

The Myanmar Conundrum: What Matters, and What Matters Less

Written by Alfredo Zeli

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ALFREDO ZELI, APR 23 2021

The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, also known as Burma, is a multiethnic country in Southeast Asia that is mostly known today by the international public because of little – if anything – more than two infamous events occurring therein: (1) the Muslim Rohingya crisis; and (2) the military coup d'état staged by the national armed forces (called *Tatmadaw*, as each and every writing on Myanmar needs to remind) two months ago, precisely in the morning of February 1, 2021, bundled with the declaration of the year-long state of emergency and the brutal repression of the civil unrest ensued in response and still underway.

These have sparked outrage and indignation worldwide due to their blatant disregard of human rights, democratic governance, and accountability to the international community. Few would disagree on that the despotic oppression of the people(s) of Burma must end; tyrants must be removed from power and their foreign undemocratic supporters (supposedly, the People's Republic of China) must be rebuked harshly; accordingly, action must be taken by the international community as soon as possible and with all available means to that end.

Nevertheless, upon more rigorous pondering, things unfortunately seem not to be as clear-cut as we might wish or believe. There is an even bigger problem in the country that still needs to be addressed. It is assumed in this article that the greatest overarching issue in Myanmar is the ethnic-based armed insurgency that has been ravaging the country for more than seven decades so far. Therefore, it is maintained that no invocation for a humanitarian intervention down there can be advanced soundly as long as the nature and character of the internal conflict in Myanmar is not properly considered.

The conflict pits the ethnic Bamar (or Burmese) majority, represented by the central government in Naypyidaw and defended by the *Tatmadaw*, against an extensive plethora of ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) challenging the Burmese government. On the one hand, the Burmese armed forces control an area roughly corresponding to the central plains of the country; on the other hand, the EAOs occupy and exert *de facto* sovereign and exclusive rule over the remainder of the country, that is the heavily forested mountains surrounding the central Irrawaddy river basin. This is really a war amongst the people, whose stakes range from the attainment of political autonomy and ethnic-based federalism to outright secession on the part of ethnic minorities. Opposing it there is the resolute will of the Burmese ruling majority to safeguard its own security and national survival.

The conflict has broken out since the very inception of Burma as an independent state as far back as 1948. This proves the Burmese internal conflict the longest-running civil war on earth. Recognized as such, the armed insurgency in Myanmar is also acknowledged as a “forgotten war,” for it has been largely neglected by the international public despite its unparalleled duration and brutality. Apparently enough, the victimization of the Rohingyas committed by the *Tatmadaw* (and left unaddressed by the civilian Burmese government in the face of pressures from the international community) is but a part of this broader picture, as well as atrocities against other minorities such as the Karen people in Kayin State.

Adopting an exploratory approach, this article delves into Burma's ethnic insurgency through overviewing the hallmarks of this outstanding civil war. The distinctive features of the conflict will be assessed in the next part with a

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brief review of selected theories drawn from the Social Sciences literature on civil wars. This selection is done arbitrarily among those theories developed since the end of the Cold War that can be applied to the Burmese case. Specifically, rationalist theories emphasizing the notion of the insurgency as a “rational choice” made by rebels upon material cost-benefit calculus will be mentioned. Afterwards, political accounts focusing on the power distribution among belligerents will also be discussed.

The overall purpose of this article is to suggest further research aimed at understanding the form and nature of the most compelling security issue in Myanmar being its deep-rooted internal conflict. The significance of this analysis is underscored by the recognition that (1) understanding – and acknowledging – the Burmese internal conflict is an imperative prerequisite to addressing such concerns of democratic governance and Rohingya (or whosoever) rights being now in the spotlight of international politics, and that (2) no credible or feasible solution can be devised if not once the character of Burma’s civil war has been thoroughly grasped. Hence, the argument of this article is that a holistic perspective – comprising the ethnic insurgency – should be adopted by international observers when dealing with Myanmar and the worrisome developments unfolding there. In the process, it is also a specific goal of this paper to offer a cross-sectional outline of the peculiar configuration of the strategic environment characterizing the Burmese internal conflict.

