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Chapter 11

Fracturing the Monolith: Could Military Defections End the Dictatorship in Myanmar?



Terence Lee and Gerard McCarthy

Introduction

Following the Myanmar military's seizure of power on 1 February 2021, millions of people across the country took to the streets to express their fury. Incensed by the generals' nullification of the November 2020 election and the arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi and the democratic elected leaders from the National League of Democracy (NLD), people in upland and lowland areas brought the country to a standstill. A civil disobedience movement (CDM) against military dictatorship quickly emerged, the largest and most diverse seen in Myanmar since the 1988 uprising.

With Myanmar now in its third year of renewed military dictatorship, the hybrid political and economic order that had emerged between 2011 and 2021 has been obliterated. The economy, already faltering due to a pandemic-related downturn, contracted at least 18 percent in 2021 as businesses faltered and investors fled amid the junta's violent refusal to negotiate with the rising resistance.¹

The mostly urban protests of early 2021 have since morphed into escalating armed struggle against the dictatorship throughout the country. Conflict has intensified in regions that have been contested for decades such as Karen and Kachin States and has emerged in sections of the country that have not seen insurgency since the early years of independence including ethnic Bamar majority regions of Magwe, Mandalay, Sagaing and Yangon Regions.

The junta has attempted to wrest control of the domestic and international narrative about the coup while mismanaging the official response to new waves of COVID-19.

¹ World Bank (2021).

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It has attempted to limit use of social media to contain information and images of military repression by restricting domestic internet usage. Meanwhile, it has sought to normalize the coup locally and internationally by levying claims of corruption and electoral fraud against the previous National League for Democracy (NLD) government led by Aung San Suu Kyi. In response an assertive people's movement has emerged to encourage soldiers, officers and even senior ranks of the military to defect and join efforts by local People's Defence Force militias and the democratic National Unity Government to force the Tatmadaw to concede in the face of widespread armed resistance. The refusal so far of coup leaders to negotiate, even in the face of intensifying local insurgencies across the country, has only deepened the resolve of democracy activists who view the reign by terror as the beginning of a new and indefinite dictatorship.² A long and violent spiral of violence and repression looks likely in the years ahead. What might offer a path out of Myanmar's imbroglio and towards a more representative and stable mode of governance?

The Importance of Military Defection

Past episodes of mass uprising and successful transitions from dictatorial rule in Asia and the Middle East and North Africa offer several important lessons for Myanmar. Following weeks and months of popular demonstrations, the fall of presidents Ferdinand Marcos in 1986, Suharto in 1998 and Hosni Mubarak during 2011 Arab Spring, came only after the defection of senior military officers to the people's cause.³ In authoritarian regimes, the security forces wield the ultimate veto—they can move tanks into the streets and use their coercive resources to suppress outright, any popular uprising. The withdrawal of their support thus deprives the regime of the coercive apparatus on which their survival depends. As Theda Skocpol reminds us, a state can survive significant illegitimacy and “value incoherence” even when there is a widespread sense of relative deprivation among its subjects only if its coercive apparatus remains coherent and effective.⁴

If participants of mass demonstrations wish to avoid a slaughter, the armed forces' participation, or at a minimum tolerance, is crucial. The armed forces' brutal suppression of the demonstrations in Bahrain and Syria during the Arab Spring and the People's Liberation Army's forceful interventions in Tiananmen Square in 1989 are just some examples of security forces successfully intervening to prop up dictatorial rule. Authoritarian incumbents can survive popular mobilizations when security agencies employ concerted and targeted repression, demonstrating to protestors that the administration is united and capable of imposing order. The overwhelming force used against the protestors and networks that coordinated protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989, for instance, arguably fractured resistance to Chinese communist rule

² Moe (2021).

³ Lee (2014).

⁴ Skocpol (1979).

for at least a decade.⁵ On the other hand, repression that is diffused and erratic can undermine perceptions of the regime's durability while simultaneously exacerbating grievances that can sustain resistance for years and even decades.

