Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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The survival of Myanmar's junta in doubt as it lashes out against its foes

For several decades, Aung San Suu Kyi was rarely out of the headlines as she fought for democracy in Myanmar often under house arrest. But the Nobel peace laureate fell out of favour with western liberals in 2017 after being accused of doing too little to end the persecution of the Muslim Rohingya minority.

Pope Francis has not forgotten Suu Kyi, who is 79 and serving a 27-year prison sentence on charges ranging from corruption to not respecting Covid pandemic restrictions imposed by Myanmar's military junta, which fears her enduring popularity, according to rights groups.

The Pope has offered Suu Kyi refuge on Vatican territory although it was unknown if and how she could ever take up such an offer. "We cannot stay silent about the situation in Myanmar today. We must do something," the pope is reported as saying at the end of September.

This year the Rohingya have faced the worst state-led violence in seven years and there is no credible international dialogue, with much of the world consumed by wars in the Middle East and Ukraine.

But the Myanmar military is currently in a weakened and fragile state and reportedly controls less than half of the country's territory, leading to greater speculation about its future. What are the prospects for the Rohingya and might the junta collapse?

Offer for peace talks

In 2015 Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won Myanmar's first democratic election in 25 years. But the military arrested her when it staged a coup in 2021, since when the junta has continued its fight against an array of ethnic rebel groups and pro-democracy forces.

The junta, or State Administration Council as the military regime calls itself, made its first direct, and surprising, offer for peace talks to rebels that was dated 26 September and published in state-run newspapers, the AP reported.

The National Unity Government, the main group co-ordinating opposition to military rule, rejected the offer, as did the Karen National Union, which has been fighting for autonomy almost continuously since the country then called Burma gained independence from Britain in 1948.

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Other opposition groups engaged in active conflict against the military include the Karenni National Progressive Party and the Chin National Front. All these groups have called for dialogue but only after the junta accepts an end to military rule and the peaceful transition of power.

The junta has started a national census ahead of repeatedly delayed elections that are now scheduled to take place next year but in reality would be almost impossible to hold given the active conflict.

Weakness of the military

The apparent weakness of the military has not stopped it from carrying out the worst attacks on the Rohingya population this year since 2017 when it drove more than 750,000 Rohingya across the border into Bangladesh, says Human Rights Watch.

In recent months, the Myanmar military and the ethnic Arakan Army have committed mass killings, arson, and unlawful recruitment against Rohingya communities in Rakhine State.

On August 5, nearly 200 people were reportedly killed following drone strikes and shelling on civilians fleeing fighting in

Maungdaw town near the Bangladesh border, Rohingya witnesses told Human Rights Watch.

Only 636,000 Rohingya — or 23 per cent of the 2.8 million Rohingya around the world — still live in their homeland of Myanmar

"Rohingya in Rakhine State are enduring abuses tragically reminiscent of the military's atrocities in 2017," said Elaine Pearson, Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "Once again, armed forces are driving thousands of Rohingya from their homes with killings and arson, leaving them nowhere safe to turn."

According to Médecins Sans Frontières, only 636,000 Rohingya — or 23 per cent of the 2.8 million Rohingya around the world — still live in their homeland of Myanmar.

The total death toll since the military took power in 2021 is at least 5,350 civilians and more than 3.3 million people displaced, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights said in a 17 September report.

Just as disturbing is that nearly 27,4000 people have been arrested, a number that has risen since the implementation of mandatory conscription in February while torture and ill-treatment are pervasive, it said.

When the junta may fall?

The military's lashing out against opponents comes as its viability and even survival are being increasingly questioned. Money is deserting the country and the junta is struggling to source foreign exchange, says Sean Turnell, an economist who worked with Aung San Suu Kyi and was imprisoned for 650 days by the junta before his release in 2022.

"All indicators point in one direction which is the defeat of this regime," he said recently.

Myanmar's future largely depends on China

Myanmar's future largely depends on China, which is a major arms supplier to the military as well as to several ethnic resistance organisations that keep the junta weakened and more open to Beijing's influence.

Activists such as Than N Oo, a co-founder of the Free Myanmar advocacy group, have urged Myanmar's opposition groups to unify. "Only through close collaboration can they hope to out-manoeuvre China's coercion and topple the junta," he wrote recently in the Asia Times.

The military has suffered historic losses over the past three years and is in the most weakened state in its history, says the United States Institute for Peace. Military officers have been surrendering to resistance forces, deserting and defecting while the army's patronage system is degraded largely due to a lack of funds.

But few people are laying any bets on when the junta may fall. The regime is likely to continue to lose ground militarily, "precipitating a collapse or major transformation of the junta," says the institute. "But it is difficult to predict when it will occur."