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CASE STUDY

April 2025



**The first Burmese
success stories**

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LEXICON

- **AA:** Arakan Army
- **ABS'DF:** All Burma Students' Democratic Front
- **ASEAN:** Association of Southeast Asian Nations
- **C3C:** Central Command and Coordination Committee
- **CDM:** Civil Disobedience Movement
- **CNF:** Chin National Front
- **CRPH:** Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw
- **GER:** Groupes Ethniques Résistants
- **ICWA:** Indian Council of World Affairs
- **J2C:** Joint Command and Coordination Committee
- **KIA:** Kachin Independence Army
- **KNPLF:** Karenni National People's Liberation Front
- **KNPP:** Karenni National Progressive Party
- **KNU:** Karen National Union
- **LDF:** Local Defence Forces
- **MNDAA:** Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army
- **NLD:** National League for Democracy
- **NDAA:** National Defense Authorization Act
- **NUCC:** National Unity Consultative Council
- **NUG:** National Unity Government
- **PaKhaPha/PDT:** People's Defence Teams
- **PDF:** People's Defense Forces
- **SAC:** State Administrative Council
- **Tatmadaw:** Burmese Army
- **TNLA:** Ta'ang National Liberation Army
- **EU:** European Union
- **UN:** United Nations
- **USA:** United States of America

INTRODUCTION

Shaped as a Westphalian nation-state during nearly a century of British colonisation, Burma is a mosaic of ethnicities with distinct cultures. During colonisation, the Barmars, the majority ethnic group, were directly administered by the British Crown, while ethnic minorities such as the Shan, Chin, Kachin, Arakan, Mon, Karen and Karenni enjoyed relative autonomy. These administrative distinctions heightened tensions which, once independence was achieved in 1948, crystallised into sharp oppositions.

The 1962 coup led by General Ne Win plunged the country into a series of repressive military regimes. This cycle of authoritarianism persisted until the Saffron Revolution in 2007, a significant protest but insufficient to dismantle military rule for good. Although the 2008 Constitution promised some reforms, it also guaranteed the army a quarter of parliamentary seats and control of key ministries, preventing any real transition to a federal system and keeping the ethnic question at an impasse.

The semi-democratic election of 2010 was a step forward, with the release of political prisoners and ceasefire agreements signed with ethnic resistance groups. The period 2010-2016 was marked by significant reforms: opening up of the media, legalisation of trade unions, the fight against corruption and progress in peace negotiations.

The 2016 elections confirmed this trend, allowing a civilian government led by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi to take the reins of power for the first time since the country's independence. However, this momentum was brutally interrupted by the military coup of 1 February 2021, which established an authoritarian regime under the aegis of the State Administrative Council (SAC), returning to the practices of violent repression and annihilating previous advances after overthrowing the democratically elected government of the National League for Democracy (NLD).

However, over the past year, the military junta in Burma seems to have gone through a phase of significant weakening. This weakening is manifesting itself on several fronts - military, economic and diplomatic - making it possible to make an initial assessment of the advances made by the opposition, organised mainly around the National Unity Government (NUG), the opposition government formed in response to the army's seizure of power.

