

# Civil War Conflict Resolution: The Case of Myanmar Civil War

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the protracted civil war in Myanmar following the 2021 military coup that ousted the democratically elected government. It outlines the historical, ethnic, and political roots of the conflict, emphasizing the deep-seated tension between the military-dominated government and the overthrown pro-democracy National Unity Government (NUG). This civil war conflict is characterized by an intractable conflict marked by escalating violence, a zero-sum game mentality, and a lack of viable peaceful solutions. The paper provides two recommendations to help resolve this conflict. In the short term, international mediation by the United Nations Security Council's permanent members is needed to broker a ceasefire. In the long term, peacebuilding through national peace education initiatives aims to promote non-violent conflict resolution among youth in Myanmar. These dual approaches aim to end the ongoing conflict and prevent future recurrence by addressing both the immediate political deadlock and the deeper social drivers of violence.

**Keywords:** Myanmar Civil War; Intractable conflict; Mediation; Peacebuilding

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## 1. Background of the Myanmar Civil War

### 1.1. Geography and demographics

Myanmar has a total area of nearly 700,000 square kilometers and is the largest country by area in the Indochinese Peninsula. It borders Bangladesh and India to the northwest, China to the northeast, Laos and Thailand to the east and southeast, and the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal to the south and southwest. Myanmar's strategic location is extremely important because it is located near the main shipping lanes of the Indian Ocean. Myanmar's current capital is Naypyidaw, its largest city is Yangon, and its second largest city is Mandalay.

Now, Myanmar has a population of about 57 million, of which the Bamar account for nearly 70%. The Bamar have dominated Myanmar society since independence in 1948. Most of the important positions in the Myanmar government and military are held by the Bamar. In addition to the Bamar, Myanmar is home to more than a hundred other ethnic groups and is one of the most diverse countries in Southeast Asia. Among them, the larger ethnic minorities include Shan, Karen, Rakhine, and Chinese <sup>[1]</sup>. For a long time, several of Myanmar's

larger ethnic minorities, such as Shan and Karen, have had their militia organizations and have been in a tense confrontation with the Myanmar central government dominated by the Bamar. This tense confrontation has further deteriorated since the military government came to power in 2021.

## **1.2. Historical background**

Since gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1948, Myanmar's politics have been turbulent. Like most of its neighbors, Myanmar initially practiced a parliamentary democracy. But representative democracy only lasted until 1962, when General Ne Win launched a military coup, overthrew the civilian government, and began to implement military dictatorship in Myanmar. After the military government led by Ne Win came to power, it began implementing a socialist economic plan and nationalized all major enterprises in Myanmar. Instead of developing Myanmar's economy, the military government's economic policies caused it to deteriorate rapidly. In the 1980s, Myanmar suffered a serious economic crisis and caused severe food shortages <sup>[2]</sup>. The economic crisis made more and more Burmese people begin to dislike the rule of the military government and triggered large-scale democratic protests. Among them, the most famous was the 8888 Uprising that broke out in 1988. The protest was initially led by students, but later, teachers, monks, and workers also began to participate in it, and it became a nationwide democratic protest march against military rule. During this period, the Burmese democrats, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of General Aung San, the founding father of Myanmar, established the National League for Democracy to further pursue the vision of democratic reform in Myanmar. Faced with widespread democratic protests, the military government chose to use violence to suppress the protesters. At the same time, the military government suppressed the National League for Democracy and placed the party's leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, under house arrest <sup>[3]</sup>. After suppressing the democratic protest activities in Myanmar in the late 1980s, the military government's rule continued until the 2000s.

