



The Cost of the Coup: Myanmar Edges Toward State Collapse

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What's new? The 1 February coup has plunged Myanmar into political, social and economic turmoil. Mass protests, public- and private-sector worker strikes, and the security forces' brutal violence against the population, including the killing of at least 158 unarmed civilians on 27 March, are pushing the country toward collapse.

Why does it matter? Neither the military regime nor the popular uprising is likely to prevail soon. Nor is either likely to back down. The crisis is set to deepen, with the prospects of greater bloodshed, economic damage, humanitarian emergency and refugee flight to neighbouring countries growing in coming months.

What should be done? Getting the regime to change course will be an uphill struggle. Still, foreign actors should not recognise the junta; they should impose arms embargoes and targeted sanctions on the military and its interests. Asian and Western powers should continue working together. Donors should plan for significant humanitarian and development needs.

I. Overview

The 1 February coup d'état has triggered a mass uprising across Myanmar. The security forces have responded with brutal violence, first against demonstrators and now against the broader population, with the apparent aim of terrorising people into submission, particularly in cities. The worst so far came on 27 March, when the military killed at least 158 people. Far from quelling dissent, this approach has hardened many people's resolve to resist, including through strikes that paralyse governance and the economy, nudging Myanmar closer to state collapse. Outside actors have few good options, but the stakes are too high not to try to pull the country back from the brink. Foreign governments should pressure the regime and deny it tools of repression. They should not recognise the junta and should engage the elected government's representatives. They should impose or strengthen arms embargoes and targeted sanctions on the military and its business interests. Western and Asian powers should pursue a unified approach in urging the regime to change course so as to avert a deeper crisis that would reverberate across the region.

Since the first anti-coup demonstrations erupted in early February, the military regime has attempted to crush peaceful protests and strikes. The situation has escalated dramatically, with large numbers of battle-hardened troops deployed into

towns and cities. Establishing forward operating bases in schools, universities and hospitals, these units are terrorising the public by using the harsh tactics employed against Myanmar's insurgencies. They are shooting protesters, attacking compounds of striking public-sector workers and targeting the general population in cities like Yangon and Mandalay – unleashing night-time terror by beating, arresting and even murdering people apparently at random, while destroying or looting private property. On 27 March, when the country marks Armed Forces Day, the military held a massive parade of troops and weapons in Naypyitaw while troops across the country were shooting dead at least 158 unarmed civilians, including fourteen children. All Myanmar's neighbours (China, India, Bangladesh, Thailand and Laos) sent officials for the occasion, as did Pakistan, Russia and Vietnam.

Beyond being morally repugnant, the regime's actions risk precipitating state collapse – where the generals may control the trappings of state but be unable to impose their will on the country as a whole, maintain order, or govern and deliver services effectively. Increasing levels of violence are hardening opposition and broadening a popular consensus that a return to military rule must be prevented at all costs. The banking system is hardly functioning, transport and logistics are crippled, and ports paralysed, sending the country spiralling into economic crisis. The regime's attempts to head off a meltdown using intimidation and violence have made things worse. Efforts to force banks to reopen will fail when staff are terrified to leave home, and raids on branches that are open – to arrest unruly customers demanding their deposits – only spread panic. Threats to nationalise banks that do not comply will help precipitate the very outcome the regime wants to avoid – a run on the banks that are able to open. The generals seem unaware that they have destroyed the two most important economic commodities: trust and confidence.

The crisis could worsen fast. Market dysfunction is increasing, and prices of many staple foods have surged, with the World Food Programme warning of looming food insecurity for urban and peri-urban populations. The already fragile public health system is also breaking down: testing for COVID-19 has come to a standstill, and if the current situation continues, as seems likely, regular vaccination programs will be interrupted, as will treatments for tuberculosis and HIV patients, among others. Worse still, with some protesters now adopting more violent tactics, the emergence of urban armed resistance cannot be ruled out. Armed conflict could also escalate in the country's ethnic regions. Some ethnic armed groups may be drawn into conflict against the Myanmar army, or Tatmadaw. Others are already expanding their areas of control or pressing territorial claims against rival groups – taking advantage of a security vacuum while the military tries to assert its control over the main cities.

With most senior members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) – including President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi – in incommunicado detention since 1 February, a group of MPs-elect, the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), has come together to represent the elected government. This group, which has appointed a government in hiding led by an acting vice president and composed of several ministers and envoys, has issued numerous executive decrees, and reached out to ethnic political parties and armed groups to build anti-regime alliances. A number of Myanmar diplomats, including the country's permanent representative to the UN in New York, have pledged allegiance to the CRPH. While the opposition on the streets to the regime is largely leaderless, most involved

in it recognise the CRPH as the legitimate government. Many are calling for a new, more inclusive politics for the country that transcends previous ethnic and partisan divides and replaces the existing 2008 constitution with a genuinely federal and democratic charter.

The fast-deteriorating situation represents a significant diplomatic and security challenge for the region. The already dim prospects of a resolution to the Rohingya refugee crisis have evaporated, and the risk of state collapse accompanied by broader instability and violence could result in new refugee flows to neighbouring countries. The military regime is already becoming a diplomatic deadweight for the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), challenging the bloc's unity and consensus-based decision-making. Failure to deal effectively with this challenge will hurt both ASEAN's credibility as an institution and its diplomatic and economic relations with the West.

While outside actors have not yet shown much capacity to influence the generals, who are well accustomed to resisting international pressure, it is incumbent upon foreign governments to use the tools they have to signal that the status quo is unacceptable, impose targeted costs on the military and its economic interests, and deny the regime the instruments that it is using to brutalise its own people. At the same time, keeping open available lines of communication so outside actors can convey concerns about the deepening crisis and finding ways to keep regional and Western governments working in unison will also be important. In particular:

- ❑ Foreign governments and international institutions should avoid actions that appear to recognise the military regime as Myanmar's legitimate government, and instead engage with the CRPH and other leaders whom Myanmar's people regard as legitimate, such as ethnic (including Rohingya) leaders. They should also impose targeted sanctions on the military and its business interests.
- ❑ Countries that have not already done so should also impose strict arms embargoes, including on dual-use items that authorities can employ against protesters and technology such as surveillance equipment, potentially agreeing to a common set of voluntary rules and guidelines on blocking these transfers.
- ❑ Asian and Western powers should work together to confront the crisis, focusing on their overlapping interest in regional stability, and maintaining a united front wherever possible. Because of almost certain Russian and Chinese opposition to coercive measures, the UN Security Council is most promising as a forum for quiet diplomacy at present. Governments willing to call out the military in strong terms should do so in parallel through the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council.
- ❑ Outside actors with channels of communication with the regime – including the UN special envoy and governments in the region that enjoy privileged access – should preserve them and use them to express continuing opposition to the coup, condemn state violence and warn the junta of the present trajectory's perils. ASEAN, in particular, can play an important role, especially if diplomatic or mediation possibilities emerge in the future.