The post-Cold War Research on Civil Wars and the Burmese Case

Civil wars – a rough synonym of intra-state conflicts – and the related matters of insurgency and counterinsurgency (e.g., the use of guerrilla tactics by irregular combatants and the need to cope with them by conventional armies) started being of particular interest to political scientists toward the end of the Cold War. Given the prominence of civil wars in the post-bipolar international security environment, speculations and debates soon emerged in the 1990s and subsequent decades trying to explain the causes and factors determining the emergence and duration of intra-state conflicts. Generally speaking, the broad post-Cold War security debate points to the growing complexity of contemporary conflicts and to the empowerment of a variety of violent non-state actors which, employing sophisticated irregular tactics, are now posing serious challenges to sovereign nation-states and their conventional armies. As Mary Kaldor observes, ‘[t]he capacity of formal political institutions, primarily nation-states, to regulate violence has been eroded and we have entered an era of long-term low-level informal violence, of post-modern warfare.’ (Kaldor, 2012: 201)

Within that debate, particularly popular was the “resource curse” literature (see Ross, 2004) stressing the centrality of natural resources in a country as the primary risk factor for the inception and prosecution of intra-state violence. This is a rationalist theory, for it assumes rebels as actors whose choices (namely, the decision on whether to start the insurgency) are formulated upon a *rational* calculation of material costs and benefits. Specifically, the theory posits that the presence of strategic resources in a certain territory engenders the opportunity for potential rebels to start the armed insurgency in a bid to occupy and control the area where the resources are located and profit therefrom. Also, situations of weakened state institutional control and widespread disorder, destruction, and mayhem being typical of warfare turn out to be the propitious environment for belligerents to more freely pursue certain criminal activities such as the participation in illegal markets, whose profits are multiplied thanks to its links to the globalized economy (Kaldor, 2012). On top of that, when the sources of wealth are identified with immobile, land-tied, assets, the stakes for initiating violence are raised further. And this is exactly what happens in Myanmar – a country outstandingly rich in illegally traded natural and mineral resources such as timber, jade, amber, oil, gas, and narcotics (see Meehan, 2011).

Another popular rationalist theory addressing contemporary civil wars is offered by Herschel Grossman’s “general equilibrium model of insurrections” (1991) built upon the opportunity cost for individuals to take part in an organized violent enterprise. As it frequently happens, the spread of violence results in the country being trapped in a vicious circle where poverty feeds violence that in turn generates more poverty. This is what is called the “conflict trap,” which evidently applies to Myanmar, where the world’s lowest figures of national economic development and growth are exhibited. This *socio-economic* account still works if we disaggregate the economic figures, as suggested by Cederman and Gleditsch (2009), so as to capture locally based economic underdevelopment in specific areas of a civil war-torn country.

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As a slight variation of this rationalist approach to civil wars, Carles Boix (2003) shifts the focus on the *perceived* inequalities as a relevant factor motivating actors to participate in an organized violent activity. It follows that the unequal distribution of resources and wealth (real or perceived) raises the stakes for either those endowed with privileges to coercively defend the *status quo* and the unprivileged ones to act in order to amend their condition as they may find fit. As we can see in Myanmar, it is in the typically underdeveloped periphery of the country – that is where the greatest inequality relative to the Bamar-administered core is perceived – that the most intense organized violence takes place.

Shifting the glance away from strictly material socio-economic variables such as the relative distribution of wealth and the territory-specific presence of strategic resources, another scholarly strand focuses on the *political* dimension of civil wars. Barry Posen (1993) pointed to the anarchic power competition amongst groups within a state, spiraling and resulting in security dilemmas as the fundamental cause of escalation and prolongation of civil conflicts. Notably, as originally posited by Posen, the units in such an anarchic system are defined on an ethnic base; hence the theory perfectly fits the Burmese case, where no less than 135 discretely identifiable ethnic groups can be found, with the majority of them striving for the legitimate rights of political participation and/or self-determination, when not sheer survival.

Among these minorities, the largest are (in random order) the Shan, Chin, Kachin, Mon, Karen, Karenni, and Rakhine. EAOs such as the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the Karen National Union (KNU), the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the Arakan Army (AA), the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA-5), the Shan State Army-North (SSA-N) and -South (SSA-S), the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA-ESS), the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), the Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA), the Shanni Nationalities Army (SNA) can be listed as the most mighty ones, for they wield a standing force of one to several thousand effectives each.

With such powerful forces confronting the Tatmadaw and at times one another (example given in next paragraph), the presence of a particularly stable *balance of power* amongst belligerents – and the security dilemmas associated with it – determines the duration and development of the conflict. Well-equipped and -trained EAOs are able to individually withstand engagements with conventional Tatmadaw forces. For instance, the AA, extensively training and recruiting troops in Rakhine State (where the atrocities against Rohingyas happen), has recently proved little harmed by a massive Tatmadaw combined arms offensive deploying infantry attack, heavy artillery strikes, and tactical air support. As another example, the TNLA in northern Shan State also appears capable of resisting Tatmadaw aerial and helicopter fire combined with ground operations.