Actively opposing autocratic regimes entails physical risks and costs which are often prohibitively high for many potential supporters. Resistance movements have historically suffered from information limitations, because of the need to remain underground and contain communication between networks of resistance. While the rise of new media in Myanmar since 2011 has opened up possibilities to share information and coordinate actions, popular movements can still have difficulty publicizing their activities and goals and thus struggle to recruit members to sustain their struggle.⁶

The absence of visible signs of opposition strength can be overcome when security forces defect. When communities observe open and collective acts of defiance their perceptions of risk may decline, loosening the constraints on participation. Critical-mass theories of collective action contend that protestors base their calculations of involvement on the likelihood of direct action being effective at a particular moment in time. Courage sparks courage, and when security forces defect it could be the material, psychological and moral impetus that sparks even greater enthusiasm and participation from the people to make renewed demands for change.⁷ It is for this reason that when security forces defect "People Power" revolts are forty-six times more likely to usher in a regime change.⁸

The defection of the senior ranks in the security also has a snowball effect as this can spark a further cascade of revolts down the chain-of-command as those who previously felt they had no options realize alternatives now exist. A revolt within the military chain-of-command could be a warning for the dictatorship's remaining lieutenants to begin thinking about their political self-preservation. It is sensible for the autocrat's remaining loyalists to get ahead of the curve by siding with the rebels and not risk getting swept away in a political convulsion. Seeking a bargain with the opposition reduces the possibility of violent reprisals, and facing ignominious ends like Nicolae Ceaușescu, Saddam Hussein, or Muammar Gaddafi.⁹

An exit ramp in Myanmar therefore depends on how politics within the military and police unfold in the face of the unprecedented pressure mounted to the junta by the protest movement and the actions of the parallel government.

The Tatmadaw, short of its elimination by foreign powers or revolution, will remain a permanent part of the state apparatus. As the civilian leaders discovered following Aung San Suu Kyi and NLD's ascension after the 2015 elections, the senior officer corps will be an integral part of the political landscape any new democratic government will have to manage in any post-authoritarian setting. Indeed, Myanmar's future is contingent on how the most senior members of the Tatmadaw

⁵ Zhao (1989).

⁶ Chenoweth & Stephan (2011).

⁷ Kurzman (1979).

⁸ Stephan & Chenoweth (2008).

⁹ Cook (2006).

can be persuaded to change their attitudes to critical questions of governance and political conflict.

Will the resolve of the civil resistance movement spark fractures within Myanmar's security apparatus, potentially dividing the military and police into hardliners and softliners? What could lead to schisms among the senior members of the officer corps, splintering the security forces into hardliners and soft-liners?

Hardliners and Softliners

In authoritarian regimes, professionalism in the armed forces and police is often subservient to personal and factional interests, such as financial and political aggrandizement, other acquisitive motives, and clientelistic allegiances. The security forces are in essence an arena for competition for economic and political privileges.¹⁰ Ensuring that these contests for material benefits do not spiral out of control and create fissures within the ruling elite is the key challenge of autocratic rule.¹¹

All authoritarian regimes, including military juntas, need to create and maintain an institutionalized system for the disbursement of spoils and the resolution of disputes. While there may be individual or factional pursuits, so long as the regime manages elite ambitions and generate a sense of collective endeavour—the belief among power holders that their interests are best served if they remain within the regime—autocratic rule is likely to endure.

Perpetuating autocratic power thus requires a set of formal and informal rules within the regime such that no individual or faction will trump another and to ensure that disagreements between elites are resolved in ways that do not threaten their collective grasp on power. When ruling elites begin experiencing the collective benefits of tamping down their own ambitions in the interest of the interests of the regime's survival, they are more likely to support its continued existence.

Accruing collective benefits thus delivers increasing “returns to power” through a self-reinforcing cycle of elite privilege and dominance. Of particular importance to the senior officer corps is how government appointments or functions are assigned, and how economic spoils of power are shared and disbursed. Also pertinent in this regard are the norms for consulting with the officer corps when making key policy decisions.

If ruling elites abrogate mechanisms to share power and its material benefits, and ignore processes for dispute resolution, individual battles and inter-factional fighting could turn into a zero-sum game in which individuals or sub-groups vie for political life or death. The flouting of mechanisms to manage inter-elite interactions also increases the allure of working outside of the intra-elite framework to prevail in power struggles. Previous defenders of the regime might become the ones who

¹⁰ Professionalism is defined as a commitment (1965).

¹¹ The discussion in this section (2014).

undermine the system if conflicts begin to be resolved outside of it, as they feel there is little prospect of success by working within it.