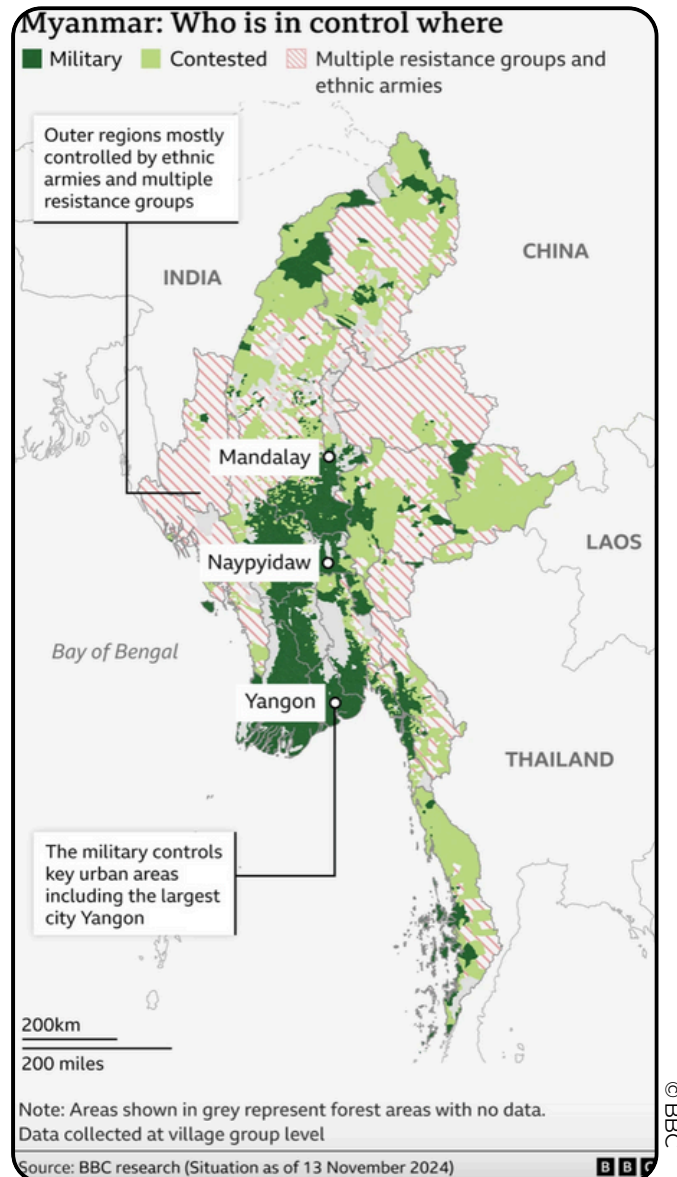
The Ethnic Resistance Groups (ERGs), historically present in the country and in opposition to the central government, had signed ceasefire agreements during Burma's democratisation phase. However, in the face of increased repression by the junta, ERGs such as the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Arakan Army (AA)¹ have taken up the

¹ These four GERs have, at times, enjoyed prosperous relations with the ruling junta and their turn towards the pro-democracy movement is an important marker in the Burmese context.

hostilities and made significant inroads to the point where it now controls around two-thirds of Burmese territory, revealing the Tatmadaw's² operational weaknesses. Despite its capacity for repression, the junta is now faced with tenacious resistance and an increasingly fragile situation.

This study explores the causes of this weakening and the strategies that have enabled the opposition to gradually assert itself.

Why and how did the junta, despite its historical strength, lose so much ground to the opposition?



2 Name of the Burmese army

I. THE FORMATION OF AN OPPOSITION

1 - Le National Unity Government, ses People's Defence Force et le Civil Disobedience Movement

From the day after the *coup d'état* on 1 February 2021, healthcare workers were in the vanguard of the protest against the junta. By refusing to go to their place of work, they marked the first act of civil disobedience in opposition to the military's return to power. Under the impetus of the leaders of the National League for Democracy (NLD),³ the Burmese population was called upon to take part in peaceful demonstrations, reminiscent of Mahatma Gandhi's Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM).

The slogans 'CDM' and 'Don't go to office, break away' quickly gained momentum in the streets. However, violent repression was not long in coming: 'At least 252 attacks were carried out against health workers and medical facilities, resulting in 25 deaths by 31 July 2021'. In 2 months of demonstrations, the crackdown caused the deaths of 700 civilians, with the army firing live ammunition into the crowds.

Thinking it could suppress any hint of resistance with a climate of terror, the Tatmadaw instead fuelled a deep sense of injustice, which accelerated the formation of the People's Defence Forces (PDF). This term brings together various armed groups, including the PDF themselves, the Local Defence Forces (LDF)⁴ and the People's

Defence Teams (PaKhaPha/PDT).⁵ Their membership, estimated at between 65,000 and 100,000, represents a growing force of armed protest.

On 5 February 2021, in direct response to the coup, the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) was formed by NLD MPs to ensure the continuity of parliamentary business. This initiative led, on 16 April 2021, to the creation of the NUG, which established itself as a parallel government, initially in exile, capable of coordinating the opposition.

The NUG, made up of former elected representatives from 2020, was initially criticised for its lack of ethnic and community representation. In November 2023, Aung Kyaw Moe,⁶ a figure from the Rohingya community, was appointed to the NUG, reinforcing the government's diversity and legitimacy.

To finance its operations, the NUG introduced the 'Spring's lottery', equivalent to revolutionary treasury bonds, facilitated by digital channels such as KBZ Pay, the country's main mobile payment system. The NUG has even developed alternatives such as NUG Pay⁷ and the Spring Development Bank, an offshore crypto-bank, although the success of these initiatives has varied.

³ Pro-democracy party in power, embodied by Nobel Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, during the democratic interlude between 2016 and 2021.

⁴ Local militias that operate autonomously and often pursue their own missions, distinct from those of the NUGs.

⁵ The PDT are localised guerrilla units, trained for local defence and security purposes.

⁶ Deputy Minister for Human Rights.

