

INSURGENCY OF THE ETHNIC ARMED ORGANIZATIONS' ROLE IN MYANMAR'S 2021 COUP: A TOTAL PEOPLE'S WAR ANALYSIS

PERAN PEMBERONTAKAN ORGANISASI ETNIS BERSENJATA DALAM KUDETA MYANMAR PADA TAHUN 2021: ANALISIS PERANG RAKYAT SEMESTA

Mei Rinta Sukma Firdaus¹, Afrizal Hendra², Muhammad Hadianto³
Fauzia Gustarina Cempaka Timur⁴

REPUBLIC OF INDONESIA DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

(mayrinnta@gmail.com, ibo.afrizal@gmail.com, hadianto.muhammado8@gmail.com,
fgcempaka@gmail.com)

Abstract - This article attempts to uncover events in Myanmar during the 2021 coup and its relationship with the country's various Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs). The Tatmadaw initiated the 2021 coup because the civilian government's landslide victory was based on deceit and fraud. The aim was to ascertain whether the Ethnic Armed Organizations' (EAOs) inability to overturn the military coup is linked to their shortcomings in implementing the total people's war (TPW) strategy. To that end, this qualitative article utilized a historiography-analytical-based approach in its analysis. The analysis was grounded in a methodology that incorporated a framework encompassing Kiras' four concepts of a successful insurgency and Nasution's perspective on nationalism. The two methodological tools, therefore, consist of the concepts "space," "time," "support," and also "legitimacy." The EAOs' myriad backgrounds and resources make their implementation of the mentioned concept vary. The article concludes by saying that further research is needed to clarify and make other generalizations on the research question.

Keywords: Coup, Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), insurgency, nationalism, Total People's War (TPW)

Abstrak-Artikel ini mencoba mengungkap peristiwa di Myanmar selama kudeta tahun 2021 dan hubungannya dengan berbagai Organisasi Etnis Bersenjata (EAOS) di negara tersebut. Tatmadaw memprakarsai kudeta tahun 2021 karena kemenangan telak pemerintah sipil didasarkan pada penipuan dan kecurangan. Penulis ingin memastikan apakah ketidakmampuan EAOs dalam menggagalkan kudeta militer disebabkan oleh kelambanan mereka dalam menerapkan strategi perang rakyat semesta (TPW). Untuk itu, artikel kualitatif ini menggunakan pendekatan berbasis historiografi-analitis dalam analisisnya. Penulis juga mendasarkan analisisnya pada metodologi yang melibatkan kerangka kerja yang terdiri dari empat konsep pemberontakan yang berhasil dari Kiras dan gagasan nasionalisme Nasution. Oleh karena itu, kedua alat metodologis tersebut terdiri dari konsep "ruang", "waktu", "dukungan", dan juga "legitimasi". Latar belakang dan sumber daya EAOs yang beragam membuat penerapan konsep tersebut berbeda-beda. Artikel ini menyimpulkan dengan mengatakan bahwa penelitian lebih lanjut diperlukan untuk memperjelas dan membuat generalisasi lain mengenai pertanyaan penelitian.

Kata Kunci: Kudeta, Organisasi Etnis Bersenjata (EAOs), Insurjensi, nasionalisme, Perang Rakyat Semesta (TPW).

Introduction

Since the latest coup on February 1, 2021, Myanmar has experienced devastating political upheaval accompanied by a humanitarian crisis. The coup, masterminded and carried out by the military, ousted the civilian government under Aung San Suu Kyi. Suu Kyi was elected as the country's prime minister in 2014, serving the state as a representative of the National League for Democracy (NLD). The post-coup situation in Myanmar has galvanized dissent from the public; even the movement itself is called the "Civil Disobedience Movement (Stokke et al., 2022)." Albeit just being disobedient and not necessarily violent in the ordeal, the protesting people have been suppressed, repressed, and violated their human rights by the military and its associates. Recent estimates suggest that more than 10,000 people have suffered as casualties of the tragedy, with approximately 1200 people losing their lives (Sablosky, 2021).

The coup also muddled the often-invisible balance between the central government and the country's so-called "Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs)." Every EAO has been known to fight for

greater recognition of their kin from the government. The military takeover had given some ethnic-based groupings opportunities to galvanize their intent, mainly through allying with the National Unity Government (NUG) or directly attacking the government's forces in their occupied zones (Maizland, 2022). Despite being generally supportive of removing the junta, the EAOs represent a diverse political and military, creating various challenges for the country's democratic restoration vision. Military alliances such as the People's Defense Forces (PDFs) materialized within such dynamics, paving a slightly distorted vision of the country's EAOs. Similar to the majority population's civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), EAOs have employed a "People's War," employing various tactics within the insurgency strategy's scope (Marks & Rich, 2017).