- As they review their programs to ensure their aid does not benefit the military regime, donors will need to recognise the significant levels of support that Myanmar's population will require in the coming months – and likely years – and rise to the challenge of delivering it at scale and through appropriate modalities. Humanitarian budgets and delivery mechanisms alone will not be sufficient for meeting the range of needs, which will include large-scale and long-term health, education and livelihoods support.

II. The Post-coup Political and Security Crisis

The military's 1 February coup d'état triggered massive public demonstrations across Myanmar as well as strikes by civil servants and public- and private-sector employees.¹ Having spread to most cities and towns, and even to remote rural areas, these actions have paralysed much of the country, severely affecting basic ministry functions, local administration, public hospitals, the banking system, ports, and road and rail transport, among other facilities.²

The regime may have hoped at first that the strikes and demonstrations would quickly run out of steam, as people would need to return to work after exhausting their reserves of food and cash. That may be why security forces in Yangon and elsewhere did not attempt to prevent the first anti-coup demonstrations from taking place, except in a few cases.³ The regime underestimated both people's determination to prevent a return to military rule, even if it meant personal hardship, and the strength of community support – financial and in kind – for demonstrators and striking workers.

As more and more government staff and key private-sector workers expressed their opposition to the coup by joining the strikes, and with the demonstrations showing no sign of abating, the regime soon took a harsher stance. Security forces intensified their use of violent crowd dispersal techniques (water cannons, tear gas, rubber bullets and sound grenades) and resorted as well to using battlefield weapons (assault rifles, light machine guns, sniper rifles and live grenades).⁴ A 20 February raid by soldiers and police on a Mandalay shipyard to break a strike marked a turning point. When demonstrators converged on the site to protect the workers, the security forces opened fire with live rounds, killing two people and injuring at least a

¹ See Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°166, *Responding to the Myanmar Coup*, 16 February 2021; and Richard Horsey, "A Close-up View of Myanmar's Leaderless Mass Protests", Crisis Group Commentary, 26 February 2021.

² Crisis Group interviews, businesspeople and health sector experts, Yangon, February-March 2021. See also "Nothing is moving': CDM freezes foreign trade, raising fears of shortages", *Frontier Myanmar*, 12 March 2021.

³ Naypyitaw, where the first fatal shooting of a demonstrator occurred on 9 February, was the most notable exception. Security forces shot a nineteen-year-old woman in the head. She died of her injuries on 19 February (having turned twenty while in hospital). "Woman shot last week at Myanmar protest dies", Reuters, 19 February 2021.

⁴ "Myanmar: End Lethal Force against Protesters", Human Rights Watch, 3 March 2021; "Myanmar: Vast Arsenal and Notorious Troops Deployed during Nationwide 'Killing Spree' Protest Crackdown", Amnesty International, 11 March 2021.

dozen.⁵ Further deadly crackdowns followed, with killings almost every day since.⁶ The deadliest so far was 27 March – Myanmar’s Armed Forces Day – when the military made a showy display of troops and weapons in Naypyitaw while killing at least 158 unarmed citizens across the country, including fourteen children.⁷

Facing increasing violence from the security forces, demonstrators have attempted to protect themselves with homemade shields and by constructing barricades across roads. In a few instances, protesters have targeted advancing security personnel with slingshots, fireworks and Molotov cocktails; however, most of those whom the security forces have shot were not engaging in violence.⁸

Some protesters may have also shifted to sabotage. In the Hlaingthaya industrial area of Yangon on 14 March, arsonists hit some 32 factories – many Chinese-owned or funded – after the security forces shot protesters dead; several were burned to the ground and two Chinese citizens were injured.⁹ While it is uncertain who perpetrated the attacks, protesters had publicly threatened to burn down one Chinese factory for each person killed, reflecting the widespread public view that Beijing is backing the regime.¹⁰ A Chinese state media article subsequently stated that “China won’t allow its interests to be exposed to further aggression. If the authorities cannot deliver and the chaos continues to spread, China might be forced into taking more drastic action to protect its interests”.¹¹ It is unclear what steps China would consider taking, given that it appears angry with the military for bringing about such instability but would also be unlikely to support an opposition that has adopted an anti-China stance.

The security forces are now acting with increasing brutality. Many of the protesters killed have been shot in the head, apparently by army marksmen or snipers.¹² Individuals who attempt to render first aid, or pull victims out of the line of fire, have

⁵ See “Myanmar security forces open fire on protesters, killing 2”, *The New York Times*, 21 February 2021.

⁶ At least eighteen protesters were killed by the security forces on 28 February; another 25 or more on 3 March; at least 81 on 14 March; and another 42 the following day. For detailed data, see the Myanmar Spring Revolution Fallen Stars dashboard; and the daily updates from the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma). See also “At least 18 killed in Myanmar on bloodiest day of protests against coup”, Reuters, 28 February 2021; “Myanmar: End Lethal Force against Protesters”, op. cit.; “A Yangon township reels from an assault on young lives and human decency”, Myanmar Now, 6 March 2021; “‘They are only children’: Grief, defiance on display at funerals for fallen heroes”, *Frontier Myanmar*, 9 March 2021; and “A day of tragedy and terror in Hlaing Tharyar”, *Frontier Myanmar*, 17 March 2021.

⁷ See “Cities terrorised as junta escalates lethal violence against public on Armed Forces Day”, Myanmar Now, 27 March 2021; “Troops fire at funeral as Myanmar mourns bloodiest day since coup”, Reuters, 28 March 2021; and “A nurse, an architect and a striking police officer among 169 people murdered by junta over the weekend”, Myanmar Now, 30 March 2021.

⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Myanmar journalists, Yangon, February-March 2021; “Myanmar: End Lethal Force against Protesters”, op. cit.; “Myanmar: Vast Arsenal and Notorious Troops Deployed during Nationwide ‘Killing Spree’ Protest Crackdown”, op. cit.

⁹ “Chinese workers injured in Myanmar factory attacks, China’s embassy says”, Channel News Asia, 15 March 2021.

¹⁰ See “A day of tragedy and terror in Hlaing Tharyar”, op. cit.; “As Myanmar protesters torch Chinese factories, workers are caught in spiraling crisis”, *Washington Post*, 17 March 2021.

¹¹ “The chaos game in Myanmar”, CGTN, 16 March 2021.

¹² Crisis Group interviews, Myanmar journalists and demonstrators, Yangon and Mandalay, March 2021; “Myanmar: End Lethal Force against Protesters”, op. cit.

also been shot. Security forces have beaten and killed paramedics and other first responders wearing clearly identifiable red cross symbols. They have also shot at ambulances. In one incident caught on a security camera, police stopped an ambulance in Yangon on 3 March, smashed its windows, forced the paramedics out at gunpoint, and assaulted them repeatedly with rifle butts and kicks to the head; one later died of his injuries.¹³ Video footage has also shown security forces kicking, beating or dragging protesters along the street, and sometimes summarily executing people whom they had detained.¹⁴

In addition to cracking down on demonstrations and striking workers, the security forces have unleashed a campaign of random terror at night in residential areas of Yangon and other cities and towns. Typically, truckloads of soldiers and police will converge on a neighbourhood after midnight, shouting threats, throwing sound grenades and indiscriminately firing rubber bullets and live rounds into residential buildings.¹⁵ The security forces also conduct house-to-house searches – whether in pursuit of particular people, looking for any protesters who may be hiding indoors or just to intimidate – lining up entire families, including children, on the street at gunpoint while they check IDs.¹⁶ Suspects are beaten, detained and in some cases extrajudicially executed, and private property is often destroyed or looted. Overall, security forces have detained some 2,500 people at street protests or in raids since 1 February.¹⁷

Security forces have also killed some of the volunteers manning the makeshift street barricades erected by residents to provide some protection from or advance warning of army raids.¹⁸ They also have ordered neighbours or passers-by at gunpoint to dismantle them.¹⁹ In some cases, they have also used loudspeakers to threaten to shoot everyone living on the blockaded street if residents have not removed the barrier by the next time a patrol comes by.²⁰

¹³ Myanmar Red Cross Society, Press Release 1/2021 (in Burmese), 2 March 2021; “Medics, aid volunteers become latest targets of Myanmar junta’s brutality”, Radio Free Asia, 4 March 2021; “ICRC Statement on Latest Developments in Myanmar”, International Committee of the Red Cross, 4 March 2021; “Death toll from Monday’s violence climbs to at least 20”, Myanmar Now, 17 March 2021.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Myanmar journalists and demonstrators, Yangon and Mandalay, March 2021; “Myanmar’s Sunday protest fatalities break record, total death toll exceeds 130”, *The Irrawaddy*, 15 March 2021; “Myanmar: End Lethal Force against Protesters”, op. cit. See also tweet by Wa Lone, Reuters journalist, @walone4, 2:38am, 15 March 2021.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, residents of affected Yangon neighbourhoods, other well-informed observers and journalists, Yangon, February-March 2021.

¹⁶ Ibid. See also “Soldier kills 7-year-old girl as she sits in her father’s lap during raid on Mandalay home”, Myanmar Now, 24 March 2021.

¹⁷ Figures from the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma). See the update for 14 March 2021.

¹⁸ Ibid. See also “Volunteer night guard shot dead by military”, Myanmar Now, 12 March 2021.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ See, for example, tweet by Pierre Prakash, Crisis Group Asia Program deputy director, @PrakAsia, 11:34am, 17 March 2021; tweet by The Irrawaddy, @IrrawaddyNews, 12:10pm, 17 March 2021; and tweet by Frontier Myanmar, @FrontierMM, 5:20am, 19 March 2021.

A number of detainees and bystanders have been summarily executed in the street.²¹ In one case on 13 March in Mandalay, a woman who hid fleeing student protesters in her house was shot in the head by soldiers, who then detained the students; soldiers then raided a nearby monastery where the fatally injured woman had been taken, and left with her body.²² The bodies of some detainees, including two NLD community organisers, were returned bearing signs of horrific torture; the regime claimed that some had died while attempting escape, and threatened “severe action” against anyone saying otherwise.²³

Large contingents of the military’s Light Infantry Division shock troops are now deployed in Myanmar’s main cities.²⁴ With few barracks in downtown areas, soldiers slept in their trucks at first, but since 7 March, they have set up forward operating bases in hospitals, schools, universities and monasteries.²⁵ Occupying these locations serves two purposes. First, it offers the army large compounds where it can station vehicles and equipment, as well as buildings where it can billet troops. Secondly, it neutralises locations that can serve as organising centres for the civil disobedience movement and/or as refuges for protesters.

While images of policemen joining demonstrations captured the world’s imagination in the first few days of protests, overt dissent within the security forces has remained very limited. So far, some 800 police officers, including a few from senior ranks, have resigned, joined the civil disobedience movement or left the country – either because they were unwilling to comply with orders to attack protesters or because they did not want to be associated with the police’s actions.²⁶ A group of firemen have also fled to India after refusing to turn their hoses on protesters.²⁷ The extent to which there is uneasiness or dissent in the military’s ranks over its brutal actions is unknown, but there have been very few known military desertions.²⁸ The

²¹ “Myanmar: End Lethal Force against Protesters”, op. cit.; “Myanmar: Vast Arsenal and Notorious Troops Deployed during Nationwide ‘Killing Spree’ Protest Crackdown”, op. cit.; “Soldier shoots man in head at close range as junta continues crackdown”, Myanmar Now, 15 March 2021.

²² “Days of killings and defiance in Myanmar, with neither side relenting”, *The New York Times*, 14 March 2021. See also tweet by Ro Nay San Lwin, activist, @nslwin, 9:19pm, 13 March 2021.

