

Myanmar - Victory in Sight for Democracy?

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Steve now works for the Joint Peace Fund (JPF) based in Bangkok (see their website, <https://www.jointpeacefund.org/en>). The JPF has an office in Yangon and comprises Western Governments from the EU, Canada, UK, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Norway, Finland. New Zealand is considering their involvement.

The JPF has four main functions:

- 1) Grants to civil society groups in Myanmar.
- 2) Support for early warning systems, bomb shelters for civilian protection.
- 3) Technical advice to ethnic leadership groups.
- 4) At the political level, being a focal point between all the various stakeholders.

Whether democracy can be achieved in Myanmar may depend on your definition of democracy. It is a very complex situation. The democracy movement is a force to be reckoned with but the military is not yet ready to implode. However the hope for democracy is more positive than it was even a year ago. He calls it a revolution rather than a civil war. The rebels are looking for a complete system change and a sustainable peace. Both the junta and the rebels still believe they can win.

The main groups of stakeholders in the democracy movement:

Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) – the elected politicians from 2020 – effectively the former National League for Democracy.

NUCC – National Unity Consultative Council. This includes the CRPH, various other civil society groups and ethnic revolutionary organisations (ERO's).

Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAO's) are looking for autonomy in their respective areas and are not necessarily part of a combined democratic movement.

The CRPH and NUCC together formed the National Unity Government and the NUG is accountable to the NUCC.

The revolution is being fought on two fronts, military and political.

The NUG's ministry of defense is coordinating and working with the ethnic armies and this is why they are achieving better results. And with the victories they are achieving, they also need to govern those regions where they now have control. So local government structures are being developed in regions where the ethnic forces have prevailed.

This has added some other complications. For example, now some of the ethnic armies are winning so many victories over the junta forces, they need to take prisoners, and therefore need to arrange facilities for this. Until now this has not been occurring.

The Arakan Army (AA) is close to taking the entire Rakhine State, and their leaders are willing to consider allowing the Rohingya back in.

The process is largely being driven by younger people.

International Actors

Russia - The junta has lots of Russian support.

India - India sees the need to balance China. They are worried about the ethnic minorities on their borders and what might occur among them. They are allowing some aid to get across the border, but unofficially.

ASEAN – They are completely divided. There is a 5-point consensus but there is too much division among them to deliver on it. Thailand is fearful of huge numbers of refugees coming across the border.

USA – has been talking with China but that didn't get very far. The USA is very supportive of the NUG with funding and expert advice.

The State Administrative Council (SAC)

They have positioned themselves as modern day crusaders protecting a pure Myanmar. Their strategy is simple: "The democracy movement members are terrorists." They are working towards a controlled democracy where they hold the power.

There is no current hope of a compromise.

How feasible is the task for democratic reform? It's possible but there is a big lack of trust that needs to be overcome. There are a lot of good people working in a sophisticated way.

Compulsory Conscription:

"They don't need cannon fodder" which is effectively what new young conscripts would be on the front lines. What they need are the professionals and these are the kinds of people who don't volunteer for armies. A lot of these professionals are now not turning up for work because they have gone into hiding, not wanting to be picked off and conscripted. Effectively it is forced labour and therefore illegal. It has also been corrupted by bribery at the local level.

Aung San Suu Kyi is still in prison with minimal contact with the outside world.

What Kind of Federal State Might Emerge?

It is too hard to say at this moment. When it eventually occurs the transition will take years.

How are the PDF's Funded?

A combination of family, friends, overseas ex-pats. Some of the PDF's have their own businesses.

What is the Attitude of the Monks?

There are different types of monks:

- 1) Those at a high level who are basically corrupt and work closely with the military.
- 2) "Real monks" – who are very spiritual and only concern themselves with matters of the soul and spirit.
- 3) Political monks – who are concerned about people and give practical help.
- 4) Monks from poor backgrounds who are there to get fed.
- 5) Sham monks who are effectively terrorists serving the junta.

The role of New Zealand and Myanmar citizens in New Zealand?

NZ is a small country, seen as honest and may be able to act as an honest broker in some future time. But up until now, NZ has been doing what it can. It is playing an important part in the humanitarian space.