In 2007, Myanmar once again saw a democratic protest called the Saffron Revolution. This protest forced the military government to make concessions, agreeing to hold democratic elections in Myanmar and releasing the leader of the democratic faction, Aung San Suu Kyi. In 2015, Myanmar held its first nationwide multi-party democratic election. The National League for Democracy, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, won an overwhelming victory in the election, and Aung San Suu Kyi successfully became the de facto leader of Myanmar. Later, in the election at the end of 2020, the National League for Democracy, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, won again. Subsequently, the Myanmar military, which was defeated in the election, launched a coup in February 2021 because the election results were fraudulent, placed Aung San Suu Kyi and other leaders of the elected government under house arrest, and seized power in Myanmar again <sup>[4]</sup>. In order to resist the military coup, members of the overthrown democratic ruling party National League for Democracy, with the support of Myanmar's ethnic minority militia organizations, established the National Unity Government (NUG) and the resistance army and declared war on the military government. The Myanmar civil war officially broke out and has continued to this day.

## **1.3. The conflict parties**

The main parties involved in the Myanmar civil war are the Myanmar military government and the NUG, which was established by the Myanmar democrats. Since the coup in 2021, the struggle between the military government and the NUG for political control of Myanmar has led to the outbreak of a large-scale civil war. After three years of civil war, the resistance army led by the NUG currently controls more than half of Myanmar's territory. However, the ruling military government still firmly controls major cities including Yangon, Naypyidaw, and Mandalay <sup>[5]</sup>. The resistance army does not have the power to seize these major cities from the military government, and the

military government does not have the power to retake the areas controlled by the resistance army. The Myanmar civil war seems to be stuck in a long-term conflict stalemate.

## **2. An intractable conflict**

The Myanmar civil war can be considered an intractable conflict. Intractable conflict is generally considered to have seven obvious traits, and the Myanmar civil war highlights three of them, which are violent, presumed as irresolvable, and presumed as zero-sum in nature.

Intractable conflicts involve physical violence, and the frequency and emphasis of such violent incidents usually change over time <sup>[6]</sup>. The Myanmar Civil War undoubtedly involved physical violence, and the violence of the civil war has increased over time. The Myanmar Civil War is gradually escalating from an initial small-scale armed conflict to a large-scale armed violent conflict across the country.

Both parties involved in an intractable conflict believe that a peaceful resolution of the conflict is almost impossible. In the Myanmar Civil War, neither the military government nor the NUG believed that the violent conflict between the two sides could be resolved peacefully. At the same time, since neither side could win in the short term, the military government and the NUG have been continuously expanding their armies to prepare for a long-term violent conflict. Therefore, the Myanmar Civil War is perceived as irresolvable to a considerable extent.

An intractable conflict is a total conflict in which each party in the conflict focuses only on its own needs and goals and does not consider compromise or concessions. The needs and goals of both parties in the Myanmar Civil War are clear, that is, to defeat the opponent and gain political control over the entire Myanmar. Neither the military government nor the NUG is willing to make compromises or concessions because they believe that compromise means surrender and submission, which will make their side the loser in this civil war. Therefore, the Myanmar Civil War can be regarded as a zero-sum game in nature, because both sides of the conflict believe that there can only be one winner in this war.

## **3. Survey of conflict resolution**

Since the outbreak of the Myanmar civil war, both sides of the conflict have made peacemaking efforts, but they have all failed. A key factor in the failure of these peacemaking efforts is the attitude of the military government. The military government is only willing to conduct peace talks with minority ethnic militias that support the NUG, and refuses to conduct any peace talks directly with the NUG <sup>[7]</sup>. This means that track I diplomacy has always been lacking in the Myanmar civil war because the military government refuses to have any direct interaction with the NUG at the official level. The most essential reason the military government refuses to conduct peace talks directly with the NUG is that the NUG has the support of the majority of Burmese people, including ethnic minorities.

The results of a random survey show that nearly 92% of the Burmese people surveyed have a favorable impression of the NUG, which fully proves that the NUG has received widespread support from the Burmese people <sup>[8]</sup>. The results of this survey also fully explain why the military government is unwilling to conduct direct peace talks with the NUG. Since most Burmese people support the NUG, from the perspective of the military government, if it chooses to conduct direct peace talks with the NUG and reach a peace agreement, then the military government is likely to lose political power more quickly and be replaced by the NUG. The military government believes that it must use violent means to completely eliminate the NUG, the biggest political and military threat, to ensure that the military government can always control the regime of Myanmar. Therefore, it can

be seen that without the intervention of a third external force, it is almost impossible for the military government and the NUG to reach a peace agreement through direct negotiations.