²³ “Outrage in Myanmar after activist allegedly tortured to death”, *The Guardian* (London), 15 March 2021; “Severe action to be taken against those who untruly describe death of U Zaw Myat Lin from ‘Suu’ vocational institute in Shwepyitha Township”, *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 13 March 2021.

²⁴ For background on the combat role of these divisions and their alleged past brutalities, see “Tip of the spear: The shock troops who expelled the Rohingya from Myanmar”, Reuters, 26 June 2018.

²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, local eyewitnesses and journalists, Yangon, March 2021. “Military deploys troops to public buildings around the country”, Myanmar Now, 8 March 2021; “Occupation of Schools by Security Forces in Myanmar is a Serious Violation of Children’s Rights”, joint statement by Save the Children, UNESCO and UNICEF, Yangon, 19 March 2021.

²⁶ Data are collated at the Myanmar Spring Revolution CDM Police dashboard. See also “Policemen, firemen among over 400 Myanmar nationals seeking shelter in India”, Reuters, 16 March 2021.

²⁷ “Policemen, firemen among over 400 Myanmar nationals seeking shelter in India”, op. cit.

²⁸ The lack of desertions should not necessarily be taken as a sign of lack of discontent in the security forces. It is not feasible for most soldiers and police to desert, as they live on bases or in military-run housing complexes with their families. In both places, security is tight and, so far, the chain of command has held. Apart from police, a few rank-and-file soldiers and one captain have also deserted. See “Myanmar army soldiers defect to KNU to side with anti-coup protesters”, Myanmar Now, 2 March 2021; “Myanmar soldiers and police flee Chin State to India with tales of violence”,

military has accepted that it has killed many demonstrators, characterising them as “rioters” and warning them on state television to learn from the deaths, saying protesters would be “shot in the head and back”.²⁹

III. Edging Toward State Collapse: Key Tipping Points

A. A Crippling Financial Crisis

The civil disobedience movement’s biggest impact on the functioning of the country has been via the banking system. Many staff at state-owned and private banks, as well as the Central Bank of Myanmar, have been on strike since shortly after the coup. Most bank branches remain shuttered and back-office functions – including payroll, interbank transfers and international payments – are barely operating. There is very little cash available through ATMs, and while mobile payment apps – widely adopted across the country in recent years – allow account-to-account transfers, in the current circumstances access to cash withdrawals via agents is severely limited.³⁰

The banking crisis is starting to have systemic impact. Businesses are unable to reliably make or receive payments, crippling domestic production, supply chains and external trade. These effects are compounded by strikes of other key workers, including customs agents, dockworkers, truck drivers and rail workers. Major container shipping companies have also suspended services to the country because the ports are paralysed by the civil disobedience movement, disrupting both essential imports and exports.³¹ Food security analyses are already showing shortages of basic commodities and higher prices, imperilling livelihoods.³²

Strikers and supporters are aware of the likely economic and humanitarian consequences of their actions and have set up informal support mechanisms to help cushion the blow to workers and their families.³³ The movement is leaderless and loosely coordinated – endorsed, but not organised or directed, by the CRPH. Similarly, support for strikers is not centralised, and would be at greater risk of disruption by the regime if it were. By deliberately prompting an economic crisis with the intention of hurting the regime and its ability to govern effectively, people have

Agence France-Presse, 17 March 2021. For the interview with the captain, see the Facebook post by Mizzima TV, 16 March 2021 (Burmese).

²⁹ See, for example, “Myanmar military junta warns protesters risk being shot in the head or back”, Associated Press, 27 March 2021.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, well-placed banking sector sources and analysts, Yangon, February–March 2021.

³¹ For details, see “‘Nothing is moving’: CDM freezes foreign trade, raising fears of shortages”, *op. cit.* Myanmar is reliant on imported refined fuel, cooking oil and pharmaceuticals, among other items. Key exports, including garments and agricultural products, rely on seaports.

³² “Myanmar’s Rural Livelihoods and Food Security are Under Threat”, press release, Livelihoods and Food Security Fund, 10 March 2021; “Rising Food and Fuel Prices a Looming Threat to the Poorest and Most Vulnerable in Myanmar”, press release, World Food Programme, 16 March 2021.

³³ See, for example, “As civil disobedience movement grows, so do efforts to shore up resistance”, Myanmar Now, 16 February 2021; and “Underground funding networks blossom in support of CDM”, *Frontier Myanmar*, 7 March 2021.

accepted that their economic interests will also suffer.³⁴ It is very unlikely that community efforts could be large and well-targeted enough to prevent the poorest and most vulnerable from being harmed, but those people – workers in Yangon’s industrial zones and ill-paid rail workers evicted from government housing – have been among the most determined participants in the strikes and demonstrations. The economic damage has been such that many may no longer have jobs to return to.

The regime has responded to the crisis by trying to end the strikes – at first by cajoling workers and now by intimidating or attacking them.³⁵ Private banks have been ordered to reopen or face severe consequences, ranging from fines to nationalisation. But no bank can force employees to work against their will, making pressure and fines on these institutions ineffective. Meanwhile, regime threats of nationalisation risk further undermining public confidence in the banks and precipitating a run on any branches that do reopen.³⁶ Attempts to end strikes have also backfired in the administration, with much of the civil service still refusing to work for the regime. The aforementioned striking rail workers, for example, are all public-sector employees.³⁷

In some cases, workers are staying home as much out of fear as defiance. In the commercial capital of Yangon, the violence and intimidation by soldiers and police has created a climate of such insecurity and fear that many people are unwilling to leave their homes, including to go to work.³⁸

Beyond the determination of the vast majority of the population not to give in to military rule, the regime’s violent tactics to end the uprising and restore a sense of normalcy are themselves precluding any possibility of that outcome. The situation looks set for a further downward spiral into a deep, prolonged financial and socio-economic crisis. That would do enormous damage to a national economy already reeling from the impact of COVID-19, but which had seen strong growth over the last decade of liberalisation, with the country’s poverty rate halved between 2005 and 2017.³⁹ The result will likely be millions of people falling back into poverty.

B. *Armed Conflict Risks*

Myanmar is home to some twenty ethnic armed groups fighting for greater rights and autonomy, as well as several hundred militias of various sizes that are loosely aligned with the Myanmar military.⁴⁰ A peace process initiated in 2011 secured bilateral ceasefires with many of the ethnic armed groups, ten of which have since signed

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, analysts and civil disobedience movement participants, Yangon, February-March 2021.

