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FOUNDER EDITOR  
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# Violence continues to escalate in Myanmar

*The entire region is likely to suffer from the fallout*

THE people of Myanmar have been protesting the Myanmar military’s unlawful seizure of power since the beginning of February. The country’s military seems to have only gotten bolder in their total disregard for human rights and the democratic right to protest of every citizen—it started with disproportionate force and has now resorted to downright violence in putting an end to the pro-democracy protests in the country. The images coming out of Myanmar are grim, with pictures of bloodied teenagers lying on the streets flooding social media. Reuters reports the death toll to be nearing 200, with as many as 20 protesters being shot on Monday alone.

Has the sluggish reaction of the international community emboldened the military to continue to use such brutal and repressive tactics against pro-democracy protesters (which include using live ammunition on unarmed civilians and mass detentions of protesters and political/civil society actors, including 37 journalists)? So far, the US, the UK and the EU have only imposed some very basic sanctions on the military leaders who directed the coup. Yesterday, it was reported that the EU will begin to sanction the Myanmar military’s business interests from next week. While this is a step in the right direction, we wonder why it took them so long to reach this decision, especially since rights organisations have been calling for targeted sanctions and an arms embargo on Myanmar ever since the military coup took place.

The silence of Myanmar’s regional allies with regard to the military coup is conspicuous, to say the least. We must remember that unrest in Myanmar has always spilled over into our borders and has had a negative impact on the region, especially Bangladesh. The Myanmar military’s genocide against the Rohingya has forced Bangladesh to provide refuge to 1.1 million refugees on humanitarian grounds. How will we be impacted in the coming days, especially as reports resurface of brutal force being used, especially against minorities in Myanmar?

In early March, we warned in these very pages that as long as China, India, Bangladesh, the ASEAN countries and the rest of the international community fail to work together and strongly condemn the unlawful military coup in Myanmar, we run the risk of watching history repeat itself. Our fears have been confirmed, as we once again witness the oppression of the people of Myanmar by the unelected military leaders who are continuing to act with impunity. If we do not collectively act now, Myanmar’s journey to democracy is likely to come to an abrupt and violent end.

# Fire at DMCH: Could the tragedy have been avoided?

*Hospitals must stringently take all fire safety precautions*

WE are shocked and saddened by the deaths of three patients after they were shifted from Dhaka Medical College Hospital’s Intensive Care Unit (ICU) dedicated for Covid-19 patients when a fire broke out in the ICU facility. The patients died when they were shifted to the CCU from the ICU.

So far, the cause of the fire that broke out at the ICU in the hospital’s new building is not clear, and a probe committee has been formed to investigate the incident. It is eerily reminiscent of the terrible tragedy that occurred at the United Hospital in May last year, when an isolation unit caught on fire and five patients perished as the duty doctor and nurses fled from the scene instead of trying to rescue the patients. In this case at DMCH, all the patients were transferred to the CCU from the ICU but three of them, who were on life support, lost their lives after being transferred.

While accidents can happen anywhere at any time, it is unacceptable that they should occur in a hospital, that too in the ICU where the most critical patients are treated. We hope that the probe will unravel whether any kind of negligence took place, especially in terms of having proper safety measures installed for all electronic equipment. Meanwhile, the hospital authorities with the help of the fire department must make a thorough inspection of all such areas of the hospitals where fires could break out, and must ensure that fire-fighting equipment are operational and close at hand.

We commiserate with the families of the deceased patients. If the investigation finds any trace of negligence causing the fire, we hope the authorities will ensure that the families receive compensation although nothing will make up for the loss of their loved ones. The incident should be a wake-up call for all hospitals to make sure that all their units, especially those that have specialised electronic equipment and electrical appliances, are regularly inspected and maintained. Hospitals must also take all precautions to avoid fires and have regular training of staff on fire safety protocols.

LETTERS  
TO THE EDITOR

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Control population growth

Bangladesh is one of the most populous countries in the world. At present, our population figure stands at over 160 million, and the continuous growth in numbers is having a negative impact everywhere. Child marriage, child labour, poverty, unemployment, etc.—all related to overpopulation—are adversely affecting the development of our society. Overpopulation has also led to unplanned urbanisation, declining arable land, increasing groundwater scarcity, traffic jams, etc. There is a widespread lack of public awareness about family planning. I think our population control policies should be strictly enforced, otherwise the situation will be much worse in the future.

