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## Assessing the Myanmar Junta's Grip on Power

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### SYNOPSIS

*Although rebel groups in Myanmar have made considerable gains on the battlefield, they face significant obstacles challenging the military junta.*

### COMMENTARY

February 2024 marks three years since Myanmar's armed forces (Tatmadaw), led by Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, seized power from Aung San Su Kyii's democratically elected government. However, the nominal government that the Tatmadaw set up, the State Administrative Council (SAC), is ironically at its weakest.

The SAC has been facing [unprecedented challenges on the battlefield](#) since the Three Brotherhood Alliance (TBA), consisting of the Arakan Army (AA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), launched a major military offensive dubbed "[Operation 1027](#)" in northern Shan State in October 2023. The offensive [toppled the military](#) in at least 17 towns in northern Shan State and resulted in the surrender of thousands of rank-and-file soldiers and several senior officers.

In November 2023, a coalition of Karenni ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) launched a separate offensive in Kayah (Karenni) State, named "[Operation 1111](#)", while the AA, in apparent solidarity with the TBA and Karenni forces, attacked several [military posts in Rakhine State](#), with similar success. The Tatmadaw is also struggling against offensives in the [Chin](#), [Kachin](#) and [Mon](#) states as various People's Defence Forces (PDFs) – the armed units of the National Unity Government (NUG), formed by the

ousted government – operating in Tanintharyi Region announced the formation of the [Southern Brothers Army](#).

The territory under the nominal control of the SAC has shrunk to Myanmar's heavily populated and economically important heartland – a corridor running from Mandalay in the north, through the capital, Naypyitaw, to Yangon in the south. The EAOs and PDFs have expanded their [control over seven of Myanmar's states](#) – Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Mon, Rakhine and Shan – as well as parts of Bago, Magway, Mandalay, Sagaing, and Tanintharyi. Rebel groups have also wrested some [control of major roadways](#) to Myanmar's neighbours, Bangladesh, China, India, and Thailand.



Myanmar Armed Forces Day, 2021. Myanmar's armed forces (Tatmadaw) and the nominal State Administrative Council (SAC), led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, have been facing an onslaught of attacks in late 2023 by various rebel groups. The offensives launched by these rebel groups have made such significant gains on the battlefield that observers raise the possibility of the regime potentially collapsing. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

These battlefield setbacks are perhaps the most serious to a central government in Myanmar since the country's independence in 1948. They have prompted a series of observations that the junta is "[mortally wounded](#)" and at a "[tipping point](#)". For the first time in a while, there are suggestions that [splits may have emerged in the junta](#), with the [Council on Foreign Relations](#) and the [Washington Post](#) raising the possibility of the regime collapsing.

What could lead to a regime collapse in Myanmar? How do we assess the solidity of the junta and its grip on political power?

### **How Could the Junta Collapse?**

Battlefield losses may lead to regime instability and increase the likelihood of regime breakdown. When a government experiences frontline defeats, it incurs several costs.

Defeats on the battlefield reveal the Tatmadaw's weaknesses and may prompt future rebel assaults, focused on the military's limitations, and lead to even greater losses. These setbacks have resulted in the [loss of morale and military cohesion](#) and

increased the propensity for further desertions and defections. Since Operation 1027 began, more than 4,000 soldiers are estimated to have [defected or surrendered](#), adding to the 14,000 military personnel who defected after the 2021 coup.

As casualties and defections rise, the government will be compelled to recruit more soldiers from the population to address the manpower shortfall. Military drafts are politically problematic and more so if the government is fighting an unpopular war. We see the beginnings of such a [political fallout](#) in Myanmar, with the recent [enforcement of military service](#) for up to two years for all men aged 18 to 35 and women aged 18 to 27.

Wars lead to economic disruptions, with citizens bearing the brunt. Myanmar's economy has been "[permanently scarred](#)" from its armed conflicts, the [COVID-19 pandemic disruptions, and the withdrawal of foreign investment since the 2021 coup](#).

Companies formed by [military conglomerates and their families](#) rely on a politically stable and internationally open environment to conduct business. Many such companies – including the Tatmadaw's two conglomerates, the Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL) and Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC) – are joint ventures with international corporations. Because conflict curtails business activity, destroys infrastructure, and disrupts trade, [Myanmar's elite economic interests](#) have suffered.

Cumulatively, these challenge the SAC's ability to continue ruling and add to the political pressures for a government already considered [illegitimate domestically and internationally](#).