⁷ The system – NUGPay facilitated donations from abroad, but its use inside Burma was limited by frequent internet cuts and severe sanctions for possession of the application.

NUG's legitimacy is based on an ambitious political project: the formation of the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), bringing together various ethnic groups to envisage a future democratic federation. Although the NUCC encountered numerous obstacles, renewed discussions took place in August 2024 to make progress on a draft constitution, which is still under construction.

However, this progress would not have been possible without the support of the GER, who, alongside the PDF, the NUG and the CDM, which is predominantly Bamar (the majority ethnic group in Burma), form the backbone of the resistance.

2- Essential support from ethnic resistance groups

The existence of the GERs in Burma dates back to independence, when they took up arms against the central government, which was dominated by the Bamars and associated with Buddhism. However, some historical GERs have modified their independence doctrine over the decades. A striking example is that of the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), which has been active since 1957 and which, from the end of the 2000s, abandoned its independence ambitions to embrace the cause of a federal democracy.

Furthermore, the TNLA and the KIA, which were previously more conciliatory towards the Tatmadaw, were positively affected by the period of the democratic parenthesis. This led them to actively support the NUG and its PDFs after the coup.

The coup also led to the emergence of unprecedented coordination between the new

Bamar (NUG, PDF and CDM) and the GER: the PDF operate under the supervision of the Central Command and Coordination Committee (C3C), a joint structure created by the NUG in October 2021, bringing together the NUG and its allies, notably the KIA, the KNPP, the Chin National Front (CNF) and the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABS'DF). At the same time, discussions with the Karen National Union (KNU), which is not a member of the C3C, led to the formation of the J2C, responsible for coordinating operations in the south-east zone under KNU influence. Although the C3C and the J2C remain separate entities, the NUG is the central hub.

The internal divisions within the ethnic communities, once deep-rooted, are tending to fade. In the south-east, the KNPP has seen the Karenni National People's Liberation Front (KNPLF), once an ally of the junta, join the ranks of the opposition. Similarly, in the west, the CNF and its historic rival, the Chin Brotherhood, have succeeded in concluding a mutual recognition agreement in support of the resistance.

3- Coordination as the key to strengthening military and intelligence capabilities

Since the start of Operation 1027, launched on 27 October 2023 by the Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BA), SAC has suffered significant operational losses. And the renewal of this offensive, which began on 25 June 2024, has enabled further progress to be made, marked by close and improved coordination with the NUG.

It is also this effective coordination between the various players in the resistance that has

8 GER alliance supported by PDFs, bringing together the MNDAA, the TNLA and the AA.

enabled the PDF to make progress: whether alongside the TNLA in the Mandalay region or with the KIA in the Sagaing region, the PDF have established themselves as an important element of the armed resistance forces.

The junta's inability to counter the advance of the GER is clear: the TNLA, the PDF and the MNDAA have made major territorial inroads. For the first time since Burma's independence in 1948, one of the fourteen Regional Command Headquarters (RCQ) was captured by the MNDAA, illustrating the operational superiority of the GER in the North Shan region. In addition, the PDF and the TNLA have advanced further south, to the vicinity of Mandalay, the country's second city and former royal capital. More recently, it was the AA that seized a second HQCR in Ann Township, in the south-western state of Arakan.

At the same time, the opposition has pursued an intelligent strategy of targeting the key points of the Burmese economy, a strategy that is beginning to bear fruit.

The SAC has lost control of major sites such as the Mogok ruby mines, the Tagaung nickel mine, the Singu gold mines, several oil fields in the Magway region and the Hpakant jade mines. What's more, the AA has seized not only Thandwe Township, where Ngapali, one of Burma's most popular seaside resorts, is located, but also most of the infrastructure surrounding the Chinese gas pipeline, which is crucial for China's oil imports by bypassing the Straits of Malacca, as well as for access to hydrocarbons in the Bay of Bengal.

The NUG, for its part, has set up a sophisticated and organised intelligence service, which has proved essential in its fight against the junta. With several departments, including a military intelligence branch and a counter-intelligence project called 'Watermelon', this service actively monitors the movements of the regime's army and infiltrates agents into SAC structures. The alliance between this intelligence network and the GER has enabled the NUG to solidify its positions and improve the coordination of its operations against the regime.



