BERTIL LINTNER

The Golden Land Ablaze

Coups, Insurgents and the State in Myanmar

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INTRODUCTION

This is a tale of hope and despair—and how the leaders of Myanmar's military misjudged the political mood in the country when they seized power in a coup on 1 February 2021. It is also about how the international community failed to realise what really happened before and during the decade of openness which Myanmar experienced from 2011 to 2021. It was not, as many foreign pundits surmised, a 'transition to democracy'. And that was certainly not what the military meant it to be.

Decades of Western sanctions and boycotts had forced Myanmar into the arms of the Chinese, and that dependence had by the early 2000s become so grave that Myanmar military analysts began to state in internal, classified military documents that the country was in danger of losing its independence. Therefore, it had no choice but to open up to the West. But for that to succeed, certain measures had to be taken, such as the release of political prisoners and the introduction of freedom of speech, press freedom and the right to form political parties and non-governmental organisations.

After decades of stifling, direct military rule, elections were held in November 2010 and a new government was formed in March 2011. It did not seem to matter that the election, which the military's Union Solidarity and Development Party had won by a landslide, was fraudulent and that the new president, Thein Sein, was a general who had for several years been a leading member of the junta that had ruled the country since the crushing of a pro-democracy uprising in 1988. Almost overnight, Myanmar turned

from being an international pariah to the darling of the Western world. The US secretary of state Hillary Clinton, president Barack Obama, the UK prime minister David Cameron and the king of Norway all went to Myanmar to see for themselves the remarkable changes that were taking place.

But the unprecedented openness that people came to enjoy during 2011–21 did not mean that the supreme power of the military was over. The autonomous status of the military, free from any governmental interference or oversight, had been enshrined in a constitution that had been enacted after a rigged referendum in 2008 and thus before any elections were held. But when the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Aung San, Burma's independence hero who was assassinated on 19 July 1947, won not only the first really free and fair election in November 2015 but also the next election, in November 2020, the generals had had enough of pseudo-democratic theatre. They stepped in, arrested the winners of the election before the NLD and its allies could form yet another government, and the country was placed under the rule of a new junta called the State Administration Council, or SAC for short.

There were protests, and the military opened fire on the demonstrators. But that had happened before—after the initial military takeover in 1962, during unrest in the 1970s, and when a massive pro-democracy uprising was crushed in 1988—and brutal crackdowns had worked on those occasions. After a few days of indiscriminate killings, the protests had fizzled out and people had returned home. But not this time. What had happened during the decade of openness was not a transition to anything, but a transformation of Myanmar society. An entire generation had learned how to use the Internet, to communicate on social media, and to hold workshops and seminars on subjects related to democracy and civil rights.

That, in turn, gave birth to what is called Generation Z and massive opposition to the coup, first by peaceful means and then with armed struggle. The NLD and other political parties have been forced underground, while urban activists have joined forces with ethnic rebel armies such as the Karen National Union (KNU)

and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and managed to score some spectacular victories on the battlefield. As one Myanmar observer put it at the time of the coup, 'The military has messed with the wrong generation.' It is unlikely that Thein Sein and the other generals had expected this kind of development when changes were introduced after the 2010 election.

Three years later, Myanmar is still ablaze. The army, which had performed well during the civil wars which have raged in the country since independence from Britain in 1948, is, for the first time, on the defensive. The military has lost control over large parts of the country and a parallel authority called the National Unity Government (NUG), which is made up of MPs who were elected in 2020 and other pro-democracy activists, is active on the international stage.

But, so far, the anti-SAC forces are not well-equipped enough to defeat the much more heavily armed Myanmar army, which, in turn, is stretched out on too many fronts to be able to crush the resistance. And, despite assurances by many foreign, mainly Western, observers, there is no unity among the various Burman and ethnic resistance groups. This is a war that neither side can win by military means, and caught in the middle is the civilian population, which is bound to suffer the most.

Decades of conflict have turned Myanmar, or Burma, once a fairly prosperous country with a fragile but still working democratic system, into a social and economic wreck. I have written this book in order to explain the enigma of military power in Myanmar and to provide interested parties with a better understanding of the many other issues which have led to today's sad state of affairs, and so they will not be misled by shallow analyses and wishful thinking.