### **Why Could the Junta Stay in Power?**

Battlefield losses and territorial gains by opposing forces are not synonymous with the collapse of a government. Governments break down when the ruling arrangements among the political elites rupture. In [The Politics of Authoritarian Rule](#), Milan Svobik observes that most authoritarian governments break down because of infighting among regime insiders. Such a breakdown could occur in Myanmar when the financial and political deals that bind the senior officers together fail and when these officers find it more favourable to leave the junta.

However, the [Tatmadaw is remarkably resilient](#) and has demonstrated a dogged ability to renew itself across generations. It has survived despite significant long-standing international pressures and domestic challenges.

The Tatmadaw is underpinned by an [institutionalised system](#) for the disbursement of spoils. While there may be individual or factional interests, the military leadership has been able to manage the ambitions of its higher echelon officers and generate a collective endeavour – the belief that the senior generals' interests are best served if they remain within the regime.

The military is self-contained and self-reliant and has developed a long-standing [organisational culture](#) that advances "an abiding sense of the wrongs perpetrated against Burma" and "the myth of an almost superhuman dedication necessary to

preserve the nation against over-whelming odds”. The Tatmadaw believes it must do “whatever it takes” to fulfil its self-appointed task of “safeguarding” the nation from all its enemies.

A lucrative incentive structure of promotions, official positions, and retirement benefits keeps the officer corps tied to the junta. Myanmar’s opening to foreign investments provided opportunities for [military officials to broker business deals and access non-budgetary sources of funding](#). Being in the Tatmadaw has become a stepping-stone for personal wealth. While there are internal tensions, there has been [no sign of a breakdown](#) in discipline, mutiny in a major combat unit, or irreconcilable differences that point to the junta’s imminent collapse.

Although the surest way to achieve a regime breakdown is an [outright military victory](#) for the EAOs and PDFs, there are many challenges that the latter face in achieving this.

First, increasing frontline losses for the Tatmadaw could prompt it to intensify its counteroffensives. Min Aung Hlaing has intimated that the military would do “[whatever it takes to return the state to stability](#)” amid the advances by the EAOs and PDFs. The junta has also [extended emergency rule](#) in Myanmar for another six months.

Since the start of Operation 1027, the Tatmadaw has increased its tempo of airstrikes, many harming civilians. The [UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) has documented over 554 civilian deaths since October 2023; the number of civilians killed by the military rose to over 1,600, an increase from approximately 300 in 2022.

Second, many of the recently overrun “bases” were small ones that had been established as a [token Tatmadaw presence](#). These outposts were under-manned and, not surprisingly, vulnerable to attack. Not all military units are likely to be defeated as easily as these have been.

Despite [manpower problems](#), the military has airpower, artillery and armour, and access to economic resources that the EAOs and PDF do not. Also, the Tatmadaw has external allies – [China and Russia](#) – to support its armed campaign. Already, Beijing has put a pause to the TBA’s territorial gains by brokering a [ceasefire](#) along Myanmar’s border with China.

Third, there is a possibility that the insurgents could [overreach](#) and start [believing their own exaggerated claims](#). As the EAOs and PDFs start conducting more conventional operations by employing larger formations to capture, hold and administer territory, they will [become more vulnerable](#) to Tatmadaw counteroffensives.

Finally, it is uncertain whether the [patchwork of EAOs and PDFs](#) can unite and govern a post-Tatmadaw Myanmar. Civil wars are rarely contests between a unified rebel force and the government. Instead, they feature disparate rebel groups with multiple factions competing over leadership, territory, and resources. Binding obligations among rebel groups to share power and moderate their respective ideological positions would thus be difficult to initiate and sustain.

Myanmar's [multitude of armed rebel groups](#) have long operated autonomously. The only issue the EAOs and PDFs appear to agree on now is the removal of the Tatmadaw. However, the [gulf between them in what constitutes the end game is wide](#) – EAOs seek to liberate their homelands and set up a government of their design, while the PDFs that are linked with the NUG have ambitions of re-establishing the democratic order in the country governed by their detained former leader, Aung San Suu Kyi.

Even if Myanmar's armed groups settle their differences, the historical record of rebel groups [successfully transitioning](#) to stable governments is scant. Post-conflict societies, especially those involving ethnic mobilisation, face extensive challenges. These include agreements on a national identity or "official nationalism", post-war reconstruction and the development of administrative and public institutions to deliver public goods and services.

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