The disregard of rules for intra-elite governance leads to the breakdown of the collective endeavour central to maintaining autocratic stability. It splits the ruling elite into “winners” and “losers”—the beneficiaries of the individual and factional struggles and the ones who are out-of-favour from economic and political opportunities. The longer the “losers” remained excluded, the more likely they will turn into “soft-liners” and be motivated to oppose the dictatorship. “Softliners” seek alternatives to better their position vis-à-vis their competition while the “winners” become “hardliners,” who have strong reasons to protect the regime and retain their privileged positions. Because they have prevailed over their rivals, the “hardliners” face the prospect of losing everything, should autocratic rule collapse. What are the prospects of such a situation arising in Myanmar and within the Tatmadaw?

Sources of Cohesion

The Tatmadaw is not only the most powerful political institution in Myanmar but also self-contained and self-reliant. Members of the military undergo rigorous training and are exposed to intense propaganda about the need for national stability and the armed forces’ critical role in upholding the nation’s integrity. Military personnel grew up ‘learning’ about the bitter political divisions, economic hardships, criminal activities, and rural insurgencies that continue to plague the country. They are taught that it was only through the efforts of the armed forces that the Union survived. Such themes are endlessly promulgated, in the mass media and at Defence Services Museum in Naypyidaw where exhibits “speak of sacrifice, bravery, nationhood and struggle”.¹²

The twin spectres of internal division and external subjugation, like the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1992, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the 2011 Arab Spring, are held up as examples of what Myanmar could suffer. Most Tatmadaw officers thus have “an abiding sense of the wrongs perpetrated against Burma and the myth of an almost superhuman dedication necessary to preserve the nation against overwhelming odds”.¹³ Members of the armed forces believe in doing “whatever it takes” to fulfil their self-appointed task of restoring “law and order” and “safeguarding” the nation from all its enemies, armed and unarmed, domestic and foreign.¹⁴

While the police largely live in the community, rank-and-file members of the military exist in a sociological vacuum within their battalions, and they encounter few civilians.¹⁵ The Tatmadaw have their own mass media outlets, banks, educational institutions, hospitals, insurance companies, recreational facilities, social structures,

¹² Author fieldnotes (2017).

¹³ Ibid (2014).

¹⁴ Selth (2021a).

¹⁵ Seekins (2007).

and support mechanisms. Military personnel, their families and close supporters, plus retired veterans constitute a privileged caste within Myanmar society, so far removed from mainstream Burmese society that, as Martin Smith noted, it is virtually a “state within a state”.¹⁶

Military personnel are bound by a strict disciplinary code and the Tatmadaw exercises an extraordinary degree of control over the private lives of its members and their families. As servicemen and women live on military bases, they are subject to constant surveillance by their peers, their superiors and the military intelligence service, the Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs.¹⁷ Military defectors have described a cloistered, strictly controlled life where “everything is monitored,” with control extending from the colour of the longyi worn by soldiers’ wives to their social media posts and “how to decorate your home”.¹⁸

From several accounts, service personnel are also restricted in their reading and television viewing to censored news outlets, all with the aim of making the armed forces the sole focus of their lives.¹⁹ Many in the security apparatus were also exposed to recent military-curated propaganda in print and social media suggesting that the November 2020 election was rigged and that the election commission unfairly restricted campaigning by the military’s proxy, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), due to the pandemic.²⁰

The manipulation of information flows is likely a defection-prevention strategy to keep soldiers in the dark about what is happening in the country and to threaten those soldiers planning to desert. Defectors have spoken of a Facebook monitoring team within the army that warns personnel if they post political messages supporting the NLD or criticising the military, they may be arrested and denied promotions.²¹ The control of information flows co-exists with restrictions on movement—soldiers are required to stay at the army base and are only allowed to leave if they are granted permission from superiors. When the third wave of Covid-19 hit in June 2021, the senior leader further curtailed the movement of soldiers and their families, claiming that it was to prevent the spread of the virus. In fact, it was applied to prevent further defections.²²

Discipline in the armed forces is ruthlessly enforced. When orders are given, they are expected to be obeyed immediately and without question, and without thinking.²³ Recruits undergo rigorous training programs that emphasize loyalty to their comrades, their unit, their service arm, the Tatmadaw and the country. Personal feelings and personal ties are subordinate to the authority of the armed forces, as

¹⁶ Selth (2021b).

¹⁷ Selth (2021c).

¹⁸ Conrad & Bayer (2021).

¹⁹ Beech (2021).

²⁰ Potkin & McPherson (2020).

²¹ Conrad & Bayer (2021).

²² Kyed & Lynn (2021a).

