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A Close-up View of Myanmar's Leaderless Mass Protests

Engineers, doctors and even exotic pet owners have come together in opposition to the military coup for what are now Myanmar's widest protests in three decades. We asked Crisis Group's senior adviser on Myanmar, Richard Horsey, to talk about what's happening and why.



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What was it like to be in the streets during the protests?

It's hard to describe the incredible energy. The people who join cut across all classes of society and generations, but the preponderance are really quite young, energetic people who feel their futures have been stolen. Young people in Myanmar have grown up under the past ten years of relative liberalisation, 4G connection to the world and consistent economic growth. This period has been one of the first times in the last 50 years when a generation has felt that tomorrow will be better than today. They feel that the coup has robbed them of that hope.

Another aspect perhaps not seen from the outside is how positive the energy is in the protests, the very innovative humour, people outdoing each other to have the best memes on Facebook. There's clearly been some inspiration and techniques drawn from protests in nearby Thailand and Hong Kong. But there's also a really strong element of Burmese culture present, where quick, cutting satire is a response to all kinds of things. For instance, people have been stopping their cars in the streets, pretending they've broken down, raising their bonnets and telling the police: "I don't know what's going on, since the coup my car's CDM warning light is flashing and it's breaking down all the time!" (CDM is the acronym for the civil disobedience movement.) Of course, the police started cracking down on this, and so the next day people started driving really, really slowly. When the police got wise to that, protestors did something else, almost slapstick humour. Someone bought a big bag of onions, but made sure there was a hole in the bottom. The person then went out onto an intersection and of course the onions started coming out of the bottom. And like in any market in Myanmar, everyone rushed over to help pick them up, and put them back in the bag. But of course, they kept coming back out. And soon there was a gridlock backed up for blocks. At the same time, they had a very serious objective, which was to frustrate the ability of the police to move around town and intercept other protests.



A protest in downtown Yangon with many flashing the Hunger Games three-finger salute, which has come to symbolise revolutionary defiance in neighbouring Thailand and Myanmar. 7 February 2021.
CRISISGROUP/Richard Horsey

You've been watching Myanmar and often living in the country for 25 years. Have you seen this many people on the streets

before? Are the protests unifying the population?

This is clearly the biggest, most concerted protest movement that Myanmar has seen since 1988, when huge numbers of people went onto the streets to confront military rule. On 22 February this year, there were hundreds of thousands of people on the streets in Yangon, well in excess of a million across the country. There were big rallies in dozens of provincial towns and cities, including some pretty remote places.

People all over the country want to participate in the popular rejection of the coup. While that of course includes restoring power to the victors in the November elections – the National League for Democracy (NLD) of Aung San Suu Kyi – the rejection goes far beyond that. What this coup has really done is unite the overwhelming majority of people in the country. Whether or not they supported the NLD in the elections, almost everyone can agree that they don't want the military running the country. Myanmar remains an incredibly divided society, in many different dimensions, but nobody wants to go back to the dark days of the authoritarian military past.

We should be cautious about thinking it will be easy to heal those deep divisions. But there are some signs that the protest movement is beginning to bridge some of the divides. Initially, after the coup, some ethnic armed groups and political leaders were – logically, from their perspective – positioning themselves to see what concessions they could wrest from a military with an apparently weakened hand. This was driven by a sense that in the context of mass protests, the military could less afford armed conflict in the periphery, and was in need of whatever legitimacy it could get. Some ethnic leaders have even joined the regime's new administrative structures. But I think we're seeing a shift, as the mood of the country is expressed so clearly on the streets, including big protests in areas where minority ethnic groups are concentrated. Some ethnic armed groups and ethnic political parties have now put out quite strong statements aligning themselves with the protestors. This is partly because they see which way the wind is blowing generally in terms of popular public sentiment, and partly because they are seeking greater autonomy and know that any future political deal granting it will have to be agreed to by the majority. But their attitudes reflect more than these calculations. Increasingly it's their own ethnic populations coming out on the streets. Whatever minority ethnic populations think of the NLD, they just don't want to be under military government because it's the military governments of the past that had so severely oppressed ethnic minorities.

What is the impact of the civil disobedience campaign?

