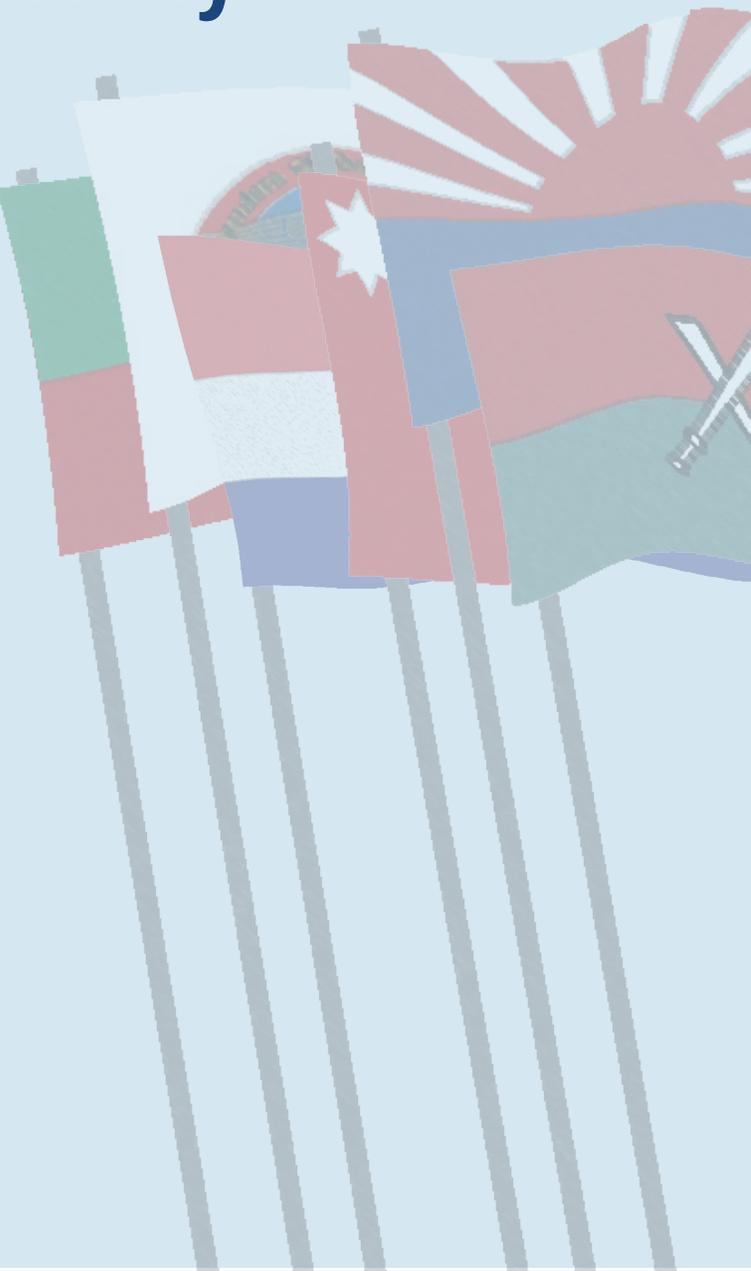


Establishing a Federal Army: Fantasy Versus Reality

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Almost immediately after the coup d'état took place on February 1, 2021, scores of people took to the streets to peacefully protest against it. When the Tatmadaw began brutally cracking down on the protests, torturing and even murdering the participating civilians in plain sight, a new kind of thinking began to emerge among the people, particularly those from the central parts of Burma/Myanmar and belonging to the Bamar majority. Some of the key perspectives that have evolved since can be summarized as follows:

1. Unlike what the military and previous civilian governments had consistently claimed, ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) are not “troublemakers” or “insurgents”; instead, they are fighting for their respective states and the rights of their people.
2. In order to uproot the fascist military dictatorship, put civilian government back into power, and achieve democracy, people willing to defend the country will need to be trained in warfare, and the People’s Defense Force (PDF) will need to be established.
3. Soldiers participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) have expressed their desire to continue serving the country and the people if there is a platform for them to do so. Subsequently, the public has suggested them to join the future federal army.



In the beginning of the revolution, there were talks about how the idea of establishing a federal army is all fantasy but in fact, the effects of these changing views are becoming real. Ethnic revolutionary armies are reclaiming land in the states, while newly established defense forces (both PDFs and others) in the country's heartland are taking up arms, fighting for a federal democratic union.

The number of EAOs in Burma/Myanmar is quite high compared to other countries, and there are even multiple groups representing each nationality (e.g. Karen, Shan). These armed groups find it challenging to negotiate with each other, let alone unite. In addition to that, they have different interests and visions, with some fighting for genuine federalism or self-determination, while others holding questionable stances. When asked whether bringing all these groups together is possible, the EAOs' answer is usually no, followed by many of them saying that the possibility of a federal army is nothing but a fantasy. The challenge of being unable to negotiate thus truly exists amongst the country's EAOs.