Although currently not in open conflict with the central government, an EAO that certainly deserves a special mention is the UWSA – the armed wing of the United Wa State Party (UWSP) representing the Chinese-speaking Wa ethnic group in the *de facto* independent Wa State located in eastern Shan State. Wielding a 20 to 25,000 men-strong force, heavy artillery, as well as armored vehicles supplied by China (the figure increases to up to 30,000 effectives according to Myanmar Peace Monitor, accessed on April 13, 2021), the UWSA can be fairly said to be the most powerful EAO in Myanmar. It is also one of the seventeen armed organizations that, starting since 1989, have struck bilateral ceasefire agreements with the Burmese government. The UWSA-Tatmadaw alliance was in fact devised as a strategic move aimed at joining forces against the common enemy, the SSA-S in Shan State, from which the UWSP is striving for secession and over which the Burmese government is naturally endeavoring to enforce internal sovereignty.

Still, clashes between the Tatmadaw and the UWSA have been recently reported, and the government is formally claiming sovereignty over what is the Wa State; therefore, there is reason to maintain that the relinquishment of arms by the UWSP in favor of a political unification with the Burmese government (that is a *real* peace with the Tatmadaw) is not to be expected anytime soon. This obviously applies also for all the other ceasefire groups, to say nothing about the non-ceasefire ones (Callahan, 2007). We can easily grasp from this how, in such a complex strategic environment, insurgents are constantly facing security dilemmas vis-à-vis the Tatmadaw (and other EAOs in case of EAO-versus-EAO struggles). This holds true even more compellingly in the case of those EAOs being excluded from the bilateral ceasefire agreements with the central government (e.g., the Northern Alliance, formed by the AA, TNLA,

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KIA, and MNDAA). Moreover, the very fact that EAOs form alliances adds an extra layer of complexity on top of this outstandingly composite scenario, thereby augmenting uncertainty for the players involved in the conflict.

The remarkable capabilities of major EAOs make up the case for the analysis of civil wars hinging upon the relative strengths of belligerents involved in the confrontation. This approach focuses on a political variable in this case being the ability of the state to curb the rebellion at its early stages (Fearon and Laitin, 2003). Clearly enough, this variable is crucially at play in a relatively weak state like Myanmar, whose central government has never been able to establish conditions of stability and security over its sovereign jurisdiction ever since the onset of hostilities in 1948. In such a context, indeed, the use of large-scale violence appears to be a feasible and effective means for actors to advance their interests and solve controversies.

Furthermore, Fearon and Laitin (2003) acknowledge the relevant role of the terrain, which is a significant factor we need to always consider when we analyze an insurrection. Specifically, it has been pointed out that a mountainous terrain is particularly favorable for insurrectional activities, thereby favoring the outbreak and conduction of a civil conflict. We can see this unequivocally by looking at Myanmar's EAOs, whose *de facto* sovereignty is exerted throughout the mountains stretching from the regions surrounding the central area of the Irrawaddy river basin all the way to the country's borders.

It emerges from this brief overview that an extremely complex scenario characterizes the Burmese civil conflict, which has been underway for approximately seventy years and involves a large number of politically motivated belligerents. Significant is the fact that this conflict features objective and measurable variables (elicited in this analysis) that can possibly make up an overall theory – or a set of middle-range theories – to explain it. Importantly, given the prominence of the conflict in the Southeast Asian country's political landscape, such a theory aimed at understanding the nature of warfare in Myanmar is, as a matter of fact, the only possible pathway toward a sound formulation of policies aimed at tackling problems such as ethnic violence or the emergency measures (including the country being run by men of the military) frequently deployed by the national armed forces.

In point of fact, while security and internal sovereignty are certainly not a guarantee for the democratic process to effectively take place in a country, no democratic process can be imagined in absence of security and internal sovereignty. Differently put, no democratic rule can be effectively transplanted in Burma if the conditions of permanent civil warfare and lack of internal sovereignty in the country are not tackled. And even if that could work somehow in theory, it is not even a remote possibility that such a hopeful prospect would come about in Myanmar. In order to capture this verity, let us consider the following.

What we witness in Myanmar is an asymmetric conflict, i.e., an armed confrontation in which at least one player is a non-state actor. In such a conflict, the local population plays a pivotal role in the conduction of military operations and often determines their outcome in terms of failure or success. In a classical pattern of insurgency, where insurgents are facing superior state forces in terms of organizational and logistical capabilities as well as firepower, the local populace can provide stealth and safe haven, which is key to ensure the organization's viability and survival.