Vuk Valcic / SOPA Images / Sipa USA via Reuters

II. OTHER DECISIVE FACTORS

1- *Social and economic factors*

The junta, on the back foot because of the NUG's actions, is multiplying hasty decisions and strategic errors from both a military and political point of view. One of the most convincing signs of the junta's weakening was the announcement of compulsory conscription for all men aged between 18 and 35 and all women aged between 18 and 27. This measure triggered a wave of emigration by young Burmese wishing to escape forced conscription, but lacking the financial means to bribe the authorities and evade this obligation. On a symbolic level, this decision is catastrophic for the junta: it constitutes an explicit admission of its inability to maintain its armed forces in their current state.

Strategically, the NUG succeeded in turning it into a counter-productive measure, making it easier for the PDFs to recruit draft dodgers.

Since the coup d'état in February 2021, the Burmese economy has experienced a marked decline, with GDP falling by 10%. The Burmese kyat, the national currency, has lost more than half its value, and inflation is reaching alarming levels. In order to safeguard its foreign currency reserves, the junta has imposed strict

strict controls, encouraging companies to use barter methods rather than monetary transactions for international trade.

Living conditions in urban centres are deteriorating rapidly, ultimately facilitating the conditions for a large-scale popular uprising coordinated by the NUG. 'The real threat to the stability of the regime in urban areas probably comes from economic despair and falling living standards, which was one of the main factors behind the saffron revolution protests in 2007'.

2- *International advocacy*

Internationally, the NUG succeeded in demonstrating its legitimacy, gaining recognition from various international players shortly after the coup. In October 2021, the French Senate, independently of the government, publicly recognised the NUG and the CRPH as the legitimate representatives of Burma. This recognition was followed by the European Parliament, which, in December 2022, invited the NUG minister,

Aung Myo Min, to take part in official meetings. The same year, in November, the NUG was authorised to open a diplomatic representative office in Washington, DC. In December, the US House of Representatives passed a National Defense Authorization Act providing for non-military assistance to the ESMs and PDFs in Burma.

Since 2022, the United States has stepped up its efforts to support the resistance and exert greater pressure on the military junta. In December 2022, President Biden signed the BURMA Act, included in the National Defense Authorization Act 2023 (NDAA). This law imposes new mandatory sanctions against senior military officials and companies linked to the junta, particularly those active in strategic sectors such as resource extraction. The sanctions also aim to freeze assets in the United States, restrict financial transactions and limit the export of sensitive technology to Burma.

At the same time, the BURMA Act provides for an increase in humanitarian aid and financial support for the purchase of non-lethal equipment for resistance forces, such as the NUG and PDFs.

The US has also stepped up international coordination, urging the UN to step up its efforts to support democracy and human rights in Burma. It also announced new sanctions in June 2023, targeting junta-controlled banks in order to reduce the junta's financial resources. All these measures have been extended by the new Trump administration, guaranteeing continuity. At the UN, the ambassador representing Burma remains the one appointed by the former NLD democratic government.

Reappointed several times by the Presidency of the UN General Assembly following a stand-off with the junta, he continues to plead on behalf of the people of Burma.

Finally, since the coup d'état in February 2021, the European Union (EU) has adopted a series of gradual sanctions against the junta and its supporters. These measures include an arms embargo, a ban on the export of dual-use goods likely to be used for repression, and restrictions on military cooperation. In addition, the EU has frozen the assets and banned the travel of numerous military officials, members of the government and entities associated with the army. These sanctions have been extended to include private companies providing resources to the regime, as well as officials implicated in serious human rights violations. In this context, Zin Mar Aung, the NUG's Minister of Foreign Affairs, visited Brussels in December 2022, on the sidelines of the EU-ASEAN summit.

3- International challenges still to be met

The countries of the sub-region, meeting again at the ASEAN summit, have once again failed to make any concrete progress or reach any consensus on resolving the Burmese crisis.