At the same time, the manpower, weapons, and supplies of the current State Administration Council (SAC) are several times higher than those of the EAOs and the emerging defense forces combined. Moreover, from the perspective of the SAC's proponents, resisting the Tatmadaw is merely a daydream, as the military has never lost a fight in more than 70 years of its existence. This perspective also reflects the Tatmadaw's own image of itself and the status quo in the country that it has maintained over generations.

| Establishing a Federal Army in Practice

Before the National Unity Government (NUG) came into existence, the temporary government under the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) frequently asked Tatmadaw officials to participate in the CDM, declaring that they were going to claim their own territory in cooperation with EAOs. Then, on May 6, 2021, the NUG announced that the PDF had been established as the core of the future federal army.

However, in reality, it remains unclear whether the EAOs are fighting as federal alliance forces or even intend to do so in the future. For instance, the fighting between the Karen National Union (KNU) Brigade 1 and the military resurfaced during a local protest for which the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) was providing protection. Likewise, the battles in the KNU Brigade 5 have been described as the brigade's efforts to force out the SAC's troops that had been stationed in the area 'to maintain territorial integrity,' thereby violating the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). These efforts of the KNLA appear to simply protect their land and their people, and it would hence be inadequate to consider them a sign of the group's becoming a federal alliance force.

In a similar vein, as a result of a total of 277 clashes between the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and SAC forces from February 1 to July 31, 2021, the KIA has been able to regain up to 10 areas that it had previously lost to the Tatmadaw. It would only be appropriate to assume that the KIA, a powerful EAO that once had nearly all of Kachin State under its control, is making strides in reclaiming its land. Although the KIA has never officially stated that these efforts were towards establishing a federal army, the armed group has always showed enthusiasm for forming a federal union of Burma/Myanmar.

As some EAOs continued to reclaim their respective territories, the NUG tried—rather unexpectedly—to take some credit for these developments upon themselves. While the EAOs do indeed stand on the side of the oppressed, they are neither the armed wing of the NUG nor have pronounced themselves to be its official alliance forces. Assumably, even if the EAOs decide to work in alliance with the NUG, their full cooperation will be established only when the NUG's political objectives become crystal clear.

Although the NUG's Ministry of Defense has not been able to confirm yet whether taking the armed revolutionary route and engaging in war will be the way forward, it has expressed its desire to stop the terrorist SAC. Taking these events into account, it is possible to infer that the EAOs and the NUG are going to revolt against the dictatorship with the same objective regardless of the actual establishment of a federal army.

In any case, on August 12, 2021, the President of the KNU admitted that not much could be expected of political discussions during these turbulent times. In addition, on August 20, 2021, the Defense Minister of NUG revealed that its military operations would indeed be led by EAOs. Therefore, it can be assumed that these actors' vision of fighting together against the military dictators is stronger than the idea of negotiating with them.

| Is a Federal Army Even Necessary?

The need to establish a federal army has been long belated. The Tatmadaw, when formed under the Kandy Agreement in 1945, was in fact a multi-ethnic armed force. Specifically, it was composed of former professional soldiers from the British Burma Army, Burma Independence Army, and ethnic battalions. At that time, the Burma Independence Army led by General Aung San was arguably not an army of professional soldiers. Soon enough, these Bamar soldiers began propagating that they were not mercenaries like the ethnic armed forces that had previously served in the British Burma Army, and claiming that only the Bamar soldiers were truly patriotic. Keeping the same mentality, after the 1962 coup d'état, the Tatmadaw not only became a military that is political, Bamar-dominant,

and mono-ethnic, but also a completely unprofessional and oppressive institution that we see today.

A clear consequence of such military taking control of the country for generations is the fact that most people in Burma/Myanmar—including those who support the establishment of a federal army today—have no idea which ethnicity the Tatmadaw's first commander-in-chief belonged to or how many ethnic battalions there were in the military after independence. This part of history is revisited only to learn a lesson of disintegration among ethnic minorities and their willingness to protect the union together—and hence to avoid repeating it in the future.

When a federal union of Burma/Myanmar is established, it will be comprised of states, some of them inhabited by diverse ethnicities. Then, obviously, there will be a need for a multi-ethnic military composed of soldiers from all states, and security will be needed at the community level as much as at the federal level. Yet, the Bamar majority does not seem to understand this need. It was only when people in Rakhine State lost their sense of security that the Arakan Army emerged, and the same goes for the emergence of other EAOs in their respective states.