³⁵ See, for example, the numerous comments and speeches by Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing carried in the English-language state-run newspaper, the *Global New Light of Myanmar*, since the coup.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, well-placed individuals in the banking and financial sector, Yangon, February-March 2021.

³⁷ See “Police, soldiers forcibly evict more than 1,000 rail workers and their families”, *Frontier Myanmar*, 10 March 2021.

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Yangon residents and journalists, February-March 2021.

³⁹ According to UN statistics, Myanmar’s poverty rate fell from 48.2 to 24.8 per cent during this period. “Poverty in Myanmar Has Declined Substantially, but One in Four Still Poor, According to Report”, UNDP Myanmar, 27 June 2019.

⁴⁰ See Crisis Group Asia Report N°308, *Rebooting Myanmar’s Stalled Peace Process*, 19 June 2020.

a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement that provides a framework for a political solution to the conflicts. Since 2014, however, the peace process has been moribund, mired in procedural wrangles and bogged down by an apparent lack of political will – on either the military’s part or the elected NLD government’s – to make any significant concession that minorities demand.⁴¹

The coup has upended the strategic calculations of ethnic armed groups. Some are seeking to steer clear of the crisis, or even trying to engage the regime to further their own goals. Many armed groups and ethnic political leaders were deeply disappointed by the NLD government, which in their view offered few concessions at the peace table and did little to address their grievances in parliament over the last five years.⁴² Many ethnic leaders also feel that the Burman majority failed to support them when the military was carrying out abusive campaigns in ethnic areas over the years. At the same time, however, ethnic minorities have long experience of the army’s brutality and are alarmed at the prospect of a return to authoritarian military rule; there have been large anti-coup protests in several ethnic areas, and the sense that greater minority-majority solidarity may now be possible seems to be growing.⁴³

Against this backdrop, different ethnic armed groups are approaching the unfolding crisis in different ways:

- ❑ The United Wa State Army, a 20-30,000 strong, well-equipped armed group (Myanmar’s largest) with de facto autonomous control of its territories on the Chinese and Thai borders, has remained aloof from the post-coup crisis but maintained informal contacts with the Myanmar military.⁴⁴ It would likely seek a confrontation with regime forces only if its direct interests were threatened. It might be open to an agreement with the regime that would solidify its autonomous status.
- ❑ The Arakan Army, which had been fighting a brutal two-year conflict with the Tatmadaw in Rakhine State until an informal ceasefire in November 2020, is the armed group most closely engaging the military.⁴⁵ Its aim is an autonomous status for Rakhine State like the Wa’s. It sees an opportunity to further this goal at a time when the military cannot afford to be fighting on multiple fronts.⁴⁶ There has been little unrest in Rakhine State since the coup, apart from in the NLD stronghold in its far south. Rakhine political and civil society figures have accepted positions in the junta’s national and state administrative councils, and the regime revoked the Arakan Army’s terrorist designation on 11 March. This willingness to work with the regime has divided Rakhine public opinion and the community’s main political party has stated that its cooperation with the regime is contingent

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ On protests in ethnic areas, see, for example, “Nun kneels in front of police to stop Myanmar violence”, Reuters, 9 March 2021; and “KNU vows protection for Karen protesting Myanmar coup”, *Bangkok Post*, 17 February 2021. On the possibility of minority-majority solidarity, see Naw Hsa Moo and Dominique Dillabough-Lefebvre, “While Myanmar’s Cities Become Military Occupations, Conflict Persists in the Ethnic Borderlands”, Transnational Institute, 12 March 2021.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, individual with knowledge of the discussions, Thailand, March 2021.

⁴⁵ For background to the conflict, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°307, *An Avoidable War: Politics and Armed Conflict in Myanmar’s Rakhine State*, 9 June 2020; and Asia Briefing N°164, *From Elections to Ceasefire in Myanmar’s Rakhine State*, 23 December 2020.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

on added benefits for the Rakhine people.⁴⁷ On 29 March, the Arakan Army and two allied groups threatened to resume fighting the military if it continued violence against protesters.⁴⁸

- The Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) has had a de facto ceasefire with the military in Kachin State since mid-2018, though sporadic clashes between its units in northern Shan State and regime soldiers have continued over this period. Following the coup, the group informed the military that it “would not tolerate” violence against protesters in Kachin State and that it would “stand with the people” in any such confrontation.⁴⁹ Since then, the military has shot protesters in the region, and the KIO has launched attacks on Myanmar military bases; it remains unclear whether these attacks were a direct response to the violence against protesters, although some in the KIO have made the link.⁵⁰ Like other armed groups, the KIO has to strike a difficult balance between a desire to maintain its ceasefire and an imperative to stand with the Kachin population.
- The ten armed groups that have signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement were quick to condemn the coup (these do not include the United Wa State Army, the Arakan Army or the KIO). They also collectively expressed their support for the CRPH and the demonstrators, and they suspended their formal engagement with the peace process as of 20 February. There have only been informal contacts with the military’s peace negotiators since then.⁵¹ The largest of these groups, the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) and the Karen National Union (KNU) have also met separately with CRPH leaders.⁵² More than a thousand people – protest organisers, NLD MPs and civil society figures – have also sought refuge in areas under KNU and RCSS control.⁵³

⁴⁷ See “ANP describes cooperation with junta as contingent on benefits for Arakan’s people”, Development Media Group, 12 March 2021.

⁴⁸ “Myanmar’s Arakan Army, allies set to resume fight against Tatmadaw over civilian killings”, *The Irrawaddy*, 30 March 2021.

⁴⁹ “KIO vows to stand with the people if military govt resorts to violence”, Kachin News Group, 11 February 2021; statement, KIO Central Committee, 17 February 2021 (in Burmese); “KIO General Secretary La Nan: The main problem is the 2008 constitution”, Kachin News Group, 19 February 2021.

⁵⁰ See “Military clashes with KIA after ambush in Kachin state”, Myanmar Now, 12 March 2021; and “Kachin Independence Army says latest fighting is to show coup military that the KIA will not tolerate people being harmed”, *Myitkyina News Journal*, 21 March 2021 (Burmese).

⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, individuals involved in the peace process, Yangon, February-March 2021. See also “NCA-signatory EAOs discuss how to prevent further bloodshed by regime”, Myanmar Now, 12 March 2021.

⁵² See tweet by Dr. Sasa, CRPH envoy, @DrSasa22222, 9:01pm, 6 March 2021; and tweet by Nimrod Andrew, KNU representative, @NimrodAndrew, 2:24am, 6 March 2021.

⁵³ Crisis Group interviews, individuals with direct knowledge of the situation, March 2021. See also “Nearly 100 people seek refuge from military regime in RCSS territory”, Shan Herald Agency for News, 15 March 2021; and “Thailand braces as refugees from Myanmar coup flee to border regions”, Reuters, 19 March 2021.

In the long term, it is possible that the post-coup crisis could bring a new level of empathy to relations between the Burman majority and ethnic minorities, and a corresponding political realignment that could improve the prospects of a lasting settlement to Myanmar's decades-old conflicts – assuming civilian rule is restored.⁵⁴

The CRPH has made important moves in this direction. Apart from consultations with the RCSS and KNU mentioned above, on 9 March it appointed a prominent ethnic Karen politician, the ousted NLD speaker of the Upper House Mahn Win Khaing Than, as acting vice president and de facto civilian leader while President Win Myint is detained by the regime.⁵⁵ It has also announced the removal of all ethnic armed groups from the lists of terrorist organisations and unlawful associations that were in existence before the coup, and has spoken of future plans to replace the Burman-dominated military with a more diverse “federal army”.⁵⁶

In the short term, at least some ethnic armed groups could become entangled in the crisis, and violence in ethnic areas could increase as a result. The KNU is providing armed protection of demonstrations in areas where it operates, with its fighters escorting columns of protesters. Their presence has engendered tensions – though, so far, no clashes – with the Myanmar military and police. Local conflict in Kachin State could also escalate if the KIO follows through on its threat to intervene if the regime kills demonstrators in the state. Finally, with the Tatmadaw focusing its attention and resources on operations to quell urban dissent, some armed groups may take advantage of the circumstances to seek to expand their territory or to press territorial claims against rival groups – dynamics that have been visible in northern Shan State since the coup.⁵⁷

The coup could also give birth to a new type of conflict in Myanmar. The security forces' deadly crackdown on demonstrations has led more determined protesters to use weapons such as Molotov cocktails, fireworks and swords.⁵⁸ At least several hundred of these have now travelled to the territory of five different ethnic armed groups to obtain military training. Some hope to form an armed group to conduct urban warfare against the regime; others are planning to return to the cities and engage in more informal resistance and asymmetric attacks.⁵⁹ Although guns are easily available in Myanmar's conflict areas, the extent of people's capability and resources to pursue such a plan are difficult to assess with confidence at this time. Still, high levels of anger and despair may drive some down this path, raising the prospect of violent escalation in the cities.

⁵⁴ For discussion, see Ashley South, “Re-imagining Myanmar – The mother of all ‘critical junctures’”, *The Irrawaddy*, 24 February 2021; Naw Hsa Moo and Dillabough-Lefebvre, “While Myanmar's Cities Become Military Occupations, Conflict Persists in the Ethnic Borderlands”, op. cit.

⁵⁵ CRPH Notification 12/2021, 9 March 2021.

⁵⁶ CRPH Notification 14/2021, 17 March 2021. See the interview with CRPH envoy Sasa in the Facebook post by VOA Burmese News, 17 March 2021.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, analyst, Chiang Mai, Thailand, March 2021. See also “Statement on the Situations Following the Seizure of Power by the Tatmadaw”, Restoration Council of Shan State, 22 February 2021; and “Clashes persist between RCSS and combined forces of TNLA, SSPP in Namtu”, Shan Herald Agency for News, 16 March 2021.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interviews, demonstrators and journalists, Yangon and Mandalay, March 2021.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interviews, individuals involved in these activities, March 2021.

Conflict erupting on so many different fronts would send the country even further into a downward spiral, but there is no reason to believe the regime would feel it had to back down or that it was at risk of defeat. Such violence would undoubtedly stretch the Tatmadaw's capacity, but its size and firepower are vastly superior to those of its potential opponents.⁶⁰ Ethnic armed groups are well versed in guerrilla warfare and defending their upland areas, but most do not have the capability to conduct offensive operations in the lowlands.⁶¹ Given that these groups are not a united front, the regime can also cut deals with individual groups to relieve the pressure. Arms embargoes, while important, are unlikely to degrade the military's ability to fight. It manufactures most of its own light weapons and ammunition, and it retains close relations with key arms suppliers.⁶² In particular, Russia's embrace of the Myanmar military, with Deputy Defence Minister Alexander Fomin attending Armed Forces Day as a guest of honour, will have given the regime confidence that it still has the backing of important allies.

C. A Post-coup Economy: Natural Resource Rent Seeking and Illicit Economy

While the military is still struggling to consolidate its control over the country following the coup, at this point there is no indication that it has any intention of changing course. Instead, it seems bent on asserting its authority through brute force. Thus, the economic downturn is bound to get much worse as the banking system falls apart, protests and military violence cripple economic activity, foreign investors look for an exit and new investment stalls. Even in the short term, the formal economy is likely to shrink dramatically due to the financial crisis, the collapse in business confidence and state finances, and the flight of both capital and workers.

The regime will have few places to turn to attract foreign investment and bolster state finances. At first, it may have counted on Chinese support, but Beijing's displeasure with the coup and its aftermath, and the attacks on its businesses, mean that neither the Chinese state nor many Chinese companies are likely to rush to invest.⁶³ The generals are thus likely to fall back on what was the mainstay of the national economy during the last period of military rule: natural resources, including timber, natural gas, minerals, and jade and other gems.⁶⁴ Given that the state owns most natural resources, these would offer the easiest and quickest source of revenue, as well as rent-seeking opportunities for military leaders. History suggests that the state would tap the country's natural resources notwithstanding the cost to sustainable development, the environment and the welfare of the ethnic minorities in whose areas most of these resources are located.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Most well-informed analysts put the military's strength at 300-350,000 personnel. See Andrew Selth, "Strong, Fully Efficient and Modern: Myanmar's New Look Armed Forces", Griffith University Asia Institute, 2016.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interviews, analysts, Yangon and Bangkok, March 2021.