But it may not be only doom and gloom. No repressive system lasts forever, and Myanmar's military dictatorship is no exception. Despite all the hardships, Myanmar has a vast pool of talented people of various nationalities who one day may be able to steer their country towards a different reality where they will all be able to live up to their full potential. The long-suffering peoples of Myanmar deserve nothing less, but it will be a protracted struggle which, maybe, has just begun. Only time will tell, and it

all depends on what will or will not happen inside the ruling and still remarkably unified military.

Bertil Lintner

Note on names

U, *Ko* and *Maung* are used alternately to mean mister, depending on the rank and age of the man addressed, and his relationship to the speaker. Thus, Nu would be called Maung Nu by his mother, Ko Nu by his friends and U Nu when addressed formally or by subordinates. Daw and Ma are used similarly for women. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is the formal designation, while Ma Aung San Suu Kyi would have been used when she was younger or by her friends.

Bo and *Bohmu* are military titles for officers which are often carried into civilian life, like *Bogyoke*, which means 'supremo' or 'chief' and is more respectful than 'general', a military designation only. *Thakin* is a title used by the young nationalists in the 1930s (Thakin Than Tun, for instance); it means 'master' and was originally reserved for the British, but the nationalists used the title to show that they were the real masters of their country. Some of the communist leaders, who once were members of the early nationalist movement, are referred to as *thakins* as well. *Saya* means 'teacher' and *Sayadaw* refers to learned Buddhist monks.

Yebaw means 'comrade' and was used by the communists and, until 1988, also within the ruling Burma Socialist Programme Party. Male Shans are titled *Sai* ('brother') and females *Nang* ('sister'). *Sao* and *Khun* are Shan titles originally reserved for the ruling families but later used by military officers in the insurgency. Karens are titled *Saw* (men) and *Naw* (women). *Mahn* is the Pwo Karen equivalent of *Saw*. *P'doh* is used for addressing officials in the Karen rebel administration. Mon males are titled *Nai* ('mister'). The Burmans, Shans, Arakanese, Mons, Karens, Karennis, Was, Padaungs (Kayans), Palaungs and most smaller tribes do not have family names. The Chins, Kachins and Nagas, on the other hand, have surnames as well as clan names.

Myanmar or Burma is another issue that often causes confusion. There is actually no difference between the two terms other than that *Myanmar Naing-ngan* is the formal designation of the country,

while *Bama-Pyi* has always been used in daily speech (and in the original national anthem). The issue is explained in more detail in Chapter Three. Here, Burma is used when the text is about the country before the 1989 'name change', and Myanmar is used when describing events after 1989. Rangoon rather than Yangon is used when dealing with proper names such as the University of Rangoon and in references to books printed before 1989. Towns and regions are referred to by their old as well as new names.

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MYANMAR TODAY—AND TOMORROW

On 27 October 2023, the same day the Brotherhood Alliance issued a statement announcing Operation 1027, their military operation 'aimed at eradicating the military dictatorship that the entire Myanmar population is united in opposing', the National Unity Government's (NUG) Ministry of Defence stated that they would 'join forces with the Brotherhood Alliance in Operation 1027. We will actively engage in the required operations to collaborate effectively in their endeavours.'[1] The NUG's rather ambiguous statement seems to imply that Operation 1027 was not their initiative. It most likely was not, and it could hardly have been a coincidence that fighting erupted shortly after China had begun a crackdown on the scam centres operating from sanctuaries near or in more or less the same areas as the heaviest fighting took place.

Now, the problem has been dealt with, and the Chinese must be very pleased with the outcome of the Brotherhood Alliance's campaign. But it would be too simplistic to look at Operation 1027 as a Chinese conspiracy, or to underestimate the anti-junta sentiments and determination of the Brotherhood Alliance, the allied Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and local People's Defence Forces (PDF) to fight for what they believe in. Resistance is everywhere, in the ethnic minority-inhabited frontier areas as well as in central Myanmar, and it is homegrown and genuine. But

the importance of the China factor should not be overlooked. The SAC is universally hated and large parts of the country are ablaze, and that has also provided China with a golden opportunity to act more directly in Myanmar's domestic affairs. China, the only country with a foot in every camp, has once again managed to act as peacemaker. Several ceasefire agreements have been reached in northern Shan State and, in April 2024 in Rakhine State as well. But those have been short-lived and there seems to be no end in sight for the most intense civil war Myanmar has experienced since the years immediately following independence in 1948.

