

Research Article

Between COVID-19, Coup, and Conflict: Multi-dimensional Threats to Human Security in Myanmar

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Abstract.

Conflict and civil wars are ongoing in Myanmar. Internal displaced persons of Rohingya are now more than one million people, according to United Nations. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Myanmar government continue using military approaches against its people, especially after the coup. This article will elaborates on the condition of Myanmar during the COVID-19 pandemic amid conflicts and military coups. It is essential to see how these three phenomena represent a multi-dimensional threat to the security of the people in Myanmar. This article uses a qualitative method with literature review as a data collection technique. Perspective of human security is used to analyse the issues regarding conflict, COVID-19, and coup in Myanmar with several dimensions of approach. The findings of this article show that the COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the human security for the people of Myanmar during conditions of conflict and continuous repression from the junta regime.

Keywords: COVID-19, conflict, coup, military regime, human security

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Published 24 February 2023

Publishing services provided by Knowledge E

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Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the 2nd ICPSH 2022 Conference Committee.

1. Introduction

Corona virus pandemic 2019 that originated in Wuhan, China has been spreading to the world including to its neighbour Myanmar, which shares 2.227 km border with China. The government announced that COVID-19 pandemic had entered Myanmar on March 23, 2020 with its confirmed first cases [1]. Myanmar is particularly vulnerable to the spread of COVID-19 with a fragile health system exacerbated by a long period of conflict and civil wars.

Myanmar responded early after its first cases with established the Inter-Ministerial Working Committee, enforce several containment measures, and impose the lockdown to prevent the spread of COVID-19 [2]. However, the case numbers rapidly increased. On February 2021, around 140,600 COVID-19 cases have been confirmed in Myanmar

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[3], during the military coup. Although the Myanmar government has stated that it will try to deal with the COVID-19 outbreak, the Myanmar military continues to intensify attacks in several areas inhabited by Rohingya Muslims, especially in Rakhine, Chin, and Karen [4]. The junta government also performed repressive actions against citizens who held demonstrations against an undemocratic government. Various bad records inherited from the past and even now regarding human rights violations and the use of a coercive approach in dealing with conflicts, as well as horizontal and vertical conflicts in the country, still make the democratic transition in Myanmar unstable. Democratic transition is exacerbated by a military junta's coup in 2021 during the COVID-19 period, making the people of Myanmar not only fight against the pandemic but also against oppression from the government.

The previous researches regarding this issue are [2, 3, 4]. Oo et.al show that Myanmar still facing the impact of pandemic COVID-19. However, government actions to tackling COVID-19 with the centralized "whole-of-government" approach worsening the social and political situation to Myanmar people. Myanmar people facing double threat which are COVID-19 and also the repression from the junta. Furthermore, conflict is still escalating in Rakhine state have make Rohingya people have been displaced making total number of internally displaced person at approximately 457,000 in 2019[2]. Han et.al also state that the military coup is causing an uptick in violence, increased discrimination against racial and ethnic minorities, and harder access for aid workers, already restricted by the COVID-19 outbreak. The people of Myanmar are fighting for their freedom from persecution at the same time that the international community is battling COVID-19. At a time when coordinated attempts to manage COVID-19 are impeded by political restraints, this required response to preserve their human rights runs the risk of accelerating COVID-19's spread. Nearly two months have passed after the coup d'état, numerous nonviolent protestors have suffered fatalities, injuries, or threats, and the planned COVID-19 immunization campaign was halted [3]. Putri et.al also state that Myanmar's shoddy healthcare system has made the nation more susceptible to a pandemic. The fact that there are still active local ethnic tensions makes this issue worse. The onset of a pandemic condition aggravated the humanitarian disaster that developed as a result of the armed conflict. The refugee camp does not meet the requirements of the health protocol for the application of physical separation or other health treatments. The Myanmar Army is still engaged in armed operations in the middle of this, and make Myanmar vulnerable because of ongoing armed conflicts and a health crisis[4]. Those previous researches show the same case with my research by focusing on Myanmar

condition during COVID-19 pandemic. However, the three previous researches do not use the perspective of human security, which I refer to.

2. Method

The research method in this article uses qualitative research methods with focus on case study of Myanmar in the pandemic COVID-19 era. The purpose of qualitative research is to examine and comprehend the significance that some persons or groups of people ascribe to social or human problems [5]. The data collection technique is the literature study from journal sources, reports, or surveys from international institutions, mass media, and official documents from international institutions. These data sources are then collected and analyzed inductively to be categorized and developed into research findings or results. In analyzing the multi-dimensional impact faced by Myanmar in this era of COVID-19, conflict, and the coup, use the concept of human security. The concept of Human Security in UNDP [6] has two definitions, first, security from chronic threats such as hunger, disease, and repression. Second, namely protection from sudden and dangerous disturbances in the pattern of daily life. Human security concept also have seven element that are defined by United Nations, there are environmental security, economic security, food security, personal security, health security, political security, and community security.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Domestic Condition of Myanmar before the Pandemic

Myanmar is a country that borders Thailand, Laos, China, India, and Bangladesh. Myanmar is also a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, with Burma as the majority ethnicity, most of whom live in mainland Myanmar—followed by ethnic minorities such as Shan, Karen, Rohingya, Chinese, Mon, Tamil, Assamese, Chin, Hmong, and several ethnic groups. Other minorities live in the highlands, and the majority are poor. Of these several ethnic groups, the life of the Rohingya is the worst. Myanmar's government does not recognize the Rohingya ethnicity. It treats Rohingya with direct repression and violence, structural violence, and cultural violence by the Myanmar government and the majority of ethnic Burmese Buddhists [7].