⁶² See Selth, "Strong, Fully Efficient and Modern", op. cit.

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, analysts and Chinese diplomats, January-February 2021.

⁶⁴ See Crisis Group Asia Report N°231, *Myanmar: The Politics of Economic Reform*, 27 July 2012.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Such an approach would also fit with the military's longstanding strategy of using ceasefires to manage armed conflict, employed most effectively in its 1989-1995 truces with various ethnic armed groups.⁶⁶ Instead of defeating these groups militarily or negotiating their demobilisation and disarmament, the military has for decades sought to co-opt them via ceasefire deals that allow them to continue holding arms and give them *carte blanche* to administer their areas as they see fit – including unregulated resource extraction and illicit activities such as narcotics production.⁶⁷ Given that it will likely need to continue to deploy significant numbers of troops to central parts of the country for some time to contain dissent and secure key facilities, the military has a strong incentive to reach ceasefire deals with as many armed groups as possible. As noted, the military is already in discussions with the Arakan Army and other groups.

Natural resources are just one of the many facets of Myanmar's illicit economy, which itself is estimated to be worth tens of billions of dollars per year. Apart from the illicit extraction and smuggling of jade, gems, precious metals, timber and minerals, it includes the production and trafficking of massive quantities of drugs (methamphetamine and heroin), unregulated casinos, money laundering, and human smuggling and trafficking, among other activities.⁶⁸ These illegal activities have proven to be highly resilient in the face of previous economic shocks – including COVID-19 – and have thrived regardless of the kind of government in power.⁶⁹ The post-coup political economy may provide an even more conducive environment for such illicit activities, particularly in ethnic areas: even when not complicit, the regime will be distracted by the crisis in the country's centre, armed groups and militias will have a stronger sense of impunity, and the formal economy's collapse will drive more people into the informal and illicit sectors in order to survive.

IV. A Military Exit Strategy or a Pyrrhic Victory?

Following the coup d'état, military chief Min Aung Hlaing stated that the military would remain in power for one to two years before holding new elections and transferring power to the winners.⁷⁰ His intention was apparently to remove Aung San Suu Kyi – and possibly her NLD party as a whole – from the electoral playing field, ensuring that he could fulfil his ambition to become civilian president after retiring as commander-in-chief.⁷¹

⁶⁶ See Crisis Group Asia Report N°299, *Fire and Ice: Conflict and Drugs in Myanmar's Shan State*, 8 January 2019; and "Myanmar's Illicit Economies: A Preliminary Analysis", UN Office on Drugs and Crime, February 2020.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ "Myanmar's Illicit Economies: A Preliminary Analysis", op. cit.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interviews, drug policy experts, Yangon and Bangkok, 2020-2021. Crisis Group Report, *Fire and Ice*, op. cit.

⁷⁰ See "National Defence and Security Council of Republic of the Union of Myanmar holds meeting", *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 2 February 2021. The period of one to two years derives from the constitutional provision (improperly) invoked by the military, which provides for a one-year state of emergency, extendable for a further two six-month periods (2008 constitution, section 425).

⁷¹ See Crisis Group Briefing, *Responding to the Myanmar Coup*, op. cit.

A quick exit from military rule, however, no longer appears feasible. The military's seizure of power, and its brutal treatment of the population, have created a profound national crisis that makes it unlikely the military will be able to consolidate its authority and proceed with its political program. Even if it is able to violently suppress protests and force critical government and private-sector staff back to work, it would be presiding over a country in economic, social and political turmoil. Attempting to ram through what would almost surely be sham elections in such a scenario would not offer the military a clean exit and Min Aung Hlaing the clear path to the presidency that he desires. Rather, it would create a flashpoint for renewed confrontation with the movement that the military has so pitilessly worked to crush.

With or without elections, the military's pressing ahead with violently imposing its will is likely to exacerbate conflicts, worsen state dysfunction and provoke an extended war of attrition with the population, resulting in only a Pyrrhic victory. The regime may be able to control the main levers of power, but the country could become largely ungovernable. A deep security, economic, humanitarian and health crisis would then be almost inevitable – the latter arising not only from a potential resurgence of COVID-19, but also from interrupted treatments for Myanmar's large case-load of multi-drug-resistant tuberculosis and HIV patients and from stalled vaccination programs.⁷² Refugee flows to neighbouring countries have already started, with several thousand people fleeing to India and Thailand, numbers that could dramatically increase over the next months – a prospect for which Thailand has already started making preparations following regime airstrikes on KNU targets near its border since 27 March.⁷³ The one million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh will be even less likely to be willing or able to return home.

While such a scenario of state failure is in no one's interest, little suggests the regime recognises the gravity of the situation, or that it is prepared either to change course or seek some form of negotiated outcome with its opponents in order to defuse the crisis. It still appears confident in its capacity to prevail through force – a mindset that can only fuel further violence and escalation and bring the state closer to collapse.

Both regional and Western powers have a strong interest in managing the crisis. ASEAN, in particular, faces a situation in which a member may be heading toward state collapse, with major political, security and humanitarian consequences for the bloc. Myanmar's generals are well practiced at resisting outside efforts to influence their actions, and the odds of persuading them to change course, or seek a negotiated end to the crisis, are not high.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, the humanitarian and security implications of the unravelling situation are too grave not to try. In particular:

⁷² Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian and development experts, Yangon, March 2021. Before the coup, Myanmar already had one of the weakest health systems in the region. The health system is now crippled by strikes and security forces' attacks on medical workers and occupation of hospital compounds. According to World Health Organization data, Myanmar has one of the highest incidences of drug-resistant tuberculosis globally.

⁷³ "Thailand braces as refugees from Myanmar coup flee to border regions", op. cit.; "Thousands of Karen villagers flee as military continues airstrikes", Myanmar Now, 28 March 2021.

⁷⁴ See Crisis Group Briefing, *Responding to the Myanmar Coup*, op. cit.