Therefore, acknowledging the complexities that EAOs have brought into the whole fiasco is essential. This article plans explicitly to answer the question, "Is the cause of EAOs' inability to overturn the military government due to its lack of implementation of the Total People's War

Strategy?" To that end, this study employs a qualitative research method, combining historical analysis with descriptive orientations. Its data-collection method involves a literature study method, digging through historical data in past literature and online news. Segmentation of the article is presented as follows: (1) theoretical framework and plan of usage; (2) related historiography; and (3) theory-based systematic analysis. The intention is to utilize expositions offered by Kiras (2019) and Nasution (1965), particularly delving into the elements contributing to a successful insurgency and the role of nationalism in total people's war, respectively. This article affirms the current research question and does not overtly revisit previously established arguments.

Research Method

This research methodology is qualitative analysis, which uses the theory as a research tool, from finding problems and collecting data to analyzing data. This qualitative analysis utilized a historiography-analytical-based approach in its study. The analysis also relied on a methodology that employed Kiras' four concepts of a successful insurgency and Nasution's notion of nationalism. These two methodological tools encompass the elements of "space," "time," "support," and "legitimacy."

Intricate Relationship between Insurgency and Total People's War (TPW)

Citing Fearon & Laitin (2003), an insurgency is a situation in which irregular warfare is waged by small, especially rural-based, groups that utilize low to moderate arms. A more appropriate definition of the situation pertains to the actors' intention, primarily aimed at overthrowing and changing the status quo. The status could refer to a system or a whole set of constitutional orders. Not only on the military front, but insurgents would also often use political measures and, to an



Figure 1. Myanmar's Administrative Division
Source: International Crisis Group, 2022

extent, wage full-on guerilla warfare to eventually overcome the formal system's stakeholders (Gray, 1999; Long, 2009). The method is considered a part of the "Total People's War (TPW)," which Clausewitz defined as the continuation of politics by other means, mainly through the people's involvement (Syarifuddin et al., 2021; Tanjung et al., 2021a).

Clausewitz's understanding of the concept marked a reconceptualization, which emerged during the Soviet resistance to Nazi Germany's advances (Fomin-Nilov, 2018). During the historical case, each actor has their role. For instance, the people supported the insurgency, the government carried out the coordination function of resources and war campaigns, and the military ensured the effectiveness of such operations. Any successful insurgency, therefore, must utilize three factors: (1) people, (2) government, and (3) military (Herberg-Rothe, 2007).

We could summarize some key points from the exposition. Firstly, insurgency often showcases small groups fighting to challenge the established status quo. Second, guerilla warfare serves as an essential aspect of the strategy. Thirdly, the

strategy was further modified into the Total People's War, which solidified the joint role of the people, the government, and the military in a warring situation. Those three actors are the key to the successful execution of the TPW.

Executing a Successful Insurgency: Five Prerequisites

In their writing, Kiras (2019) identifies four factors that insurgents must carefully consider and exploit to carry out a successful insurgency. Those factors consist of space, time, support, and legitimacy. Since these two aspects are the most reachable to the actors, space and time are considered the most significant elements to such a strategy's success. Insurgents should specifically utilize the strategy since it could compensate for their weaknesses relative to the established status quo's stakeholder (i.e., limited weaponry and troops' quality). In short, those factors primarily help out the insurgents in specific ways. Space allows a player to outmaneuver the state in areal-based warfare, while opportunity could only come if the insurgents make time as their ally. On the other hand, insurgents

must ensure the diversion of the populace's support toward the state while simultaneously garnering external support and legitimizing their way instead of the state (Gat & Clausewitz, 1993).

In recent years, nationalism has been regarded as another critical factor in conducting a successful insurgency. A prominent global south figure named Abdul H. Nasution once emphasized this notion, believing that nationalism can unite the people, even in a warring situation (Nurbantoro et al., 2022). Nasution's book *Fundamentals of Guerilla Warfare* (1965) outlined the concept's unifying force. In the literature, the ex-general talked about how nationalism could unite various groups towards a single goal, transcending even the most wide-ranging differences (Tanjung et al., 2021b). His idea was tested when the Dutch returned to reoccupy Indonesia after the latter proclaimed independence. Although critics vary in the strategy's effectiveness during the war, it must be said that, with constraining resources, his TPW's doctrine supported the military operations and led to a successful defense of Indonesia's independence. This case is a justification for

seeing the concept's universality-that it may be used to analyze other similar instances. The lesson learned from Nasution's thoughts is the importance of local support that highlights the need for guerrilla forces to establish strong ties with the communities in which they operate. This support serves as a foundation for sustained resistance.