Political developments in Myanmar reflect the pressures and struggles for authority between ethnic groups in the region. The struggle for resources between these ethnic

groups in the country has occurred from before colonialism to post-colonial times. This impacts Myanmar's social, security, political, and economic structures, especially the conception of national security in the face of threats from division and civil war (intra-state conflict). This was exacerbated when Myanmar gained independence from Britain in 1948. Through a military coup in 1962, Myanmar was ruled by a government that denied the recognition and survival rights of these ethnic minorities. The regime is responsible for thousands of internally displaced persons, both those still surviving in Myanmar and migrating to other countries in search of political asylum. During the cold war, the actions of authoritarian governments in human rights violations did not get a response from the outside world. Since the Cold War, Myanmar, under General Ne Win's leadership in 1962, isolated itself from external affairs with the outside world and did not get involved in the feud between the two blocs of the US and the USSR.

In the economic sector, with "the Burmese road to socialism," Myanmar implemented a unique isolationist development to avoid the exploitation of neo-colonialism by nationalizing almost all fields, such as the economy, business, and media. Even the United States at that time, in the 1960s/70s, did not try to provide economic sanctions in Myanmar regarding human rights violations by its government because of the limitations of US investors' economic investment there [8]. However, the continuity of the practice of authoritarianism in Myanmar does not necessarily stand without resistance. Ethnic minorities threatened by the regime's coercive policies took military resistance against the government. For example, the formation of the KNU (Karen National Union), which has the military wing of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). In 1976 several minority groups also allied to form the National Democratic Front (NDF). Political dynamics also emerged with large demonstrations in 1988 which the Myanmar government responded with military action. The Military Junta Regime and the State Law and Order Restoration Committee (SLORC) then stood up and ruled Myanmar using "martial law" for the protesters. SLORC is still fighting ethnic minority groups, implementing forced labor, restricting media freedom, and imprisoning thousands of political protesters. This demonstration resulted in a series of changes with the holding of elections in 1990, the constitution of 1991, the name "Burma" was changed to the name "Myanmar", while SLORC was renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). However, the victory of Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party in the election was rejected by the SPDC, implying that Aung San Suu Kyi was detained under house arrest.

In domestic politics, the action of the junta government in maintaining its political power and not wanting to transfer power is to use a coercive approach. General

elections held free and fair by the junta government were only procedural and harmed democratization. The non-recognition of the NLD's victory in the 1990 elections until the detention of Aung San Suu Kyi at that time indicated that the regime was not ready for democracy. Political and economic reform efforts by the military junta regime in Myanmar began to show improvement after intense international pressure from the United Nations, donor agencies, the United States government, and INGOs such as Amnesty International. As stated by Archarya [8], several international factors play a role in promoting democracy in a country. First, international policies and pressures. Second, western assistance in promoting democracy. The third is sanctions from international agencies or institutions, and the fourth is the effect of external demonstrations.

Following various pressures and protests from within and abroad, Myanmar must start carrying out reforms regarding its political and economic policies. In 2003, PM Khin Nyunt initiated efforts to reform and restore democracy through the "roadmap to democracy" initiative, resulting in changes to the 2008 constitution and elections in 2010, which resulted in the election of moderate generals and initiated changes in Myanmar to a more democratic direction. The process of policy change in this transitional government is not only for maintaining security within the country but also for security from external threats. They were especially maintaining the country's position in the international system. Changes in the international situation after the Cold War, and international pressures regarding various cases of domestic human rights violations, inevitably forced the Myanmar military junta regime to carry out political changes or reforms. The regime is also trying to gain support and understanding from the international political system by engaging regional and institutional institutions to face the challenges of an anarchic international structure.

The feud between the SPDC and the NLD was also still ongoing when in 2004, the NLD refused to be involved in the National Convention in formulating the deliberation of basic principles on Myanmar's new constitution. It culminated in a protest led by monks, the "saffron revolution," in 2007, which resulted in about 31 people killed and thousands of protesters being arrested [9]. After the 2008 referendum and the Cyclone Nargis tragedy, 2008 the NLD declared the "Shwegondaing Declaration." This declaration demanded the government release several NLD leaders, review and amend the 2008 constitution, reopen NLD offices in several regions, recognize the results of the 1990 elections and call for open dialogue with the regime.