- ❑ Foreign governments and international institutions should not recognise the military regime and its officials as representing the Myanmar state. They should, however, engage closely with the CRPH and other representatives Myanmar's people regard as legitimate, such as ethnic leaders (including Rohingya).
- ❑ Although, as discussed below, the UN Security Council is unlikely to mandate an arms embargo or other coercive measures, governments should do so on a bilateral basis. In addition to imposing the strongest possible ban on arms and military equipment transfers, these embargoes should cover dual-use items, including technological tools of surveillance and repression. In the absence of a UN embargo, like-minded countries could also agree to a coordinated list of prohibited items and share information on their efforts to block transfers on a voluntary basis. While major arms suppliers to Myanmar such as China and Russia are very unlikely to sign on to such a moratorium, it would at least create a framework for other states to coordinate constraints on the military.
- ❑ Economic sanctions, particularly on the military and their business interests, are useful in signalling the coup's unacceptability although, as Crisis Group has previously observed, they are likely to have marginal impact on the regime and the course of events, especially as only Western countries are likely to impose them.⁷⁵ Thus, the recent U.S. and UK decisions to sanction the military's two holding companies are welcome and useful, and the EU should follow suit, but these steps are unlikely to alter regime calculations, particularly when it is facing far more devastating consequences from its own policy failures and from civil disobedience activities.
- ❑ Channels of communication with the regime should be kept open to the extent possible, including via the UN special envoy and governments in the region that enjoy privileged access to the junta, including China, Japan, India and ASEAN members. These channels may also help outside actors to identify and pursue any future openings for diplomacy and mediation. Military-to-military contacts can also be useful for non-regional powers in passing clear messages without conferring the legitimacy that could come from high-level political contacts with the regime. These channels can be used to express clear opposition to the coup, condemn subsequent state violence and warn the military that the trajectory the country is on risks catastrophic state collapse.
- ❑ In order to maximise leverage, it is crucial for Asian and Western powers to work together, including in the UN Security Council. Due to Russian and Chinese resistance, the Council is not prepared to impose coercive measures at present. But it can be a forum for quiet diplomacy. At the same time, governments willing to call out the regime's abuses can work through the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council. China and Russia should recognise that if Security Council diplomacy bears no fruit, Western states will eventually default to a harder line there, too.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

- Thanks to close personal and institutional ties with Myanmar, ASEAN has a distinct role to play in liaising with the regime, and it will be particularly important if diplomatic or mediation openings emerge. It should actively try to create space for such opportunities.⁷⁶ While the mission may be impossible if the junta demurs, the bloc is best placed to engage with the regime and enjoys uniform international support in taking the lead. ASEAN's customary non-interference in members' affairs should not inhibit a proactive role: it has, in the past, shown flexibility in interpreting that principle, its efforts need not be public and several member states will be hugely affected by the crisis. Failure to try to address the crisis would call into question the organisation's relevance, given that Myanmar is flouting its charter every day.⁷⁷ At the same time, ASEAN should avoid acting as if the regime were in any way legitimate, so as not to contradict its key Western partners' stances.⁷⁸ ASEAN's engagement with the junta should be restricted solely to efforts aimed at addressing the crisis.

- Myanmar is facing a deep economic crisis that seems poised to push millions into poverty and create huge needs for both humanitarian assistance and broader, longer-term health, education and livelihoods support.⁷⁹ These needs will occur across the country, and perhaps especially among peri-urban populations that have more limited social safety nets and less effective coping mechanisms than rural dwellers. Previous experience in Myanmar and elsewhere demonstrates that humanitarian budgets and delivery mechanisms alone cannot address such long-term needs. As donor countries rightly review their development programs to ensure that the regime is not diverting or otherwise benefiting from their funds, it is also important that they prepare to provide the significant levels of support that ordinary citizens will require. They must rise to the challenge of delivering aid at scale and through appropriate modalities – whether NGO and civil society channels, or through government systems at the local level as appropriate.

⁷⁶ Article 32 (c) of the 2007 charter allows for the group's chair to "ensure an effective and timely response to urgent issues or crisis situations affecting ASEAN, including providing its good offices and such other arrangements to immediately address these concerns".

⁷⁷ The ASEAN charter enshrines adherence to the rule of law, good governance, democratic principles, respect for fundamental freedoms, and the promotion and protection of human rights.

⁷⁸ A good example of engagement that minimises legitimacy for the regime was Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi's meeting with regime-appointed foreign minister Wunna Maung Lwin in Bangkok airport on 24 February 2021. Her readout of the "brief meeting" referred to him by name only rather than as "foreign minister", and photos showed her dressed informally and with no national flags. She also stated that she was in contact with the CRPH. Crisis Group interviews, diplomats briefed on the meeting, February 2021. See also "To do nothing is not an option": Retno", *Jakarta Post*, 24 February 2021.

⁷⁹ See Thant Myint-U, "What next for Burma?", *London Review of Books*, 18 March 2021; "Myanmar's Rural Livelihoods and Food Security are Under Threat", op. cit.; and "Rising Food and Fuel Prices a Looming Threat to the Poorest and Most Vulnerable in Myanmar", op. cit.

V. Conclusion

The Myanmar military's attempts to brutally suppress popular opposition to its 1 February coup d'état are both morally reprehensible and ineffective, only strengthening opponents' resolve and potentially leading the country toward state collapse. Despite the crackdown and bloodshed, the widespread campaign of civil disobedience and demonstrations shows no sign of abating. The more violence the military employs to get people off the streets and back to work, the further out of reach its objective becomes. Deep economic crisis, food market dysfunction, rising poverty, a public health emergency and even hunger all now seem inevitable. Risks are growing of an escalation in armed conflict and a large exodus of people from the country.

The best way to avert the risk of state collapse is for the military to change course, but there is no sign that it is likely to do so, or even that the generals recognise the magnitude of the crisis they have precipitated. Outside actors need to do all they can to drive home how serious the moment is by refusing to recognise the regime's legitimacy and imposing targeted sanctions and arms embargoes. Governments with channels of communication need to impress on the generals the urgency of halting the country's descent while there is still time to do so. Asian and Western powers share an interest in a stable, functioning Myanmar and should work closely together, including at the UN Security Council. Finally, donors should be prepared for the possibility that these efforts will fail to pull Myanmar back from the brink, and that a dramatic increase in assistance will be needed to shield Myanmar's people from the further fallout of their leaders' incompetence and brutality.

Yangon/Brussels, 1 April 2021

Appendix A: Map of Myanmar



International Crisis Group/KO/Dec 2015. Based on UN map no. 4168 Rev. 3 (June 2012).



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