The very nature of Myanmar's EAOs, as with other countries' EAOs, is centered on their kin and ethnicity. Nationalism based on ethnicity is not a new phenomenon; instead, the pervasiveness of a unifying idea between people under a common sociolinguistic origin persists until this day (H. Smith, 2005; M. et al., 2003). The exclusivity of that kind of nationalism differs from the one developed by Nasution. Specifically, the former relies on a nationalist sentiment from similar ethnic traits. At the same time, Nasution may be based on a broader definition of nationalism, often derived from the same politics and history (Nasution, 1984). Axiologically speaking, Nasution's nationalism leads more towards tolerance in an insurgency than ethnic-based nationalism. The claim rings true since

ethnic-based nationalism might reject the importance of allying with similarly interested groups merely because of their cultural makeup (Bieber, 2018; International et al., 2022).

Approach Plan

Per the earlier parts of this article, this study intends to confirm whether or not Myanmar's EAOs' inability to overturn the military government stems from their lack of effective utilization of the insurgency strategy. The strategy is further divided upon the five factors mentioned earlier. Before conducting the analysis, an effort will be made to validate the use of the insurgency strategy by the Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs). This part is done through an extensive historiography or explanation of the situation. The systematic analysis would consist of comparing each factor to iterated events, locating the possible mishaps that the EAOs might have done, and the consequences of such mistakes. The aim is to analyze the historical data provided through journals, media coverage, and other obtainable eligible data.

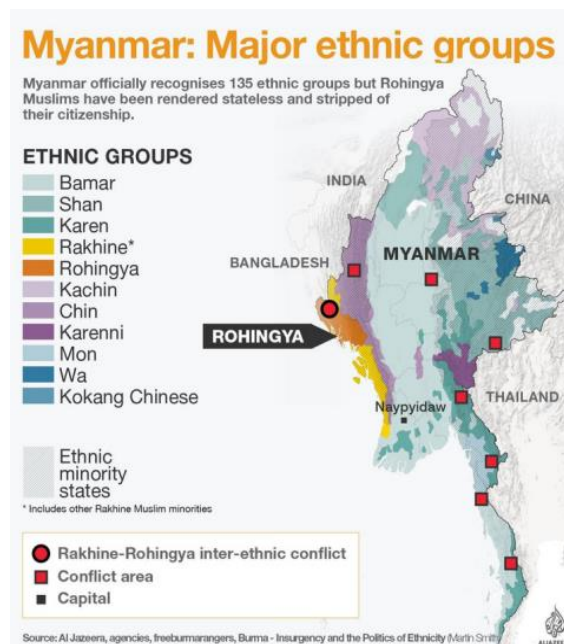


Figure 2. Myanmar's Ethnic Populations
Source: Al-Jazeera, 2017

Post-2021 Coup: Reactions of Myanmar's Ethnic Armed Organizations

As previously discussed, the Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) in Myanmar typically operate in alignment with the interests of the ethnic communities to which they are affiliated. The hundred or so EAOs of the country represent the population, which stands at around a third of the nation's population. For decades, those groups have been known to oppose the central government's authority, aiming at getting greater rights to self-rule, rights, and recognition. Some organizations formally signed ceasefire agreements with the civilian government to support such an

aim, while others remained firm in fighting both political regimes (Campbell, 2021). Many events unfolded after the 2021 coup. However, how the EAOs responded, continued in their primary goal, or even allied with the pro-democracy movements and organizations must often be added to the political discourse. In short, EAOs bound themselves with the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) and generally sided with the pro-democracy sides. At the same time, those who are outside of the agreement are generally open to cooperating with the junta.

The military coup is reported to have disrupted the delicate balance between the central government and the EAOs. The balance, referred to as "peace" as well, was first initiated under the leadership of the NLD (National League for Democracy). That peace, however, could not be said to have been achieved for the entirety of the country. More specifically, it is a process that involves implementing the NCA and negotiating agreements with EAOs who still need to do so (Stokke et al., 2022). That kind of EAO carries the potential to derail the democratic countermovement. Apart from some who saw the situation as an

opportunity to enlarge their geographical control, some who are close to the military may work to attack civilians who are part of the CDM. Therefore, the term "Wild Card" used to denote the amalgam of actors seems befitting due to the groups' varying intentions, goals, and disposable resources.

