

PERSPECTIVE

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Ethnic Armed Organisations in Post-Coup Myanmar: New Conversations Needed

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This undated photo taken in May 2021 shows an anti-coup activist undergo basic military training at the camp of Karen National Union (KNU), an ethnic rebel group in Karen State after people fled major Myanmar cities due to military crackdown and sought refuge in rebel territories. Photo: STR, AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The increasingly widespread attacks on *Tatmadaw* troops by resistance forces across Myanmar have given rise to suggestions of a descent into civil war, with Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) touted as a “wild card” that might decide the country’s fate. However, talk of a Federal Army and comparisons to the Syrian civil war are premature and create a false impression of unity in intent.
- Broadly, EAOs are either fighting to regain lost territory, adopting a wait-and-see approach, protecting their ethnic kin from *Tatmadaw* attacks, or seeking opportunistic business deals in the peripheries. They have vastly different worldviews, military capabilities, and working languages, some leaning politically towards China and others towards Western countries.
- Recognising the EAOs for what they are—armed groups controlling territory—rather than looking to them for military solutions or political leadership, calls for more deliberate building of pan-ethnic solidarity at all levels and for the inclusion of diverse actors in new conversations about a federal union.
- The presence of the EAOs as a fighting force or potential “wild card” must not lead to wishful thinking or become a reason to absolve China, Japan, ASEAN and the West of the responsibility to search for solutions to protect people across Myanmar.

INTRODUCTION

In April of 2021, three months after Myanmar's military (*Tatmadaw*) took over the country in a coup and replaced the elected government with its State Administration Council (SAC), attacks against *Tatmadaw* troops by Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) and civilian resistance fighters began in earnest across the country. A series of speculative claims have been made about the possible involvement of the EAOs in the country's post-coup politics.

In a first analysis, the EAOs and ethnic minorities, which comprise roughly a third of the country's population, are seen as a potential "wild card" or kingmaker. Many observers inside and outside of Myanmar see them as a key deciding factor in the country's future,¹ suggesting that they can "turn the tide" against the junta.² One Western observer writes:

These ethnic minorities are the X Factor that will decide the fate of this coup...The junta and the NLD both need the support of ethnic minority political actors. The junta has enlisted the strongest political party in Rakhine State in the west of the country and the biggest ethnic party in Eastern Mon State. In the north, ethnic armed organizations mostly supported by China are staying above the fray...The NLD will turn to the east, home to the most outspoken ethnic minority opponents of the coup – Karen, Mon, Karenni and Shan groups.³

A second assumption—that of EAO unity—has led to this "X Factor" being exaggerated.⁴ The more vocal EAOs released statements condemning the coup, and even though few followed up with any action, observers extrapolated from this the existence of a common intent aimed against a common enemy.⁵ This unity has been assumed to include the Burman people, leading to talk about a Federal Army gaining traction alongside the formation of the parallel National Unity Government (NUG).⁶ With the ultimate aim of a Federal Union Army standing up to the *Tatmadaw*, a "People's Defence Force" (PDF) was announced on 5 May to protect civilians,⁷ alongside calls for unity and pan-ethnic solidarity made by the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and NUG. The first cohort of PDF soldiers graduated on 28 May.⁸

For the EAOs, this is a strange shift. Previously viewed by many Myanmar people and foreigners alike as intransigent "spoilers"—half rejected signing President Thein Sein's Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in 2015 while the other half did—they are now being called upon to counter the might of the *Tatmadaw*. Once seen as a threat to the indivisibility of the Union, the threat that allowed many Burmans to tolerate the *Tatmadaw*, the EAOs are now being given serious attention, and their longstanding calls for federal structures are now being explored.

A third related narrative is growing talk of Myanmar being on the "precipice of civil war",⁹ a descent into chaos and "looming catastrophe" that might result in a "failed state".¹⁰ While armed violence may have now increased significantly in the urban Burman centres, civil war has in fact festered for 70-odd years at Myanmar's peripheries. Comparisons to Syria are far too premature., however, and the question does not seem to be one of whether civil war will break out (it already has), but whether forms of violence will reach a scale that might compel international political or military intervention, through China, India, Japan, ASEAN or the United Nations. The comparatively "low-intensity" fighting over the last

three decades has thus far neither drawn external intervention nor produced any significant change in Myanmar's political trajectory. Observers argue that PDF resistance in urban areas will need to rely on weapons and supplies from the EAOs,¹¹ and the passing and enforcement of arms embargos will play a big part in developments, as will any support from neighbouring countries. In late May, ASEAN came under criticism for proposing to remove mention of an arms embargo from a draft UN resolution.¹²

MYANMAR'S EAOs: A CRUCIBLE OF VARYING INTERESTS AND CAPABILITIES

Despite the claims of a unified threat to the *Tatmadaw* arising from the 20 or so EAOs across the country, the more fine-grained picture tells a different story. The EAOs represent a broad spectrum of political interests, perspectives and mutual relationships. They are not necessarily a significant military threat to the *Tatmadaw*, let alone a "wild card" or "kingmaker". And it is too early to say whether Myanmar will go down the road towards a "Syrian" civil war, given that the country has already seen 70 years of sporadic conflict with limited political change.