Throughout the previously held peace process, the Tatmadaw would not discuss security sector reform issues, and only talked about the disarmament of EAOs. Indeed, even military analysts—intimidated by the corruption and code reds going on in the military—remained silent on the fact that the Tatmadaw itself should have undergone major reforms. They were so busy pleasing the Tatmadaw that the topic of establishing a federal army did not even come up in their discussions. During that time, the activities of the Federal Union Army, an armed wing of the United Nationalities Federal Council, got ridiculed by the same people who support the idea of establishing a federal army today.

The kind of federal union and federal army that the people demand nowadays had vanished in the 1962 coup led by the former dictator General Ne Win. All there is left is a professional terrorist organization with a racist agenda and military propaganda crafted by unscrupulous dictators. All in all, do we need a federal army? Yes, we do—in order to protect everyone in the union. If we want a federal army though, we have to make sure that we build a federal union first.

Assumably, people from the country's mainland now understand that the SAC's military forces neither protect the people nor make up a federal army themselves. Now that people have witnessed the Tatmadaw's true nature first-hand, they hopefully recognize the vital need for a movement towards establishing both a true federation as well as a federal army.

| A Federal System and a Federal Army

As mentioned above, establishing a federal system should be considered before forming a federal army. Let's think about it realistically: does the existence of a military depend on the existence of a nation, or does the recognition of a nation depend on whether or not it has a military? The truth is, the necessity of a military only lies in the fact that the people, the system, and the values that make a nation need its protection.

Then, what does the union that the people want look like? What are our values and our systems? What are the things we dedicate our lives to protect? For example, the SAC's Tatmadaw claims to protect race, religion, and disciplined democracy, while the EAOs fight for their states, right to self-determination, federalism, equality, and liberation.

The view that "democracy should be prioritized before federalism"—often endorsed by people from the central areas of Burma/Myanmar—would be problematic here. Instead, we should hold on to a clear definition of democracy and a truly fair version of federalism at the same time. Without a government to answer to, a responsible political system to operate in, or political values to protect, it would be impossible to establish a federal army. Additionally, if our systems or values fail to guarantee fairness and equality, they will not be sustained.

On top of that, it would be impossible to integrate ethnic armed forces into a federal army without providing them with any political guarantees. This is because in politics, revolution has the ability to effectively build or break a nation.

To sum up, federalism is a system supposed to guarantee cohesion and fairness, and a federal army is an organization supposed to protect the entirety of the union and everyone who resides within. In order to unite all revolutionary forces in the country, it is necessary to guarantee a set-up under which everyone can come together and serve. Once this is accomplished, besides some things that will still require attention, everything else will pretty much fall into place.

As Luo Guan Zhong once said, **"It is a general truism of this world that anything long divided will surely unite, and anything long united will surely divide."** Then, when asking whose responsibility it is to unite the divided, it is not just the NUG or the CRPH, or just the people, or just the EAOs alone. Only when the true answer—that it is the responsibility of everyone—becomes clear and accepted by all stakeholders will we be able to come together and unite. Since people across all ethnic backgrounds will have to work together, it be best to leave the view that "their people have to fight for our people" at the door.

| Probability of the Emergence of a Federal Army

The question that arises, then, is whether establishing a federal army is possible only after a federal union of Burma/Myanmar is established. The answer to this question is: “Yes.” While a federal army—at least as a professional organization meeting international standards—will certainly not be established as soon as it has been mentioned on social media, it is about time to start seriously thinking about it.

Technically speaking, post-conflict and post-authoritarian states often have to undergo security sector reforms in order to not fall back either into conflict or under authoritarian rule. Although no other country has such a high number of armed revolutionary forces as Burma/Myanmar, we do not need to re-invent the wheel when it comes to forming an integrated army or post-conflict reform and reconstruction activities. There are plenty of detailed procedures, policies, and processes that have been adopted by other countries for the purposes of integration. Still, what differentiates Burma/Myanmar from other countries are the three following challenges that we have to overcome.

1 What post-conflict countries around to world have in common is that they usually work towards integrating revolutionary armies into already-existing armed forces and institutions of the state. However, in our country, the state’s own military is not just a mono-ethnic army but a terrorist organization that commits world-class war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide, making its current institutional standards unacceptable to base a future integration process upon. What is certain is that the entire structure of the institution ought to simply be made anew.

2 Today, EAOs stand as powerful organizations in areas in which they are respectively based. They are leading revolutionary movements based on their own ethno-nationalistic spirit, and are not wealthy drug lords despite what the Tatmadaw has led people to believe. The EAO leaders do not have material wealth to show off in a way that ex-General Thura Shwe Mann or the current military dictator Min Aung Hlaing does. (Tatmadaw generals, either retired or in service, often seek popular attention and sympathy by claiming that the personal savings of theirs and their wives is what enables them to found successful political parties and companies.)