Beijing's long-term objectives remain the same: to exploit Myanmar's natural resources and, most importantly, to secure the so-called China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) which gives it strategic access to the Indian Ocean. To achieve those goals, China has always played all sides in Myanmar's internal conflicts and it is therefore not, it should be remembered, in China's interest to see the emergence of a strong, peaceful, democratic and federal Myanmar. As long as Myanmar is weak, China can play official games of being a 'friendly neighbour' and 'peacemaker' and, at the same time, use a carrot-and-stick approach with whatever government is in power: trade coupled with investment on the one hand and indirect support for the ethnic armies on the other. If Myanmar ever became exactly that—strong, peaceful, democratic and federal—China would be the first to lose. The leverage China has today inside Myanmar would be gone. But then China does not want to see the situation get totally out of hand either, because that would mean serious instability in the frontier areas and, most likely, an unwanted flood of refugees across its border.

Apart from China, the only other major country that has close relations with the SAC is Russia, a new player to be reckoned with on the Myanmar chessboard. The friendly relationship that has been established in recent times between the militaries of the two countries was clearly shown when a group of Russian and Myanmar officers met for a party in Yangon on 31 January 2021. The mood was festive and the vodka flowed freely. They were celebrating the opening of a military high-tech multimedia complex in which the children of Min Aung Hlaing have a financial interest. But they also

toasted the coup that was going to be launched in the morning. The troublesome civilians who had raised questions about arms purchases from Russia and tried to interfere in military affairs in other ways would be dealt with once and for all.[2]

In June, Min Aung Hlaing, who was on a visit to Moscow, told Russia's defence minister Sergei Shoigu that, 'thanks to Russia, our army has become one of the strongest in the region'.[3] A year later, foreign minister Sergey Lavrov visited Naypyitaw and said that his government was 'in solidarity with the efforts aimed at stabilising the situation in the country', thus using the same expression as the SAC does to justify its attempts to crush the resistance.[4] Thus, Russia has been blunter and far less diplomatic in its relations with the coup-makers than China, which is playing its cards much more carefully.

Cooperation between Russia and Myanmar began in the 1990s, when the Myanmar military sought to diversify its sources of procurement in the hope of lessening its dependence on China. Boycotts and sanctions had made it impossible to acquire military hardware from the West, so the ruling generals turned to Russia. They knew that Moscow would not be concerned about human rights violations and the suppression of pro-democracy movements, and, consequently, Myanmar became a lucrative market for the Russian war industry.

Russia sold its first consignment of four MiG-29 jet fighters to Myanmar in 2001. That sale was followed by another ten MiGs in 2002. In 2006, the state-owned Russian Aircraft Corporation MiG, now restructured as the United Aircraft Corporation, opened an office in Yangon. The Myanmar Air Force has also acquired at least nine Russian-made Mi-35 Hind helicopter gunships, as well as twelve Mi-17 transport helicopters.[5] The Hinds, used during an offensive against the KIA in 2012–13 and in Kokang in 2015, are now in use all over the country against the various forces opposing the rule of the SAC.

Russia has also sold heavy machine guns and rocket launchers to Myanmar and, before the Russians launched a full-scale military operation against Ukraine in February 2022, Russian-made tanks and armoured personnel carriers were obtained through arms

dealers in Kyiv. Not surprisingly, the SAC came out in support of Russia's invasion. In an interview with the Burmese language service of Voice of America shortly after the invasion, SAC spokesperson General Zaw Min Tun cited the reasons for the junta's stand on the issue: 'Number one is that Russia has to consolidate its sovereignty. I think this is the right thing to do. Number two is to show the world that Russia is a world power.'[6]

Moreover, the Myanmar military has sent personnel to training facilities in Russia, including the Omsk Armor Engineering Institute, the Air Force Engineering Academy in Moscow, the Nizhniy Novgorod Command Academy and the Kazan Military Command Academy.[7] Others have been serving as cadets with the Russian Air Force. Probably as many as 5,000 Myanmar officers, soldiers and scientists have studied in Russia since the early 1990s, more than from any other Southeast Asian country.

