almost the entire country is in revolt. It is even harder to fathom how new elections could put an end to the political crisis. Popular anger at the military is such that hardly anyone would see a new government made up of recently retired generals in civilian garb as any kind of step forward. Nor would most people deign to participate in such a farce. In these circumstances, polls would be a flashpoint for dissent and unrest, not a step toward stability.

Myanmar will thus likely remain in a state of tumult for the foreseeable future. Resistance groups are getting more sophisticated at targeting regime forces, and increasingly cooperating with various [ethnic armed groups](#), some of which have significant military capabilities. While these trends are likely to continue, actually toppling the regime – which is fearful of the retribution it would face from a furious nation – is much more difficult for resistance groups to achieve. With neither side in a position to deliver a decisive blow to the other, a protracted and increasingly violent confrontation appears inevitable. For now, much of the country will therefore likely be under the control of a patchwork of local actors, including Myanmar military units, resistance forces and, in some cases, criminal actors, who will step in to fill security vacuums and seek to profit from them. Caught in the middle will be ordinary citizens, who are already paying a terrible price.

ecoi.net summary:

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society since the military coup
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