#### **4. Recommendations**

Given the complex situation of Myanmar's civil war and the needs of both parties in the conflict, this paper provides two recommendations to help Myanmar resolve the civil war conflict as soon as possible and build peace. Considering the actual situation in Myanmar, the goals pursued by these two recommendations are short-term peacemaking and long-term peacebuilding. The following describes and explains these two recommendations in detail.

The first recommendation is to seek to achieve peacemaking in Myanmar in the short term. Its specific content is to require the United Nations and other major powers to enter Myanmar as mediators to promote a peace agreement between the military government and the NUG. In a complex conflict system, the safest path to peace is definitely to reach an inclusive peace agreement through negotiation, thereby establishing a good institutional structure for non-violent political struggle <sup>[9]</sup>. The peace agreement is the key to peacemaking and can immediately end the current civil war conflict in Myanmar. At present, it is difficult for the two parties in the Myanmar civil war to reach a peace agreement without external third-party forces. Therefore, the intervention of the United Nations and other major powers as third-party mediators is necessary. The active intervention of neutral external forces, such as the United Nations, can ensure that the peace negotiation process and the signing of the peace agreement are carried out under international supervision so that the signing of the peace text is fair and binding on all parties <sup>[10]</sup>. This paper argues that the five permanent members of the United Nations can send official representatives to mediate the Myanmar civil war and supervise the negotiation and signing of the peace agreement. The representatives of the five permanent members are both representatives of the five major powers and representatives of the United Nations. They have sufficient capacity and status to supervise and facilitate the formulation and signing of a peace agreement between the military government and the NUG, so as to achieve the goal of a peacemaking ceasefire in Myanmar in the short term.

The second recommendation is to seek to achieve peacebuilding in Myanmar through a long-term process. Peace agreements are relatively passive peacemaking and cannot play an important role in long-term peacebuilding. Therefore, this paper argues that it is necessary to achieve the goal of peacebuilding through the promotion of proactive peace education. Education is an important factor in promoting peace and conflict resolution, and it is also a driving force for creating a society that is more tolerant and respectful of the concept of diversity <sup>[11]</sup>. By promoting peace education in schools across Myanmar, a new generation of Burmese people can learn to listen to and respect diverse views, develop critical thinking skills, and learn how to use non-violent and peaceful methods to resolve conflicts. Through peace education, the younger generation of Myanmar will be able to develop thinking about peacefully dealing with conflicts and master non-violent ways of dealing with conflicts. In this way, Myanmar will be able to avoid the recurrence of large-scale civil wars like today. In general, peace education is a long-term peacebuilding process. It prevents the recurrence of civil wars in the future by cultivating the peace concept of the next generation of Burmese people and thus achieves long-term peace in Myanmar.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The current civil war in Myanmar has occurred for complex historical reasons. Both sides of the conflict want to completely defeat each other and seize the Myanmar regime. The continuous expansion of the civil war and the



military government's refusal to directly negotiate peace with the NUG have made the Myanmar civil war a difficult conflict to resolve. In response to this situation, this paper provides two recommendations based on rigorous analysis to help resolve the civil war in Myanmar. One recommendation emphasizes the intervention of a third-party mediator (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council) to supervise and facilitate the two sides of the Myanmar conflict to conduct peace negotiations and reach a corresponding peace agreement, thereby achieving the goal of short-term peacemaking. The other recommendation emphasizes the implementation of extensive peace education for the new generation of young people in Myanmar, so that they can learn to resolve conflicts in a non-violent and peaceful way, thereby avoiding the recurrence of civil war in the future, in order to achieve the goal of long-term peacebuilding. Finally, if the two recommendations proposed in this paper can be effectively implemented, the civil war in Myanmar will be able to end soon, and long-term peace can be achieved.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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