

General strike and giant demonstrations rock Myanmar's military

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Vast crowds have packed the streets of the cities of Myanmar (Burma) in the largest day of protests thus far against the February 1 takeover by the corrupt and brutal Tatmadaw, the country's armed forces, led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. The sheer size of the demonstrations reflects the fact that workers on the railways, in shops and factories, offices and schools had shut the country down in a massive general strike.

Though police attacked crowds with water cannon in the official capital, Naypyiadow, as yet there has been no massive wave of repression as there was in 1988. This reveals both the wariness of the generals and their recognition that, unlike the great massacre in 1988, the whole world is watching.

As has been the case day after day since the beginning of the month, the biggest crowds were in Yangon (Rangoon) and Mandalay, the country's two largest cities. In Yangon, they carried a wide banner saying 'Power to the People' in English, plainly a message to the international community. Demonstrations were also held in Myitkiyina, capital of the northern province of Kachin whose minority ethnic population has a long history of struggle against successive central governments.

The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), a loose coordinating group of the resistance, called on the people to unite on Monday for a 'Five Twos Revolution' or a 'Spring Revolution'. This reference to the date, 22.2.2021, echoes the huge anti-dictatorship mobilisation of 8 August 1988, known as the "Four 8s", which was fired on by the military. This time, the Tatmadaw have, so far at least, been more restrained.

There has, however, been a threatening statement from the military, carried on state-run broadcaster MRTV, accusing the peaceful protesters of 'riot and anarchy'. It claimed that organisers were "now inciting the people, especially emotional teenagers and youths, to a confrontation path where they will suffer the loss of life".

Indeed, three people have already lost their lives, two on Sunday in Mandalay. Meanwhile, under cover of darkness, the military have been rounding up people they suspect of being the organisers; 640 so far, according to the independent Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP)

On February 19, a huge mass funeral was held for Mya Thwate Thwate Khaing, a 20 year old supermarket worker, who was shot in the head when police opened fire to disperse protesters. She was kept on life support for 10 days before she died just after her birthday. Two more demonstrators, one a teenage boy, another a man in his early twenties, were killed in Mandalay when troops and police used live ammunition to attempt to disperse the crowds.

The UN's special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, Tom Andrews, stated: 'From water cannons to

rubber bullets to teargas and now hardened troops firing point blank at peaceful protesters. This madness must end, now.?

The General Secretary of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, President Joe Biden and the US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, as well as EU and UK leaders, have all condemned the coup and threatened sanctions against its leaders. China, however, has remained silent and the reason is not difficult to see; the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, a series of infrastructure projects under construction as part of Beijing's Belt and Road. This will connect China to the Myanmar port of Kyaukpyu on the Indian Ocean, allowing trade to bypass the Malacca Strait, one of the world's busiest shipping routes and a possible choke point for the US navy in any international conflict.

The military's relations with China are far from good, however, because the Chinese have long supplied weapons to the Kachin rebels and have cultivated good relations with Aung San Suu Kyi. While China will protect them against UN resolutions, the coup will certainly isolate them internationally at a time when their economy has been weakening.

Though the brave youth and workers on the streets of Burmese cities doubtless look to the 'Western democracies' to come to their aid, this will be longer on wordy condemnations than any meaningful action. They will have to look to their own strength, particularly the general strike, to show the military that the country will remain at a standstill until they return to their barracks.

If the generals were to give in, which would be tremendously humiliating, Suu Kyi's past record shows that she could still be their last best hope of avoiding a complete melt down of their regime. This is shown by her behaviour during the five years her National League for Democracy has been in government. Her attitude to the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingyas, in particular, shows that she is at best a very conservative figure whose commitment to bourgeois democracy is combined with, and subordinated to, being a majority Bamar chauvinist. She clearly has no desire whatsoever to destroy the military institution her father founded.

Nonetheless, she has threatened to use her big parliamentary majority to submit constitutional amendments to gradually shrink the military's share of Parliament seats from 25 per cent as dictated by the 2008 Constitution to a mere five per cent. This certainly put the wind up the dominant conservative faction of the Tatmadaw but, if the coup falters and gives way, no doubt a supposedly liberal wing will be prepared to do a deal with Aung San Suu Kyi, and she with them.

It is urgent therefore that, in the course of the mass movement and general strikes, alternative organs of power, councils and defence militias, are built up and contacts made in the barracks amongst the rank and file. The present movement needs to move on from its limited demands to restore the NLD government and free Suu Kyi from arrest to revolutionary objectives like a Sovereign Constituent Assembly, with its delegates elected and under the control of the masses, a body which can put all the institutions of the Burmese state and economy under the spotlight. Only thus can a conservative restoration of Suu Kyi and the preservation of the generals' real power be prevented. The fate of the 2011 Arab Spring in Egypt should be a harsh warning.

In the process of campaigning for a constituent assembly, socialists can fight to turn a democratic into a social revolution and build a workers' and peasants' council democracy. Only then will the spectre of future military coups be banished forever.