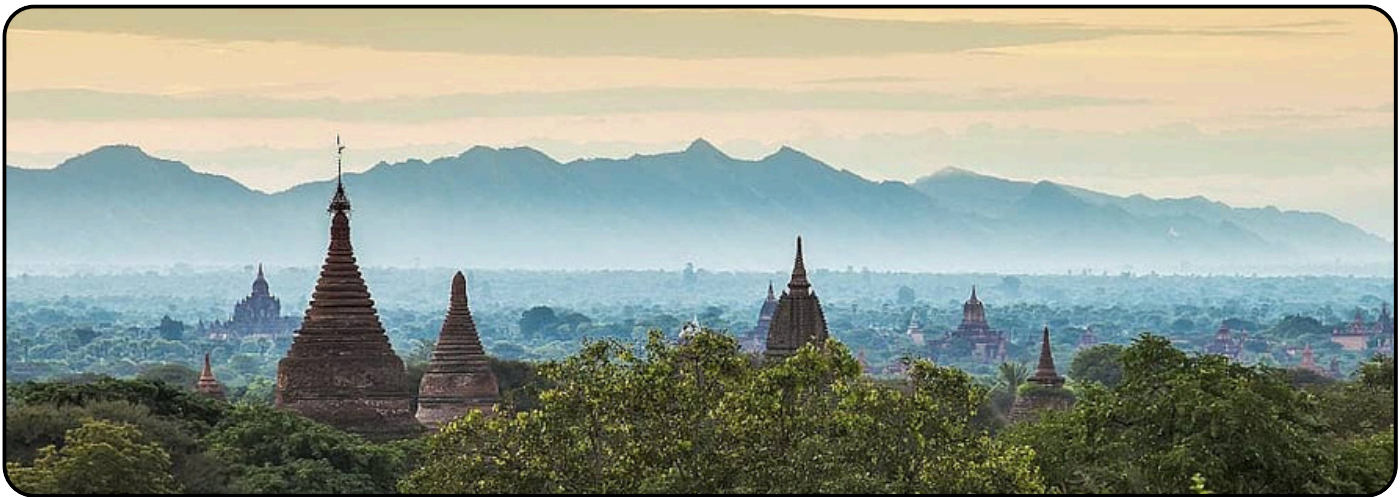
The final pillar on which the junta relies remains its ally in the north-east: China. Preferring a transparent and close relationship with the Burmese military regime, China fears the victory of an opposition that could threaten its strategic interests in the Bay of Bengal.

9 Held in Vientiane (Laos) from 6 to 11 October 2024

While China had previously presented itself as a potential mediator, it now seems to have taken a stronger stance, both to protect its interests and out of fear of growing Western influence via the NUG. With this in mind, it continues to supply the junta with munitions and military equipment.

At the same time, the junta is seeking to strengthen its ties with another undemocratic power, Russia, in particular by calling for opposition forces to be recognised as ‘terrorists’ in order to legitimise more direct military intervention.

Conversely, the NUG is in contact with Bangladesh and its new Prime Minister (Muhammad Yunus) to explore the conditions for future collaboration. On issues such as the Rohingya crisis and international mediation, Bangladesh could become an influential partner for the Burmese opposition. For its part, India seems to be relaxing its traditional policy of exclusive dialogue with the junta. Representatives of the opposition, including the NUG, have taken part in a seminar scheduled for mid-November on ‘Constitutionalism and Federalism’, organised by the Indian Council on World Affairs (ICWA), a body supported by the Indian government.



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1.

Firstly, the formation of the NUG, as the figurehead of a unified resistance, symbolised the response to the violence and oppression imposed by the Tatmadaw. Although the historical existence of GERs in Burma cannot be denied, these GERs suffered from their pluralities, their divisions both geographical (the junta is located in the heart of the country and blocked the possibilities of joining them) and ideological. However, the conjecture is no longer the same and the NUG's ability to draw on the PDFs and forge strategic alliances with the GERs has been crucial in challenging military domination. Politically, the NUG was a vector of hope and unity and helped to give this revolution democratic legitimacy on the international stage.

2.

In military terms, the adoption of a coordinated strategy, under the aegis of structures such as the C3C and the J2C, enabled the resistance forces to achieve notable successes, exposing the junta's tactical failings. The integration of sophisticated intelligence services, such as Project Watermelon, enhanced the effectiveness of the opposition, enabling it to anticipate enemy movements and plan operations more effectively.

3.

The ability of the opposition to seize **economically strategic positions from the junta**, and the loss of essential resources for the junta, illustrate the fragility of the Tatmadaw in the face of an opposition that is gaining in confidence. Instead of consolidating its position, the junta's reactions have amplified popular rejection and provided fertile ground for recruiting PDFs and creating the conditions for a full-scale uprising.

4.

The **NUG's public relations and advocacy activities** have led to diplomatic developments at both EU and US levels, illustrating the growing isolation of the junta and the NUG's increased legitimacy on the international stage. However, there is still considerable room for improvement in international aid, both in terms of intensity (insufficient funds allocated) and distribution (too dependent on the junta, which controls barely a third of the country). The regional scene, dominated by China's calculated caution and the changing policies of India and Bangladesh, shows that the regime can no longer count on unconditional support.

5.

Ultimately, the Burmese resistance offers a unique example of a multi-faceted struggle adapted to the local context, in which unity and adaptability played crucial roles. While certain strategies are difficult to transpose to other contexts, the combination of armed resistance, civil mobilisation and internationally recognised legitimacy provides a model that could inspire other liberation movements under authoritarian regimes.

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