

A Wider War Coming to Myanmar

Unclaimed attacks on military airbases signal a possible spread of civil war from remote frontier areas to urban centers

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No group has yet claimed responsibility for several, almost simultaneous attacks on military targets in central Myanmar, including air bases recently used to target ethnic armed groups in the nation’s frontier areas.

Security analysts, however, believe the shadowy attacks are likely the work of an alliance between ethnic rebels and urban-based pro-democracy dissidents, with the former providing the explosives and the latter knowledge of local conditions in the Myanmar heartland.

If that assessment is accurate and the hits were not isolated incidents, it could mean that Myanmar’s long-running, low-intensity civil wars are spreading from ethnic minority areas in the nation’s periphery to major cities and towns.

Three months after top generals seized power from a popularly elected government and despite the fact that military and police have gunned down over 750 and arrested well over 4,000 protesters, people are still bravely taking to the streets to vent their anger with the coup.

The ongoing popular resistance underscores what is by now widely seen as perhaps the most unsuccessful coup in modern Asian history. That could yet spell ill for coup leader Senior General **Min Aung Hlaing**, who has stuck stubbornly to his guns amid rising international condemnation that is deeply isolating the country.

There are certain indications provided confidentially to Asia Times by military insiders that veterans of previous ruling juntas, namely the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), are growing wary of Min Aung Hlaing’s perceived as ineffective and polarizing actions and tactics.

Recent developments, including the attacks on military airbases, have opened a Pandora’s box of possibilities and scenarios that were largely unforeseen when the tanks rolled into the main city of Yangon three months ago and scores of elected MPs and other politicians

were arrested and detained in the capital Naypyitaw.

Those include a wider civil war in the nation's central region heartland, including near the generals' bunker-like capital at Naypyidaw. On April 29, unidentified militants fired rockets at air force bases in Magwe and Meiktila in central Myanmar.

Another explosion detonated at a Myanmar Army weapons storage facility near Bago city, about 70 kilometers north of Yangon. Those attacks came after intense fighting between the Myanmar military, known as Tatmadaw, and ethnic rebels from the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) on the border with Thailand.

The shadowy unclaimed attacks on airbases also coincided with intensified battles with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in the country's far north, where many pro-democracy activists have sought refuge after bloody crackdowns in urban areas.

The Tatmadaw's attacks have been marked by airstrikes on rebel targets which have included civilian villages. That's caused the recent displacement of more than 25,000 villagers in Kayin state and at least 5,000 in Kachin state. That adds to the tens of thousands who fled their homes amid earlier fighting in the areas.

Long-time observers of Myanmar's politics have privately drawn parallels between current events and what happened after an even bloodier coup in 1988, when thousands of dissidents also took to the hills and jungles after the Tatmadaw crushed another nationwide, pro-democracy uprising.

But, they note, there are fundamental differences between the events of 1988 and current developments. In 1988, young urban dissidents formed the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), donned uniforms and fought alongside ethnic rebels in the frontier areas.

At that time, it was much easier to acquire weapons from grey Thai arms markets and dissident groups had ready sanctuaries — and even offices — in neighboring Thailand. However, improved relations between the Thai and Myanmar militaries coupled with severe entry restrictions into Thailand caused by the Covid-19 pandemic have at least so far kept the dissidents on the Myanmar side of the border.

The old ABSDF exists now only in name as most of its cadres have either surrendered or been resettled in third countries. The ABSDF's ultimately failed uprising could explain why the new ethnic-urban alliance has taken on a different and potentially more explosive form.

Indeed, recent developments seem to signal the beginning of hitherto unseen urban warfare, which the Tatmadaw is ill-equipped to handle. Apart from the obvious alliances between informal groups of pro-democracy activists and ethnic rebels, local resistance forces have already emerged in Sagaing Region and Chin state. Reports indicate similar forces are coalescing in Mon state and Mandalay Region.

Social media posts show those local partisans are equipped with hunting rifles and homemade explosives but have nonetheless been able to inflict significant casualties on the police and military, including in Kalay in Sagaing Region. In nearby Chin state, a new force called the Chinland Defense Force reportedly killed 15 junta troops in their area.

Shadowy bomb and Molotov cocktail attacks have been reported against police stations in Yangon, Mandalay and Monywa.

At the same time, the Tatmadaw must contend with battle-hardened ethnic armies. In the country's far north, there have been over 50 clashes since Kachin rebels overran and captured a Tatmadaw outpost on the strategic Alawbum mountain near the Chinese border on March 25.

Airstrikes have failed to dislodge the KIA, which has carried out subsequent attacks near the Hpakant jade mines in western Kachin state and north of Sumprabum in the state's north.

In Kayin State, the Free Burma Rangers nongovernmental organization reports daily fights between the Tatmadaw and KNLA, despite the fact the two sides entered a ceasefire agreement in October 2015.

That agreement, which included the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) and eight smaller, rather insignificant groups, was termed a "Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement" (NCA), although it was neither nationwide nor led to even a semblance of peace in frontier areas.

Although the KNLA and the KIA have sided openly with Myanmar's until now peaceful Civil Disobedience Movement, other ethnic groups have been less supportive. In a March 27 interview with Reuters, RCSS chairman Yawd Serk said his group would not stand by idly if the junta's forces continue to kill protesters but his vow hasn't been followed up with any clear action.

On the contrary, the RCSS has been fighting a rival Shan group, the Shan State Army of the Shan State Progress Party and its ethnic Palaung allies in the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) for control of areas in northern Shan state.

Myanmar's most powerful ethnic army, the 20,000-30,000 strong United Wa State Army (UWSA), has remained conspicuously silent since the coup. Not all Wa agree with the stance: Ten Wa civil society organizations signed on March 25 a written, urgent plea to the UWSA and its political wing the United Wa State Party to say something.

That hasn't happened though, probably because the UWSA is so closely allied with China's security services, which do not want to get involved with Myanmar's anti-coup movement. Protesters have targeted Beijing's perceived support of the regime at the United Nations. Several Chinese factories were torched in Yangon in one spasm of violence.

The 7,000-strong Arakan Army (AA) in Rakhine state, one of Myanmar's most powerful rebel armies, which has killed hundreds of Tatmadaw soldiers in recent fighting, has taken a more surprising stance. It entered into ceasefire talks with the Tatmadaw in November last year and was taken off its list of "terrorist" organizations soon after the February 1 coup.

Its leader, Twan Mrat Naing, said on April 16 at the UWSA's Panghsang headquarters that the ousted National League for Democracy government claimed that it would create a federal union with equal rights for all nationalities but failed to deliver on the promise. With that view, it's doubtful the AA will join any grand alliance between urban dissidents and ethnic armies.

Even without a unified ethnic resistance, there is still a chance that the Tatmadaw's old guard could move to break the stalemate by pressuring or even trying to overthrow Min Aung Hlaing and his top deputies before the situation deteriorates further.

The SLORC and SPDC were likewise brutal outfits and no friends of democracy, but former

junta chief and commander-in-chief Senior General Than Shwe did initiate liberal reforms that led to a more open society and vastly improved relations with the West and wider world before stepping aside in 2010.

Than Shwe is now in his late 80s and political analysts in Myanmar believe that the current chaos is hardly the kind of legacy he would want to leave behind. Whether the aging general has the wherewithal, influence or inclination to try to rein in Min Aung Hlaing is unknown, but the anarchy unleashed by his coup is clearly not in the military establishment's short or long-term interests.

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