²³ Tun (2009).

exercised through its senior ranks—“the Tatmadaw is the mother, the Tatmadaw is the father”.²⁴

Punishments increase in severity as the rank of the soldier involved increases, or if they leave the army as a defector—joining the opposition to the military—rather than as a deserter. Soldiers face higher risks of being persecuted and tracked down by the army in comparison to police officers and other state officials who join the CDM.²⁵ Deserters, defectors, and informers are considered “traitor maggots”.²⁶

Defying orders or disobeying your senior authorities can result in imprisonment and sometimes death. There are also consequences on military families as well. Would be defectors fear their families could be detained, tortured, or murdered. Defectors speak of family members who have been tracked and threatened by higher ranking officers.²⁷

The Tatmadaw binds its lower ranks to their superiors via an inherently violent system of patronage. The system is sustained by a military discourse of ‘one blood, one voice, and one order’, which positions subordinates as subservient bodies to their seniors, instilling complete loyalty and unquestioned obedience. These ties have led to a culture where junior soldiers are expected to please their superiors, with gifts and services to secure protection and promotions. Senior officers exploit their subordinates through arbitrary taxation, unpaid forced labor, and financial manipulation (withholding of salaries). Such practices put junior and frontline soldiers in a situation of poverty, while being used by superiors to aid their own upward mobility.²⁸

A lucrative incentive structure of promotions, official positions, special benefits, including after retirement, keeps the officer corps tied to the armed forces. The opening of the country for foreign investment in the 1990s allowed military officials to broker marketization, providing active and retired officers with business opportunities and lucrative sources of funds in retirement. Being in the Tatmadaw has thus become a stepping-stone for personal wealth, and a source of aggrandizement for family members of military officers. This was facilitated by the formation of large military conglomerates, notably including the Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL) and the Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC), which took over many socialist-era state-owned enterprises at concessionary rates and later expanded to take advantage of marketization.²⁹

Overall, the Tatmadaw has demonstrated a remarkable ability to renew itself across generations—at least until the military coup of February 2021. The military closed ranks despite domestic and international condemnation of its suppression of the 2007 Saffron Revolution and the 2017 expulsion of more than 750,000 Rohingya, highlighting its capacity to maintain cohesion in the face of enormous pressure.³⁰ The

²⁴ Thu (2020).

²⁵ Kyed & Lynn (2021b).

²⁶ “Life inside the Burma Army: SPDC deserter testimonies” (2008).

²⁷ Kyed & Lynn (2021c).

²⁸ Latt & Win (2016).

²⁹ See Gerard McCarthy (2019), Bünthe (2017).

³⁰ Callahan (2009).

military high command demonstrated an ability to think strategically, formulate and maintain the pursuit of long-term goals, and adapt them as circumstances changed.³¹ These factors should be taken seriously in assessing the likelihood of military splits. However, especially in the wake of the pressures it faces institutionally, financially and ideologically following the return to direct military rule in February 2021 it is important to remember that the Tatmadaw—like any large political institution—is not a homogenous monolith devoid of intra-organizational tensions.

Sources of Contention

Since the military's formation during the Second World War there have been several instances of serious internal disputes. Factions and cliques have emerged based on different backgrounds, different experiences, or different interests. For example, there are rivalries between graduates of the prestigious Defence Services Academy (DSA) at Pyin Oo Lwin (formerly Maymyo), the Defence Services (Army) Officer Training School (OTS) at Bahtoo and the Officer Training Course (OTC), known as Teza. Officers from OTS and OTC have often felt resentful when passed over for promotion.³² During the SLORC and SPDC period, there were tension between the “combat faction” led by Vice Senior General (Du Bo Gyoke Hmu Gyi) Maung Aye and the “intelligence faction” led by General Khin Nyunt. This rivalry culminated in 2004 when Khin Nyunt and swathes of the Intelligence Corps were arrested and charged.³³ There have also been reports of centre-periphery tensions, particularly disputes between the Tatmadaw's field commanders responsible for the Regional Military Commands, and staff officers based at Defence Headquarters.³⁴

In the current crisis, there are a range of structural, sociological, and organizational dynamics at play that could carve new cleavages within the security forces. Previously, the hierarchical structure of Myanmar's military was the main mechanism for the distribution of patronage and control of economic opportunities. However, the decade of fitful and incomplete economic and political changes between 2011 and 2021 challenged elements of this system.

First, by the time of the February 2021 coup both Tatmadaw corporations and military families were more reliant than ever on conducting business in a politically stable and internationally open environment.³⁵ After 2011, many of the businesses formed by military conglomerates and families of individual security personnel during junta rule in the 1990s and 2000s were integrated into regional and global flows of investment and trade. The military's two business conglomerates, MEC and MEHL, entered into a range of joint ventures with international companies. Since the military's return

³¹ Andrew Selth, *Myanmar's Military Mindset*, p. 23.