More specifically, the EAOs' reactions and activities in post-coup Myanmar may be divided into four categories:

Expand Territorial Control or Reclaiming Lost Territories

The intersection of territorial expansion and armed ethnic groups creates a volatile environment marked by historical grievances, competition for resources, and challenges related to governance and identity. The potential chaos increases when some issues are not effectively addressed through inclusive policies, conflict resolution mechanisms, and efforts to accommodate the rights and aspirations of diverse ethnic communities. Several EAOs, such as the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), have reportedly skirmished with the Tatmadaw, particularly near the border areas. They also provided

shelter and military training for PDF'PDF members who fled fighting from the urban area. Over the years, these EAOs have engaged in a protracted armed struggle contradictory to the Tatmadaw and Myanmar's military government. Following the 2021 coup, the disorder serves as fundamental leeway for those kinds of EAOs to expand their control and ethnic dignity and, sometimes, support the general populace's democratic aspiration (Maizland, 2022).

Adopting Wait-and-See Approach

Regarding approach, other EAOs, those who resemble the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) and the New Mon State Party (NMSP), have showcased cautiousness in responding to the post-coup situation. Avoiding direct skirmishes with the Tatmadaw and refraining from taking sides have become their go-ways (Harrisson, 2021). From a more active approach, they have successfully maintained their ceasefire agreements with both the junta and the PDFs while calling for dialogues between the warring factions. Pragmatism is another word to describe those EAOs' approach in response

to the issue, especially because balancing ethnic interests and reducing the possibility of Tatmadaw's intervention in their zone of control is hard.

Enhance Protective Measures for their Ethnic Bases

Offensive measures are just one approach Myanmar's EAOs have taken in response to the coup. Organizations such as the Chin National Front (CNF) and the Arakan Army (AA) have been reported to take defensive measures against Tatmadaw attacks, focusing more on keeping their kin safe. This type of EAO possesses a strong solidarity for their ethnicity and is more attracted to follow humanitarian concerns rather than opportunistic behavior. Therefore, when allying with other EAOs, they are much more focused on upgrading their self-defense capabilities, for instance, by creating the K3C Coalition and the Federal Army. They also engaged in recognition-seeking attempts from domestic actors, such as the NUG and other international actors (Thawngmung & Htoo, 2022).

Engaging in Illicit Business Deals with Foreign Actors

Some EAOs, akin to the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA), have been reported to focus on capitalizing financially on the situation. Because of the power vacuum and power imbalance in some parts of the country, those EAOs have improved their self-interested relationship with China (International Crisis Group, 2022). In order to ensure such actions are safe to be conducted, they have largely refrained from intervening in the political situation. Those actions include drug trafficking, illegal logging of Myanmar's vast rainforests, and illicit mining. As such, these EAOs are primarily interested in maintaining their economic holdouts since foreign actors like China could give them protection and are generally close to the junta. Attacking Chinese government personnel or even businesses in the country could mean sparking ire with the giant. Therefore, those EAOs acted indifferently or hostile against the democratic will of most of Myanmar people.

In conclusion, the EAOs of Myanmar are diverse. The diversity influences how they responded and reacted after the 2021 coup. Some supported the democratic movement, some focused on protecting their kin from the military, while others capitalized or acted indifferently towards the unfolding chaos. However, since they are not static, differing from their initial stance occasionally, the categorizations of their coup reactions need further research. The particular understanding is that, besides the CDM, they are one of the actors with a "wild card" role in the whole ordeal, potentially derailing the people's democratic aspiration.

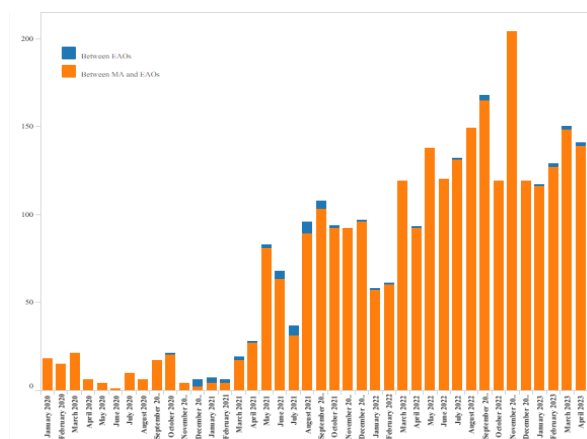


Figure 3. Timeline of Clashes in-between and between Laos and Myanmar's Military (January 2020 – May 2023)