Also, as Stathis Kalyvas pointed out in his classic (2006), compliance by the population in the armed struggle secures access to local intelligence, which is in turn imperative for rebels to successfully conduct operations against superior conventional state forces – and for the state forces to extract intelligence and weaken the enemy. Established that in an asymmetric confrontation the relationship between people and belligerents turns out to be a true strategic center of gravity, such policies of what we need to call “ethnic cleansing” are to be explained as a rather rational choice made by actors in the framework of the armed confrontation. It follows that, in Burma, the victimization of ethnic minority civilians (e.g., the Rohingya and the Karen, among several others) should be conceptualized as an outgrowth of the asymmetric conflict. As such, it would hardly disappear as long as the conflict persists.

As concerns the heated issue of the most recent seizure of power staged by Burmese military, the contextual motivations behind the military elite's decision to strike such a spectacular move are still unclear. That said, the main challenge for the international community now is how to convince the ruling junta to forego its grip on the national

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political process. This is absolutely no easy task because – as the theory of securitization illuminates – emergency measures can always be claimed and deployed by those in power based on the rationale that *national security* still needs to be (re)established in the country. In Burma, for approximately seven decades now, the constant and most compelling national security threat has been its ethnic armed insurgency. Since the insurgency seems not to be ending anytime soon, little can be done as of now to have the junta make amends and get back on track if not through coercive means.

Be such means unilaterally chosen and enforced by that portion of the international community so much sympathetic today towards the indigenous people in Southeast Asia crying for democracy and accountability, one must firmly bear in mind to be ready to face and get involved in a murky civil war of unparalleled complexity, where the interests of greedy warlords are tied up together with the grievances of the oppressed people striving for survival and revenge for the past injustices. In this war, at least three dozen powerful actors (many of which possessing capabilities of conventional warfare) are potentially warring against one another, start receiving substantial support from rogue foreign patrons, and augment their stakes and impetus in a prospective quest for influence and power in what can be fairly considered the most failed state on earth. In short, light-heartedly opting for this kind of solution would simply mean that the lesson drawn from the unworthy venture in Afghanistan over the last two decades has not been learnt by the coven of those eager to undergo the same experience – or a worse one – in Southeast Asia.

Conclusion: What do We Need to Consider First

Denouncing the murderous military rule in Myanmar is a legitimate and very admirable endeavor displaying a remarkable sense of justice and nobility of spirit. However, such humanitarian statements address only a tiny fraction of the broader picture of what is actually happening in Myanmar, thereby failing to capture the real, overarching, issue being also the enabling condition – not to say the primal source – of all the things in Myanmar we are feeling so uneasy with. On this account, this article pointed out that the overarching issue is the ethnic armed insurgency, which therefore needs to be addressed in the first place as the fundamental condition inexorably hampering any attempt to tackle the serious problems of undemocratic rule and the gross violations of human rights.

Burma made its appearance as an independent polity in the international stage in 1948. Soon thereafter, ethnic and political grievances caused the armed insurgency to start and escalate. Today, internal peace seems still far beyond the horizon. In this paper, we tried to explore the factors that might prove responsible for the remarkable duration of the Burmese internal conflict. We drew possible explanations from a set of selected theories found in the contemporary social scientific literature on civil wars. Each of the theories points to a specific factor determining the continuation of hostilities. As it emerged, factors such as the country's natural wealth endowment, endemic underdevelopment, socio-economic inequalities, ethnic fragmentation, and the remarkable might of several EAOs challenging the central government need to be accurately considered in an analysis of the Burmese internal conflict.

Several theories that can be possibly applied to the Burmese case can be found in the social scientific literature specialized on civil wars. Precisely because a wide range of theories is available, it was the purpose of this article to suggest the academic community to pursue a systematic research on the Burmese civil conflict. This is an imperative undertaking in light of the fact that it is in the context of this conflict that the recent worrisome developments in the country occur. On the one hand, recognizing the asymmetric nature of the conflict enables us to understand that the atrocities against ethnic minorities will always be a likely event as long as the armed insurgency is underway. On the other hand, it is hard, if not impossible, to persuade the Burmese military junta to relinquish power as long as national security is permanently threatened by a combination of multiple ethnic rebellions.

Recognizing all this, this paper has shown that a rigorous scholarly research on the ethnic conflict in Myanmar – considered in its entirety – is viable and is what is needed to be done as of now. Only then, the specific problems of the undemocratic rule and the human rights violations can be understood and hopefully addressed. As the situation in Burma has become truly dire and the people there are making “their voices heard,” if we really want to help we should first try to understand the country and the major problems affecting it. As long as we miss to do so, the Myanmar conundrum proves to be mental before anything else.

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