In addition, soldiers serving under the EAOs do not, in fact, get paid, which indicates that forcing them to disarm in a short period of time by paying them is an absolute insult to the revolutionaries

and their ethno-nationalistic spirit. Instead, it is important to formulate long-term strategic policies based on the idea that all stakeholders are politically on the same page. For example, before the federal system is fully established, it is likely that all groups fighting the SAC are going to work as alliance forces. After taking enough time and gaining enough experience doing so, they will then merge into a fragmented army before finally uniting as a federal army.

3

In order to transform the mono-ethnic military into a multi-ethnic army, there is a need for not just a federal system but a policy that takes ethnicity, religion, and geographical attachment into consideration. In order for ethnic minorities to integrate with the dominant ethnic group that has humiliated them and committed mass killings against their peoples for generations, there needs to be an adequate ethnic accommodation policy in place. Appropriate integration strategies and policies have to be created to meet this challenge.

Overall, if we want a federal army, we have to let go of the view that all of the country's armed forces shall be integrated into the current Tatmadaw, and instead, replace it with an entirely different defense architecture. Surely, this will not be achieved within a day. It is going to take a good amount of time to build trust and mutual support among all stakeholders involved. What is vital in the reform process is to change the institutional culture of a mono-ethnic military into a multi-ethnic one.

Probability of a New Architecture and the Current Situation

As stated above, a transformation of the entire defense architecture will certainly be needed in Burma/Myanmar. Right now, because of the SAC's obstinacy, negotiation with the public has become extremely unlikely. The Chinland Defense Force, for example, is one of the many groups that have recently emerged to take down the military. If the Tatmadaw does not give in in time, more of such groups will appear and have guerilla warfare strategies as well as people's war strategies ready soon. While some of these groups are responding to the NUG's establishment of the PDF announced on May 5, 2021, there are other community-based groups that are acting outside of the NUG's control.

The emergence of these groups reveals some similarities with the militia groups formed during the French Revolution. Some want to work with the EAOs, while others want to cooperate with the NUG. There are also groups

that organize themselves to protect their communities, and are currently only engaging in defense, but in order to defeat the Tatmadaw, it is simply a matter of time before they begin to apply the principle: “The best defense is a good offense.” Therefore, now is the time for PDFs to standardize their battle strategies, if not specific tactics. Discussions need to be held regarding when to engage in offensive or defensive attacks, when to opt for a political dialogue, and at what stage of the revolution all groups should hit the brakes. It has become crucially important for these defense forces to develop strategic communication and chains of command.

The presence of militia groups and guerilla combatants in Burma/Myanmar will soon be unprecedented. As these various actors emerge, strategic communication and information-sharing mechanisms among them will become crucial. What lies within these efforts is an opportunity for a path towards a federal army. If these groups become too disconnected and their actions too incohesive, there is real concern that things will spiral out of control in a similar way they did in murderous riots during the French Revolution.

Indeed, this moment offers a unique opportunity to not only address the injustices that the people in Burma/Myanmar have endured under a series of authoritarian regimes, but also to put out the flames of the civil war that has been going on in the country for over 70 years. It is now or never that we have the chance to revolt in order to put an end to the cycle of oppressive authoritarian rule once and for all. This makes it all the more crucial to bring forward a system that is inclusive, free of discrimination, aggression, and intimidation; a system that everybody willingly accepts.

A military does not become a federal army simply by putting the words “federal” or “union” in its name. Until there is a federal system that guarantees equality for everyone, and until there are values in place that help create such a system, there will be no federal army in Burma/Myanmar. Although defense forces around the world take on various forms (mono-ethnic, multi-ethnic, federal armies composed of state armed forces, multi-lingual armed forces, etc.), a commonality these militaries share is that their structure ensures non-discriminatory protection of the people regardless of their socio-economic status, gender, or age. If such values were not embedded in their institutional culture, there is no doubt that militaries around the world would end up committing similar atrocities to those of the Tatmadaw.

In order to establish a federal union at this point in time, shared values, collective leadership, and cooperation are essential. There is a possibility that all armed revolutionary forces will operate under one meaningful, collective leadership, but the current observations show us that the CRPH and NUG are not yet capable of it. Likewise, there is still so much distrust among the EAOs that creating a political assembly remains difficult. At the

same time, although various PDFs are carrying on with their revolutionary efforts with whatever weapons they can find, they are not the federal army. Because of all of this, we are in desperate need of a political assembly in order to gather and make sense of all the different factors at play.

The term “federal” comes from Latin and means “contract” or “alliance”, while the word “army” is based on the Latin word “amarta”, signifying “a group of people organized to protect a common interest.” Therefore, in order to make federal army a reality, we have to begin working together as a trust-building alliance, then move forward to cooperating in the form of a strategic alliance, which will then eventually transform into an integrated federal army. To conclude, a federal army shall be built in a collective and inclusive manner upon a contract whose sole purpose should be to protect and serve our common interests.



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