Ariful Islam, Chattogram

# Can Myanmar’s civil disobedience movement restore democracy?

NICOLA WILLIAMS

SINCE Myanmar’s military coup on February 1, the commander-in-chief of the Tatmadaw, General Min Aung Hlaing, has been working to remake the country’s political landscape by removing the National League for Democracy (NLD) party, detaining its leadership and installing a military junta. But the success of the coup is not guaranteed, given the junta’s lack of control over parts of the state apparatus, population and the spiralling economy.

The civil disobedience movement is spreading across key ministries. Staff from the Central Bank of Myanmar and from commercial banks are striking

internal cohesion facing off against a nation and multiple crises? Based on 2020 election results, there may even be hints of support for the NLD within the military.

A number of possible scenarios are emerging with different enabling factors, not least of which is the Myanmar people’s sheer determination to achieve democracy.

One scenario is a return to absolute military rule. The junta would use the crises, violence and coercion to remove any semblance of social order, and then present a false dichotomy to the population: anarchy or dictatorship. A delay in holding elections for several years would be justified under the guise



People flash a three-finger salute as they take part in an anti-coup night protest at the Hledan junction in Yangon, Myanmar, on March 14, 2021.

PHOTO: REUTERS/STRINGER

and limitations placed on withdrawals indicate a looming liquidity crisis. Foreign trade is frozen, with exports down by 90 percent. Medical professionals are striking and two-thirds of the country’s hospitals are not functioning properly during a pandemic. Some members of the police have also joined protests, refusing to do the “dirty work” of the military.

A groundswell of protests has swept across the country, with Myanmar’s tech-savvy youth proving to be a creative, mobilising force that the old guard has not faced before. As Min Aung Hlaing sports bulletproof vests in rare outings and uses state media to blast the civil disobedience movement and protesters, the junta’s own propaganda machine suggests the resistance is having an impact. Can the military maintain

of restoring stability.

A second scenario follows the path set by General Hlaing: hold elections within a year and reinstall a semi-elected parliament. The military has likely realised by now that the political system they had designed under the constitution does not guarantee its political victory. The military-backed Union Solidarity Development Party (USDP) has been unable to secure enough seats to outnumber the NLD, even with the advantage of a quarter of parliamentary seats being assigned to the military.

In such a scenario, the junta may attempt to redesign the electoral system from first-past-the-post to proportional representation, framing this as an opportunity for ethnic and other political parties to gain more seats in a new

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election. A sham election could then take place with the NLD removed from the electoral map.

While ASEAN countries initially seemed tempted by this track, it does not provide a pathway to de-escalate resistance. A rigged military-run election would fail to transfer the electoral legitimacy that voters bestowed on 2020-elected officials, some of whom have formed the Committee Representing the Union Parliament in opposition to the junta.

In a third scenario, the coup neither clearly fails nor succeeds, creating a protracted crisis. For over 70 years, the Myanmar military has failed to win a number of asymmetric internal armed conflicts. The battle for state control would become another front line of drawn-out crises, where the use of state-based violence breeds further resistance and new support for the civil disobedience movement.

A protracted crisis could also materialise if there is significant reorganising of power within the military, leading to unforeseen contests. Potential stalemates due to the military and civilian blocs not recognising each other for negotiations, as called for by several ASEAN countries, could also prolong events.

In scenario four, the coup fails and there is a return to the hybrid government under the 2008 constitution, with NLD members released and the 2020 election results honoured, as called for by the United Nations and much of the international community. For the coup to fail, the civil disobedience movement would need to sustain popular and financial support, and continue to impact the junta’s control over the economy and administration. This scenario hinges on the possibility of support for Min Aung Hlaing’s leadership waning as multiple crises hit

regular military families and businesses.

But scenario four is unlikely with Min Aung Hlaing at the helm of the armed forces. It would also require Western countries to hold off on normalising relations with the junta, and ASEAN countries pursuing negotiations between the elected government bloc and the military, not just with military-appointed officials.

In a final, fifth scenario, the coup fails and the civilian government leads a new transition. Many protesters and groups are calling for a new political arrangement through the removal of the military from political life and the military-drafted 2008 constitution. Rather than exclusively supporting the NLD or Aung San Suu Kyi, many in Myanmar are marching for democratic federalism—a system ethnic minorities have been striving for since 1947.

For this last scenario to take hold, a counter-coup within the military may be needed to deliver a new leadership willing to work under the civilian government—a tall order indeed. Elected officials would take up their positions and an inclusive constitutional committee could be established (including armed groups, civil society and ethnic political parties) to draft a new constitution. While Nepal provides an example of a federal transition following civil war and a people’s movement, this process is complex and loaded with challenges.

Ultimately, the people of Myanmar must choose their system of government—and thus, their fate—for it to be legitimate. A prolonged return to military rule or an illegitimate government will only perpetuate continued suffering and instability.