Source: Myanmar Peace Monitor, 2023

Results and Discussion

Insurgency Strategic Analysis

Space

The space aspect of an insurgency strategy and situation may refer to both physical and social circumstances engulfing the operation of insurgents alike (Braithwaite & Johnson, 2012). That operation saw them interacting with supporters or the populace and exchanging blows with their adversaries. More specifically, the circumstances push insurgents to think about geographical terrain, population centers, infrastructure conditions, culture, and even identity. Considering all those factors is crucial for insurgents since space would undoubtedly influence the strategies, capabilities, and weak points in insurgency and counterinsurgency operations. Many ways exist to see how the EAOs have utilized space in their strategies. One of the most prevalent ways they have done it is by managing the country's ungoverned spaces.

Ungoverned spaces refer to a country's geographical portions far from effective state control regarding presence, legitimacy, or authority (South, 2021). Apart from existing for a long time in these areas, non-state actors such as the EAOs possess

a more significant amount of freedom and impunity to realize their interests. If utilized effectively, said spaces may provide insurgents with resources, transit routes, and operational bases. Myanmar's borders have been a fertile ungoverned space for EAOs to take advantage of: forging alliances with other EAOs, establishing pseudo-governance schemes, and negotiating business deals with neighboring nations such as China. However, that type of space is hostile since each EAO could feel threatened by the presence of others' intentions, escalating tensions (Ong, 2021).

Time

As with the other associated aspects, there are many ways that the EAOs have capitalized on the aspect of "time (Braithwaite & Johnson, 2012)" The capitalization method depends upon each EAO's goals, current alliance, and long and short-term strategies. Some EAOs have been known to prolong their resistance effort considerably until the Tatmadaw, to some extent, wore down in their military capacity and fighting spirit. Waiting for a blunder from the military's side is also one

of the strategies EAOs use in their insurgency campaign cases, including viral corruption cases, civilian murder, and other forms of human rights abuses. On the other hand, some have strategically waited for an opportunity to negotiate a better deal with the Tatmadaw to improve their kin's rights and standings.

Despite the strategic benefits that time may carry in insurgency operations, EAOs have also faced risks arising from the aspect. After the 2021 coup, many civilians associated with the CDM fled to the border areas and into EAOs' territories. The EAOs then need to choose how to engage with the situations, with the possibility of escalation and uncertainty as time progresses (Bünthe, 2022). Opportunity costs arise, even gradually rising, alongside the moving time. The strategic division amongst the EAOs, mainly influenced by the aspect, has further weakened the organizations' general aim of establishing civilian government or restoring order. Therefore, it is pretty challenging to generalize how many EAOs have utilized the "time" aspect in their insurgency campaign against the military junta.

Support

The third aspect that insurgents must utilize effectively is "support." Actors supportive of an insurgency campaign may be categorized into two, depending on their origins: (1) external and (2) internal (Paliwal & Staniland, 2022). In the case of Myanmar's EAOs, many external actors have been known to display some support toward them. For instance, China has supported the Kokang Border Guard Force (BGF), which is based near the border (Millar, 2023). The country's orientation primarily stems from its economic interests realized through creating a buffer zone between the projects and other actors by "outsourcing" their security needs to the BGF. Other foreign actors have pledged their support to some of the EAOs, making the situation more dynamic and depending on the changing circumstances.

Internally speaking, or instead originating from Myanmar, some EAOs have received support from the NLD and the NUG (Ong, 2021). The support ranges from moral to militaristic. Since the previous governments have failed to acknowledge Myanmar's ethnic rights, the two political actors have supported the

organizations' aspirations for a renewed constitution accommodating such interest. Some EAOs have received military and logistical support from the exiled government directly and in coordination with the PDFs. The aid sent by the NUG's Ministry of Defense and Security Affairs came hoping to further unite the various ethnic actors towards a single goal (Bünthe, 2022). However, several challenges persisted in that endeavor, including the fear of escalation arising from NUG's direct intervention.

Legitimacy

Legitimacy is central to any insurgency strategy. It is generally seen as a political capital that could significantly influence a population's degree of acceptance towards dissenting voices or established stakeholders (Chido, 2020). To the insurgents, in particular, the acceptance rate heavily influences the troops' morale, cohesivity, and resilience in withstanding counterinsurgency operations. As with other social attributes, legitimacy has always been dynamic and constantly contested. Apart from that, legitimacy is understood to be relative in

measurement. In other words, legitimacy is a matter of perspective that becomes grander whenever the watcher thinks other alternatives are much worse to live with or support. This aspect is of particular importance to the EAOs' strategy and interests.