³² Andrew Selth, *Myanmar's Military Mindset*, p. 15.

³³ Selth (2019).

³⁴ Callahan (1999).

³⁵ McCarthy (2019).

to power many of these partnerships were reviewed and terminated in light of the brutal post-coup crackdowns, including joint ventures with multinational companies such as Kirin, Telenor, Total and Chevron.³⁶ Major international investors also cut back extractive operations, further depriving the regime of revenue.³⁷ Given that off-budget income from conglomerates is a major source of Tatmadaw financing and weapons acquisition, the coup and long-term bloody repression, domestic instability and international isolation will especially concern the younger mid-rank generation of officers as these factors will markedly undermine the organizational strength of the forces they are meant to run in the future.³⁸

Second, at a micro-level, many low and mid-rank military families rely on their own businesses, which mostly sell goods domestically, often within the local community. Since the coup a civil disobedience movement quickly expanded from protests and demonstrations into a widespread domestic boycott not just of military companies such as Myanmar Beer, the telco Mytel and military-owned banks, but also smaller businesses owned by the families of security personnel.³⁹ The combination of large-scale corporate profit loss and local-level financial pain and social shame have prompted thousands of security personnel at various ranks to reconsider their complicity and cooperation with the junta and defect to join forces aligned with the National Unity Government throughout 2021 and 2022.⁴⁰

One common response of autocratic governments facing popular resistance is to buy off key constituencies with financial rewards or business concessions. Yet the capacity of the current junta to offset the loss from domestic boycotts, foreign investor flight and international sanctions is limited by the volatility of Myanmar's financial system since the coup. Following the return to military rule there have been widespread strikes within the Central Bank and across the entire private banking sector.⁴¹ There has also been a markedly successful campaign, led initially by staff of the Internal Revenue Department, for businesses and individuals not to pay tax to the junta which has crippled public services and led to the deployment of soldiers to collect arrears.⁴² With many businesses, including military conglomerates, facing major cash-flow problems, the junta has sought to survive by printing money, dipping into reserves and brutally suppressing resistance. The economic cost of the coup and the collapse of economic and political order that it has brought about is mounting month by month, leading the Tatmadaw to use increasing brutality to suppress the expanding armed and civil resistance movements that have been spawned since the coup. As the situation continues to worsen many in the armed forces and aligned with the regime are beginning to calculate that their financial futures and the institutional

³⁶ Japan's Kirin ends Myanmar (2021).

³⁷ Smith (2021).

³⁸ McCarthy (2019).

³⁹ Walker (2021).

⁴⁰ Kyed & Lynn (2021).

⁴¹ Back to the Stone Age (2021).

⁴² Nitta (2021).

interests of the military or police no longer align with junta leader Min Aung Hlaing and the coup plotters.

The broad-based and large-scale popular resistance—as we now see in Myanmar—creates especially fertile conditions for soldiers to defect. This is amplified when the armed forces are ordered to quell civilian protesters with violent means. Violent repression on protesters not only make soldiers question the military’s legitimacy but also arouses moral concerns about their complicity in the crackdown.⁴³ Military defectors have cited the violent crackdowns and killings of civilians as an immediate motivator for deserting. They express moral concerns with being complicit in the violence, combined with a deeper concern that the violence has eroded the military’s legitimacy in society as the institution which they believe should protect the people.⁴⁴

Other defectors highlighted a deep dissatisfaction with the military’s internal treatment and exploitation (especially of lower ranks) as a reason for rebelling that goes beyond the violent crackdowns on civilians. They highlight the economic exploitation of soldiers and the corruption in the upper echelon as a source of discontent with life in the military.⁴⁵ A junior officer who defected stressed how the self-interest of the military’s Commander-in-Chief has eroded the legitimacy of the Tatmadaw:

Min Aung Hlaing gave the reason of electoral fraud [when he took power]. But he can see what the people want after his coup. He did not compromise with what the people demand. Therefore, this coup is for his own benefit.⁴⁶

Additional cracks in the edifice have also emerged with high-profile defections of Myanmar’s ambassadors and missions to the United Nations and the United Kingdom, who have publicly affiliated themselves with the National Unity Government.⁴⁷ Though the junta is far from crumbling, it is clear the coup has intensified cracks in both the military and the civil service which will only worsen over time, weakening the State Administrative Council’s grasp on power and ability to conduct a national election as planned for 2023.