The civil disobedience movement is probably having more impact on the regime than the protests. In 1988, we saw public sector workers striking and protesting, but there hasn't been this kind of broad civil disobedience movement in more recent times. During the last major instance of protests, in 2007, the movement was led by monks. Some of the people now demonstrating are civil servants, but other government staff are just not going to work or they're going to work and just not carrying out their normal functions. That is what is starting to paralyse the state. It's paralysed the banking system, even the private banks; it's paralysing the ports, transport, everything you need, in fact, to run a country.



A protester in downtown Yangon holds up a sign with a list of demands and the Hunger Games three-finger salute, which has come to symbolise revolutionary defiance in neighbouring Thailand and Myanmar. 7 February 2021. CRISISGROUP/Richard Horsey.

The military sees this and focuses most of its public messaging on urging people to get back to work, threatening them. When there have been cases of violence, it mostly hasn't been against the demonstrators singing and chanting on the streets, it's been to try to break up striking workers, including railway and port workers. We saw deadly violence against demonstrators trying to protect striking ship crews in the port in Mandalay, with at least ten demonstrators shot with live rounds, four of whom have died.

There is trouble for the military even in the capital, Naypyitaw, which they designed and built as a protest-proof city sequestered from the rest of the country. People who live there are mostly civil servants, their families and a very small number of others. There have been huge demonstrations in

Naypyidaw and that must be worrying for the generals, because that tells

them that the civil service, their own administrative staff, are against them. This type of opposition is something that symbolically they can't accept, and in terms of running the country, something they can't afford.

“It's becoming clearer by the day that the army leadership has made a huge strategic miscalculation.”

It's becoming clearer by the day that the army leadership has made a huge strategic miscalculation, and some officers may wonder if they really are all in this together. The Tatmadaw (Myanmar's military) has no history of significant institutional fissures or splits. In their professional lives, they are an indoctrinated group who are trained to believe that they are better than the rest of the population, that their role is to hold the country together. But this history of not splitting is now being tested in a way that it hasn't been in decades, perhaps ever. We should not anticipate a split, but neither should we be too confident in predicting that it won't happen.

What are the crowds' feelings towards the Myanmar military?

There is a very strong pro-NLD mood in the country. But there's an even stronger and more universal anti-military mood. It's important to say that it's not necessarily against the institution itself or the individual soldiers, the antagonism is directed against the military running the country.

Myanmar is a very different place than in 1988 or even when the last major demonstrations took place in 2007, with people now used to expressing themselves relatively openly, with a bigger middle class, and more connected to the world than ever before. The military is not as completely cocooned as it was in those times – soldiers come from normal schools, officers intermarry with the national elite – but the military nonetheless has been built up as a state within a state over decades. They have their own hospitals, their own universities, everything is a parallel structure to insulate them from the general public and weak public services. Society has changed a lot, but the military has not changed as much.

The NLD's landslide in the November 2020 elections put paid to Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing's hopes of finding a coalition of anti-NLD forces that would support him politically in his ambition to become president. He was very unhappy with the outcome and immediately began claiming there was foul play (he hasn't been able to present any evidence of that). When he staged the coup on 1 February, his script ran something like this: we will do this, it won't be popular, but we have the might, we know what we're doing, we'll bring efficient administration and we'll have no trouble shutting down demonstrations

administration and we have no trouble shutting down demonstrations. We will rally the anti-NLD forces and form a coalition to run the country. After the coup, he appointed a mix of military officers and civilians from ethnic and other non-NLD parties to the regime's State Administration Council.

Where Min Aung Hlaing miscalculated is that there's a big difference between opposing the NLD and supporting authoritarian military rule. He discovered pretty quickly that few people, even among NLD opponents, were on board with the latter.

Min Aung Hlaing is likely planning to convict Aung San Suu Kyi of a felony and dissolve the NLD as a party, which would mean the military could run a new election – they have promised to do so in a year's time – and get the result that they want. But that wouldn't solve their problem with legitimacy and public anger.

Who is leading the civil unrest?

This is a leaderless movement. It is a spontaneous reaction. The vast majority of the population is against the coup and wants to show that they are against it. Clearly there are some very intelligent, politically connected and committed people involved, but the protests and civil disobedience are not led by the NLD, or a fixed committee of people, or a labour movement, or a charismatic union leader. Instead, many different groups of people have converged on the same ideas, often in chat rooms or on Facebook.



Protesters at Sule Pagoda in downtown Yangon, Myanmar. 7 February 2021. CRISISGROUP/Richard Horsey.