Some of the most prominent examples of legitimacy-garnering ways the EAOs have done constitute the following. First, establishing a "parallel" state structure marks a delegitimizing stance towards the military junta (Thawngmung & Htoo, 2022). Second, their independent participation in peace processes both delegitimizes the state and expands legitimacy from the relevant population group (Campbell, 2021). Other than that, direct support for the democratic movement may also pave the way for legitimacy to be given to the general populations engulfed in the movement. However, the local communities' often changing interests and frequent lack of communication pose multiple threats to the legitimacy of EAOs, which share a different view. Therefore, the EAOs have considered legitimacy, but not all of them in particular.

Nationalism

In retrospect, most of Myanmar's EAOs have utilized some form of ethnic-based nationalism in their insurgency against the government. The concept is used as ideology and motivation to keep fighting the unjust governmental takeover while believing that their ethnicity shall be protected at all costs (Bieber, 2018). The attitude might stem from the long history of brutal repression towards those EAOs from previous military juntas and the dominant Bamar ethnic group. Other reasons for the intention are the EAOs' need for greater autonomy in controlling regions that they see as inheritances from their ancestors. Albeit such ethnic-based practices are quite prevalent even after the 2021 coup, some EAOs have been reported to utilize some nationalistic intent, which resembles Nasution's idea of the concept (Turner, 2017).

The uncertain situation after the 2021 coup had given birth to more EAOs practicing Nasution's idea of nationalism to further their interests. One way to do so is to ally with other groups with similar strategic orientations, regardless of their ethnic background. Internalizing this form

of nationalism could also garner support from the broader population, especially those living in urban areas, united under one goal and not by a single ethnicity (Sun, 2022). Employing Nasution's nationalism could also help the EAOs to develop a clearer political vision and solid socio-cultural base for their struggle. The Karen National Union (KNU), one of the most influential EAOs, has been known to support the creation of the Peace Process Steering Team (PPST) with the other ten NCA-signatory EAOs (Avila, 2021). KNU, therefore, had displayed some form of Nasution's nationalistic idea.

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Limitations

The present article primarily discussed the continuing civil war after the 2021 coup in Myanmar. Specifically, the focus is on highlighting the conflict between the country's Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) and examining the responses of these organizations to the coup. Even though the EAOs are often denoted as the "wild card" in the whole fiasco, some of their post-coup activities might be put into four categories. First,

some EAOs have been reported to expand their territorial withholds or reclaim lost areas taken by the junta. Second, several EAOs are engaging in a wait-and-see manner, reacting after the junta made its moves. They are third, finding ways to protect their kin from the junta or other EAOs. Furthermore, four, capitalizing on the uncertain power struggles to conduct illicit dealings with interested foreign actors.

To ascertain whether the Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) inability to overturn the military junta is rooted in their failure to implement the Total People's War Strategy, a theoretical framework was proposed. The framework outlines five indicators to answer the research question mentioned in the earlier part of the article. Said framework consists of Kiras' and Nasution's postulation of a successful insurgency: (1) place, (2) time, (3) support, (4) legitimacy, and (5) nationalism. Place refers to the insurgents' managing their space-to-force ratios. Time, if managed correctly, could compensate for the actors' lack of capability. Support, both from internal and external actors, is important since it serves as a boost to the insurgents'

aim. Legitimacy is a political capital ensuring the wider populace accepts insurgents' ideas and works. Meanwhile, nationalism acts as a binder between members of the insurgency forces.

Myanmar's EAOs varied widely in utilizing the Total People's War Strategy. In the space aspect, most EAOs have attempted to manage ungoverned spaces by controlling them as operational bases or making them a place for illicit deals. Some EAOs have utilized time wisely by waiting upon Tatmadaw's blunders, which they could strategically use to their advantage. Support is an interesting case because since there are many EAOs, the NLD and NUG have both stated, albeit implicitly, that they wished to work with all of the EAOs. Since some of the EAOs also wished to restore the civilian regime, their attempts at enhancing their perceived legitimacy included forming alliances with people affiliated with the CDM. Furthermore, lastly, most EAOs still practice ethnonationalism in their insurgency, hindering full cooperation between EAOs. However, further research should be conducted because higher generalizability

is needed to understand the EAOs' role in this endeavor.

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