Broadly, the complexities of the EAO landscape lie along four lines. First, the groups have extremely diverse interests and motives. The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) have arguably borne the brunt of *Tatmadaw* attacks over the last two decades, even as the latter signed the NCA. They were the quickest to condemn the military coup, and to launch attacks to reclaim areas they previously controlled. The KIA shot down a *Tatmadaw* helicopter and reportedly seized 10 *Tatmadaw* outposts by April, including the strategic hilltop Alaw Bum.¹³ The KNLA attacked key *Tatmadaw* positions in late March and killed scores of soldiers.¹⁴ Another group with an interest in recouping lost territory is the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), or the Kokang group. Somewhat surprisingly, it has not entered into open hostilities to retake control of the Kokang area it lost in 2009. Perhaps biding its time, it has been involved in a number of skirmishes in Shan State alongside its Brotherhood Alliance ally, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA). The Alliance reportedly killed dozens of *Tatmadaw* troops in early May.¹⁵

The Brotherhood Alliance condemned the coup in a joint statement on 30 March, but its position remains unclear in many ways. The TNLA has no clear territorial aims, and seems concerned to gain legitimacy with its support base through attacks on *Tatmadaw* forces. The Arakan Army (AA), the third member of the Alliance, has now gone silent after fierce fighting with the *Tatmadaw* throughout 2020. Negotiations were making progress between the two sides in December 2020 over the prospect of holding supplementary elections in Rakhine State.¹⁶ Even after the coup, there has been no escalation in fighting. No longer branded a terrorist organisation by the SAC since mid-March, it has done little besides issue statements since its unilateral ceasefire declaration expired at the end of that same month.

Then there are the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA), and the Shan State Army-North (SSA-N), all of whom have adopted a wait-and-see approach, remaining quiet on the coup and not making hostile military manoeuvres. At the same time, they have refused to make any deals with the *Tatmadaw*.

Other EAOs have worked with newly formed ethnic-based militias to defend their people and areas against *Tatmadaw* incursions. The Karenni Army and PDFs in Kayah State killed dozens of soldiers in mid-May in Kayah State,¹⁷ while the newly-formed Chinland Defense Force clashed with the *Tatmadaw* repeatedly in April and May in Mindat.¹⁸

Finally, there are smaller *Tatmadaw*-aligned Border Guard Forces (BGF) fighting the EAOs, such as Chit Thu's Karen BGF fighting alongside the *Tatmadaw* against the KNLA, in return for business opportunities.¹⁹

Second, the EAOs are of different sizes and military capabilities, and have different military experience across a range of operations. Six or so groups can be said to have reasonable might—the AA, KIA, KNLA, SSA-N, RCSS, and the UWSA—but none is equipped to capture and hold territory against a *Tatmadaw* aerial and ground onslaught. Even the UWSA, whose forces are estimated to be around 30,000 troops and which possesses artillery and armed drones, is unlikely to be able to hold significant swathes of territory, should it succeed in capturing them. EAOs seem better placed to conduct concentrated attacks or guerrilla raids on *Tatmadaw* positions than missions to occupy territory.

It remains an open question as to what sustained effect EAO raids might have, even as they damage *Tatmadaw* morale, disrupt supply lines, and thin its resources. Groups on the Thai and Indian borders may have access to weapons through the black market but are susceptible to crackdowns by neighbouring governments. Most significant, however, is that some of these EAOs have, through the illicit economy, access to significant funding for long-running resistance if they decide to mount it. But thus far, the EAOs' main contributions to any collective effort has been to provide shelter and training for Bamar resisters fleeing to the borderlands to avoid arrest and regroup. The KIA and KNLA, and increasingly others as well have also scored some symbolic "wins" against the *Tatmadaw*.

Third, the EAOs have differing degrees of connection to diasporas and foreign countries. Their ties shape their worldviews, sentiments, and external relations in divergent ways. The KIA and KNLA are Western-leaning through their language skills and far-flung diasporic communities, while the UWSA, NDAA, and MNDAA are largely Chinese-speaking and consume media and reportage from China. Many of the EAOs towards the south, along with the KIA, are well versed in human rights and democracy discourses, and are able to frame their positions to appeal to Western audiences. After the coup, the mainly southerly-based 10 signatories of the 2015 NCA were quick to withdraw from negotiations and declare support for the CDM, while most of the groups to the north had different calculations.²⁰ Groups on the Chinese border have had closer communication with Chinese representatives, but it remains unclear the degree to which these shape their actions. The shifts between Burmese, Chinese and English make negotiations and shared political definitions extremely difficult, whether for internal or external audiences.