What this diverse movement loses in focus and strategy, it gains in flexibility and creativity. Many participants gather by professions or pre-existing networks. You see medical staff, engineers, friendship groups, LGBT+, even owners of exotic pets or those who like to cosplay (dress up in costumes). In Mandalay, there was a big engineers' march, but it wasn't just an association of engineers bringing out its members. The call went out on Facebook for all engineers to come wearing their hard hats. As usual, volunteers watched the side of the procession, carrying string to mark the edge. But they had a problem: they had to make sure that everyone joining in was an engineer, not a provocateur or others who would be exposed as being "fake engineers". So everyone who wanted to participate was asked some simple engineering questions to pass before they were allowed to join in.

What's happening now is almost three revolutions in one. It's the NLD supporters' revolution against the taking down of the NLD government. It's also a much broader revolution against military rule and given further impetus by deep pain resulting from the economic crisis triggered by COVID-19, which cuts across party lines; the military has done the coup at the peak of the economic pain of COVID, setting a match to a lot of dry tinder. And then there is the generational revolution in a country of gerontocratic institutions mostly run by old men. It's clear that there's a new energy driving the young people on the streets, who tend to eschew party politics and talk about their futures having been stolen by the coup.

The military may be tempted to just ignore the demonstrations, wait and hope they burn themselves out. But every day that they concede the streets to the protest movement it may get bolder, stronger and gain momentum. The military may be reluctant to allow massive public displays of opposition to continue. They may be unable to abide what they no doubt view as the indignity of seeing these massive crowds chanting 'Down with Military Rule'. At a certain point, the military are likely to snap. But the problem there is that when they've tried violence up to now, it has only brought more people out onto the streets.

The military have dug an extremely deep hole for themselves. It's difficult for them to negotiate with a leaderless movement, and indeed it's hard for a leaderless movement to have a coherent strategy. But all Myanmar's demonstrators do agree on one thing: the military must leave power. So how does the military get out of this, short of brutal suppression of dissent and an extended war of attrition with the people? Even if they could turn back the clock, most people aren't going to accept a return to the previous status quo. It's hard to see this going well for anyone from here, not for the

status quo. It's hard to see this going well for anyone from here, not for the

country, not for the people, not for the economy and not for the military itself.

What can the world do?

Governments across the world grappling with how to respond face some tough dilemmas. Particularly, Western leaders understandably want to act forcefully against the coup, including by imposing sanctions. Yet the toughest sanctions in the world could not paralyse the Myanmar state in the way that these ground-level strikes are doing. It's clear that what may tip the balance is domestic factors. It's civil disobedience, rather than anything outside actors can do.

“Those governments that do not already have arms embargoes in place should impose them.”

That's not to say there isn't a role for foreign governments. It is important they take a stand, demonstrate moral clarity and make sure that they aren't part of the problem. Showing solidarity is definitely important for the protest movement, and I think that they're looking very much for that. There is a role for carefully targeted sanctions directed at the generals, their assets and some of their businesses. These types of measures would signal solidarity with the people and make clear opposition to the coup. Those governments that do not already have arms embargoes in place should impose them. If they don't, they risk, given the military's track record, being complicit in violence against peaceful protesters.

Still, sanctions against Myanmar will have a very marginal impact on the military's decisions. What we're essentially talking about here is Western sanctions – governments in the region are extremely unlikely to impose their own sanctions and it will not be possible to get such measures through the UN Security Council. The military has a long experience of surviving and circumventing tough sanctions and, besides, their economic relations are not primarily with the West. All governments must avoid imposing broad, untargeted sanctions that hurt ordinary Myanmar people – thus far, most Western leaders appear to recognise that would be counterproductive. Any changes to policies related to aid should be guided by the same principle, and a recognition that the coup and its after-effects will push huge numbers of people into poverty, increasing the need for assistance.

It's important for the outside world to recognise that domestic dynamics are driving the political developments, and think carefully about how the

... during the period of protests, and that security agencies and the population can be supported through a very difficult time. It's important to listen to the voices of the people (as in any crisis, there are many different views), show solidarity, and recognise and support the agency of the Myanmar people at this time. This means more engagement with protest leaders and other legitimate Myanmar voices to understand their views and to know what support and solidarity measures could be most useful.