Furthermore, in 2007 Russia signed an agreement to build a nuclear research reactor in Myanmar, but construction has yet to be started and may not ever materialise.[8] But the plan was revived in February 2023 when Min Aung Hlaing met with Alexey Evgenievich Likhachev, director general of the Russian State Atomic Energy Corporation, or Rosatom, somewhere near Yangon to inaugurate what was called a 'nuclear power information centre'.[9] It was described in the media as a step toward developing atomic power to fill energy shortages in Myanmar.

As another sign of the growing friendship between the two militaries, Russian officers have been guests of honour at Myanmar's Armed Forces Day celebrations in Naypyitaw. Among the most prominent is deputy defence minister Alexander Vasilyevich Fomin, who, on 27 March 2021, attended the event dressed in his full colonel-general attire.[10] Fomin was back in Naypyitaw in March 2024, and then ostensibly to visit religious sites in the new capital.[11]

Min Aung Hlaing and other military leaders may not yet be welcome in China, but they have paid numerous visits to Russia. Min Aung Hlaing was there only a few months after the coup, and Ko Ko, the SAC-appointed head of its election committee, went to Moscow in March 2024 to observe the presidential

election. While in the Russian capital, he met Central Election Commission chairwoman Ella Pamfilova and, rather ominously, they reportedly 'discussed bilateral cooperation in electoral processes'.[12]

On the soft power side, the Russian language is being taught at Yangon University of Foreign Languages and there is a Russian cultural centre in the old capital as well. There may not be many people in Myanmar who are eager to study Russian, but Moscow's schemes for closer links with Myanmar's military leadership were helped when the West turned its backs on Myanmar in the wake of the forced exodus of hundreds of thousands of Muslim Rohingyas in 2017. Russia and China have in their capacity as permanent members of the UN Security Council consistently used their veto powers to block any attempts to take action against the iron-fisted rule of the Myanmar generals.

While Beijing has vital strategic interests in Myanmar, distant Russia is more concerned about making money. But Moscow's involvement in Myanmar cannot be explained solely in that context. The erstwhile Soviet Union was once a major power in Asia and also a bitter enemy of not only the United States but also China, which saw the leaders in Moscow as 'revisionists' and 'traitors' to the communist cause. The Soviet Union had a close alliance with India and pro-Moscow regimes were in power in Vietnam, Laos and, after the Vietnamese intervention in 1978–9, also Cambodia. North Korea was neutral in the rivalry between the world's two most powerful communist nations.

All of that disappeared after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the beginning of Boris Yeltsin's chaotic rule in Russia, which then became a separate country. It needed the firmer hand of his successor Vladimir Putin to restore some of the old glory, and the Chinese have become allies in their common cause against the United States and its power in the Indo-Pacific region. Russian influence over its old allies has vanished, but Myanmar has become a willing new partner in Moscow's plans for playing a greater role in regional affairs.

Myanmar's relations with Moscow have had many ups and downs since independence in 1948. There was no shortage of

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BERTIL LINTNER is an acclaimed journalist and expert on contemporary South-East Asia, especially Myanmar. Formerly the *Far Eastern Economic Review*'s Burma correspondent, and Asia correspondent for the Swedish daily *Svenska Dagbladet*, he is the author of, among others, *The Costliest Pearl: China's Struggle for India's Ocean* (also published by Hurst).

'An important and concise account of the recent history of Burma from the perspective of the Bama and other ethnic groups, this is a timely book about a country still mired in the Dark Ages. A must-read.'

SAWANGWONGSE YAWNGHWE, GRANDSON OF SAO SHWE THAIK, THE FIRST PRESIDENT OF THE UNION OF BURMA (1948–52)

'Urgent and incisive, *The Golden Land Ablaze* is necessary reading to approach the historical underpinnings and regional context of Myanmar's most pressing contemporary issues.'

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'Broadly framed, analytically nuanced and highly topical, *The Golden Land Ablaze* is yet another critical intervention by Lintner that reveals Myanmar's past, present and future.'

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'For 45 years, Lintner has been producing original, well-informed and insightful analyses of developments in and around Myanmar. This book maintains the same high standard.'

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Cover image: A young woman leads chants as youth protestors demonstrate against the military coup, Yangon. Around her, protestors have bottles of Coca-Cola to treat the effects of tear gas.
Photo: Minzayar Oo/Panos Pictures.

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