Conclusion

Since the February 2021 coup, thousands of soldiers have defected and joined the CDM, along with teachers, doctors, policemen and others, to oppose military rule in Myanmar. While the number of defections is low compared to the 350,000 strong Tatmadaw, these desertions constitute a symbolic blow to the Tatmadaw’s internal coherence and legitimacy and a source of intelligence for the resistance movement.

⁴³ John (2012).

⁴⁴ Lindstaedt (2021).

⁴⁵ Kyed & Lynn (2021d).

⁴⁶ Kyed & Lynn (2021e).

⁴⁷ Nichols & Lewis (2021).

The manner and magnitude of military defectors organised themselves and aligning with the anti-coup, pro-democracy opposition is also unprecedented in Myanmar's long history of military rule. Other forms of less overt defiance and tacit resistance have also emerged among in-service personnel who have become increasingly disgruntled with the Tatmadaw.⁴⁸

It is important to note that there are no signs that defections have created significant splits in the upper echelon of the Tatmadaw or changed the military leaders' course of action. There has instead been an intensification of violence against civilians in the cities and rural areas involving clashes between the Tatmadaw people's militias and the ethnic armed organisations. The Tatmadaw appears to be fairly unified, and intent on holding onto power and waging a war against the people at all costs whilst the SAC further rigs the political system.

Over time, the situation will evolve. The Tatmadaw's loss of control over previously largely peaceful parts of the country, coupled with the worsening economic consequences of the coup at all levels, is overstressing the armed forces and placing extraordinary pressure on the junta. In the most prominent case so far of cracks in the regime the Tatmadaw's commander of North Western region was dismissed and apparently arrested in October 2021 after the junta lost significant personnel and territory to PDFs and other NUG-aligned armed groups. Rumours that the Commander had been planning to defect to the NUG are difficult to substantiate, and may reflect wishful thinking on behalf of the resistance.⁴⁹ Yet the tightening of strategies to prevent military troops from defecting do suggest that defections are viewed by the senior junta leadership as a serious threat to maintaining their grip on power. The likelihood of defections at the senior levels partly depends on how the mass movement and the NUG continue to court prospective softliners to their cause. The CDM, NUG and the diverse networks that comprise resistance in contemporary Myanmar are actively debating how they channel their efforts into a coherent political agenda and vision for the future of the country.⁵⁰ Many in the resistance want broader reforms than simply returning to the pre-coup status quo. These include the political defanging and democratization of the military and the formation of a federal democracy that adequately represents minority populations, either in a new or a radically amended constitution. Ironically, some of these demands may align with the underlying motivations of the coup. For instance, a shift to a more proportional representation electoral system for one or both of Myanmar's Houses of Parliament as has been advanced by the junta-appointed Union Election Commission since the coup could, in a genuinely contested political system, foster a more inclusive democracy that sees parties with disbursed voter bases including ethnic minority parties and the military's USDP, take more seats in Parliament than first-past-the-post electoral system which the military and its allies chose to be the basis for electoral politics between 2010 and 2020.

⁴⁸ Kyed & Lynn (2021f).

⁴⁹ Myanmar Military Detains North Western Commander for Planning to Defect: Ethnic Insurgent Sources (2021).

⁵⁰ Thant & Aung (2021).

As the economic and political fractures in the monolith of Myanmar's military worsen, the resistance movement is more likely to succeed if it is able to win over junta softliners who may be open to a different way forward. Addressing the grievances of current junta collaborators, especially Rakhine political elites who felt ignored and disrespected by Suu Kyi's government and partnered openly with the junta following the coup, will be particularly crucial. The chances of defection by collaborators such as leaders of the Rakhine political vehicle, the Arakan National Party, or the Arakan Army which entered into a ceasefire just prior to the coup, will increase as the benefits of partnership with the junta begin to be outweighed by both their reputational destruction among their grassroots and the prospective benefits they could realize for their communities or organisations in a post-junta future.

Some of the concessions offered to regime softliners to secure defection in other contexts include protections for their political future and assurances of individual and military economic interests. The shape of such concessions is up to Myanmar's resistance to determine. Yet the larger picture must be kept in mind: if the democracy movement can offer segments of the security apparatus and even current junta collaborators an agreement capable of securing defection, there may be a chance of an off-ramp emerging from the current crisis and entirely new political possibilities emerging on the horizon.

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