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Courtesy: East Asia Forum

# Understanding poverty through Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

POVERTY is indisputably the worst curse in human life. It reduces human existence to nearly non-existence. It is demeaning and humiliating. Mere day-to-day survival is the prime concern of the poverty-stricken life. The thought process of the poor seldom transcends beyond the threshold of survival. Poverty-stricken people in a society or nation are considered a burden and generally looked down on.

An American psychologist, Abraham Maslow, came up with the theory of the hierarchy of human needs in 1943. Known as the pyramid of needs, it begins with the most basic human needs and climbs up the pyramid to the most challenging needs. Using the pyramid model, Maslow created a classification system reflecting five sets (or stages or tiers) of human needs.

Modern-day psychologists categorise the two most basic sets of needs—physical and security—as “material” needs, while the top three sets of needs are categorised as “spiritual” needs. Maslow underscored that human beings can hardly focus on the next tier of needs unless a significant proportion of their

needs in the tier below are met.

Now, let us juxtapose the needs of the poor with Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. If the needs in the first tier—classified as physical needs (such as air, water, food, rest, health)—are further broken down according to their necessity in human life, air and water come first. Fortunately, nature is generous in bestowing the living beings with plenty of air and water to breathe and drink and meet other

needs (such as safety, shelter, stability). In this tier, the poor look for safety essential for consolidating their livelihood, a shelter for those who don’t have it, or improving the shelter’s overall condition for those who have it. Consolidating their livelihood brings some semblance of stability in their mindset.

At this tier, the poor as well as those graduating out of poverty explore various ways and means for a brighter future



‘Poverty not only stunts human growth but also gravely demoralises the people, preventing them from thinking positively, creatively and critically.’

PHOTO: STAR

necessities. Constant fiddling with nature over time has, however, fundamentally affected the quality of air and water, which are absolutely essential for our survival. The poor have no time to spend on the issue as they immediately shift to the mode of seeking food, their most tangible basic need.

Most of the people living in extreme poverty are relentlessly engaged in securing sufficient food to survive on a day-to-day basis. They are so absorbed in the hunt for food that they only rest when their physical limitations force them to do so. The question of healthcare crosses their mind only when they fall sick, restricting their ability to seek food.

When the most basic needs in the first tier of “material” needs are met, the poor look for satisfying the next tier of material needs, classified as security

for them and their children. They delve into trying different means of sustaining their newly found interim stability to avoid being thrown back into extreme poverty. Children’s education and alternative means of making livelihoods are explored diligently. In other words, they look for opportunities to improve their living conditions and grab them whenever those come their way.

Some succeed in crossing the bar of this tier into the next higher tier (also the first in the upper three tiers collectively classified as “spiritual” needs). Others languish in the tier below either in poverty or at the edge of poverty. Some even slip back into extreme poverty.

Most of the poor remain confined in the first two tiers classified as “material” needs. They need support from the state as well as benevolent organisations to pull them out of poverty and help

move to the next tier, also the first of the upper three tiers classified as “spiritual” needs. (These remaining three tiers basically involve self-fulfilment and psychological needs, such as the need for love, belongingness, recognition, self-esteem, power, prestige, achieving one’s full potential, etc.) The people in abject poverty, however, remain mostly absorbed in arranging necessary food for them and their families, a shelter of some kind, and healthcare when falling sick.

At this stage, necessary support is essential to prepare this segment of the population for a productive economic life. Once the most basic human needs—food, shelter and healthcare—are met, the focus should shift to creating economic opportunities for them via skills development, financial support and creation of employment opportunities of various kinds.

Ideally, no one in a civilised society should live in poverty. Such expectations are not very practical, however. There will always be some people mired in poverty for various endogenous factors. The aim, therefore, should be to bring the proportion of people living below the poverty line to a bare minimum in order to enable a nation to put its available human resources to the best possible use.

If a large segment of the population languishes in poverty, a nation’s full potential will remain unrealised. The poor will relentlessly struggle to meet their basic material needs, meaning they will remain stuck in the bottom two tiers of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. They will be restrained from exploring the finer sides of human potential like love and care, social activities, status, esteem and above all, doing something remarkable for the society or nation.

Poverty not only stunts human growth but also gravely demoralises the people, restricting them from thinking positively, creatively and critically. In an aggravated situation, it may increase criminal activities, cause social unrest and jeopardise the peace of a nation.

It need not be so. With some calculated efforts, the poor can be turned into a treasure capable of transforming a nation into a peaceful hub of economic prosperity.

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