Finally, the EAOs have complex relationships with their own Ethnic Political Parties (EPPs) and civil society groups. While most have a political party affiliated to their armed group, there are also various EPPs at odds with them. The Mon Unity Party and Arakan National Party (ANP) initially cooperated with the SAC—the former facing many resignations from party members as a result. The ANP saw the coup as an opportunity to achieve the representation that it was denied through the cancellation of the 2020 electoral vote in many areas of Rakhine State, and its position now remains uncertain. Relationships between many

EAOs and their ethnic minority populace have become strained as the people demand that their armed groups take the fight to the *Tatmadaw*. Groups like the UWSA and NDAA are more impervious to this type of pressure since their revenue relies less on support from the populace.

WHAT POSSIBLE ROLES FOR THE EAOS?

While the notion of a “wild card” may overstate their influence, the EAOs are indeed in a unique position. They are not the direct targets of the coup, nor necessarily antagonists to the conflicting parties. They have long experience in carefully navigating national politics. Two future scenarios may yet emerge from the ambivalences and complexities of their positions.

First, their increased involvement in skirmishes could contribute to the potential crossing of a threshold level of insecurity in the country, which in turn could trigger more distinct Chinese engagement. EAOs might provide limited weapons, training, and tactics to the PDFs and CDM resisters, as has reportedly begun in Karen State.²¹ Signs of instability are already spreading, with assassinations of government officials, detonation of bombs, and rocket attacks.²² While the military threat posed by these groups together is unlikely to inflict sufficient damage to the *Tatmadaw* to coerce a rethink of position any time soon, widespread instability across the country may force Chinese involvement if any key infrastructure is threatened.²³ China may support a mediated compromise between the *Tatmadaw* and NUG representatives in order to preserve its interests, using ASEAN to front diplomacy. But on the other hand, it could double down on the side of the *Tatmadaw* and support it against the opposition.

The second scenario sees domestic actors taking a concerted interest in a federal union, and using the present crisis to begin a parallel development of meaningful pan-ethnic ties and conversations across different levels of society. On the NUG and CDM side, recognising the EAOs for what they are—armed groups controlling territories—rather than looking to them for military solutions or political leadership, may open different solutions. The EAOs may be military experts, but the labour of developing genuine pan-ethnic solidarity at the political, organisational, and community level requires the participation of many other domestic actors. New connections mean new conversations and perspectives about what a federal union might look like, involving the younger generations²⁴. This must develop parallel to any armed action. CDM and civil society actors can meaningfully address ethnic minority concerns to find common ground with the EAOs. As CNN wrote of the KNU in April:

The KNU’s Saw Taw Nee said it was important first to build a federal democratic union, in which all ethnic groups are represented, then a federal army could follow... ‘It’s very difficult to have an army like this now. Mainly because we have different opinions, different backgrounds, among ethnic groups,’ he said. ‘The main thing is to build trust between ethnic people.’²⁵

The last decade offered little evidence that the interests of ethnic minorities and EAOs could be accommodated without a significant change in Myanmar’s circumstances. This is the basis of their reluctance. Neither the military junta nor Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD) government meaningfully engaged the EAOs to end the civil war

and incorporate them into the state. The Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee remained unable to enforce or adjudicate breaches of the ceasefire. Western countries and surrounding neighbours took no decisive action on the country's civil war, even after the horrors of the Rohingya crisis. On the long-drawn peace process, Mathieson observes that "Western donors [kept] pitchforking money into a process they know isn't working to hoodwink their capitals that the process is working to mitigate the still unfolding catastrophe in Rakhine state."²⁶ With the peace process now dead in the water, an opportunity for resetting the terms and imagining new approaches has arisen.

Finally, the presence of the EAOs as a fighting force or potential "wild card" must not lead to wishful thinking, or absolve China, ASEAN, Japan, and the West of the responsibility to search for solutions to protect human security in Myanmar. The increasing numbers of PDFs being formed, the calls for mediation led by EAO signatories to the NCA, and the vibrancy of CDM discussions hint at a variety of possible directions—political, military, or humanitarian, internal or external. Domestically, building pan-ethnic solidarity and holding meaningful political discussions are important time-consuming processes for Myanmar's future, which must unfold in earnest alongside any call for armed resistance and alliances with other armed groups. This will take time, and whether there is sufficient patience for this amidst the urgency of the moment remains to be seen.

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