Post-election 2010 and the election of general U Thein Sein, known to be moderate, is considered to signal a democratic transition in Myanmar. The first demilitarization efforts marked the democratic transition in Myanmar by retiring general Than Shwe and

making a timeframe within the framework of a “seven-step roadmap”. This is the first step because the consolidation of democracy in the era of transition from an authoritarian military regime must be carried out without the military’s presence in formal politics and business. Even so, general U Thein Sein was still paternalistic and continued to control the military in civilian and political life [10]. Second, the release of hundreds of political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi, in November 2010, as an anticipate internal popular uprising. Third, giving freedom to the mass media in terms of disseminating information. Furthermore, fourth, following the breath of liberal democracy, recognizing the need to synergize not only with China but also with Western countries, enhance economic development in Myanmar, and open up the Myanmar economy more broadly to foreign investment.

The announcement of a ceasefire (truce) between the KNU paramilitary alliance and several armed civilian forces with the government in 2011 shows significant progress in conflict management efforts, at least in short to medium term. Relations with Western countries began to improve, and the US began to open diplomatic relations with Myanmar fully. Meanwhile, the EU withdrew sanctions and an economic embargo in May 2012. Several achievements in the economic and political fields were shown in the reform era of U Thein Sein, although the policy towards the Rohingya case did not show significant changes. Myanmar was increasingly active in multilateral forums in U Thein Sein era, marked by the first time Myanmar was trusted to be the chair of ASEAN in 2014 which proved the international trust in Myanmar’s democratization process in Thein Sein era.

Myanmar’s era of democratization reached its peak when the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi won elections in 2015 and started administrative rule from 2016 to 2021. International support for Suu Kyi is a source of external legitimacy that Myanmar needs. However, the NLD and Suu Kyi also still desperately need the support of domestic legitimacy from the people and domestic constituents to maintain a civilian government. This is mainly related to the increasing exhalation of conflict between Buddhists and Muslims. Until its peak, “clearance operations” exploded in 2016-2017, which caused a massive exodus of ethnic Rohingya to Bangladesh [11]. Suu Kyi considered a pro-democracy figure, also sided with Buddhist “nationalism” and was pro-military because of her efforts to maintain the source of domestic political legitimacy. The military campaign launched by the Myanmar military forces in the northern Rakhine state triggered a backlash from the ethnic army [12]. Following the 2017 Rohingya crisis, the NLD government sought to counteract the diplomatic repercussions of the controversial policy in a reactive manner.

The Myanmar peace process had stalled since October 2018 when the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Shan State Recovery Council (RCSS) withdrew from government-led negotiations. Although there have been formal meetings between ethnic armed organizations (EAO), governments, and political parties to revive the peace negotiation process in 2020, COVID-19 has hindered these efforts, and the Panglong conference scheduled for 2020 was postponed.

3.2. Myanmar and COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 hit Myanmar as the country experienced increased violence and civil war between the Myanmar military and ethnic soldiers, especially in the Rakhine state. Meanwhile, in Northern Shan state, there has also been an increase in violent conflicts between the Tatmadaw and several groups, including the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, from 2019 to 2020. These conflicts have displaced tens of thousands of ethnic groups, including around 130,000 Rohingya. On the eve of the pandemic, thousands of people across Myanmar lived in refugee camps without proper access to public services and poor sanitation [13].

In 2019 alone, some 80,000 people were displaced due to conflict and violence, bringing the total number of internally displaced persons to around 457,000. Fighting has continued in several states of Karen, Shan, Rakhine, and Chin amid COVID-19. Myanmar responded to the COVID-19 outbreak quite quickly before the WHO declared COVID-19 a global health emergency. Myanmar established an Inter-Ministerial Working Committee, followed by a National Central Committee to prevent, control, and deal with COVID-19, chaired by State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi [2]. However, a military coup occurred in 2021 with the arrests of President Win Myint and State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi. As of February 2021, around 140,600 COVID-19 cases have been confirmed in Myanmar, and around 3,100 COVID-19 patients have died [3]. Also, in first February 2021, there was a military coup by the State Administration Council (SAC) under General Min Aung Hlaing. The coup drew criticism from outside and inside through national protests and the formation of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), and armed resistance by the People's Defense Forces (PDF). Many nurses, health workers, and civil servants quit their jobs and joined the "Civil Disobedience Movement" (CDM) as a movement to protest peacefully and non-violently against the military coup. Respond to the protest, repression from government was also launched against protestants. On the other hand, to increase domestic legitimacy, the SAC spread conspiracy theories about corruption and NLD election fraud and blamed ethnic minorities for spreading COVID-19. Even

Min Aung called the NLD government a terrorist, accusing opponents of deliberately spreading COVID-19 and bombing hospital clinics [14].

The SAC also weakened economic policies and did not take appropriate measures to deal with the pandemic, resulting in a currency crisis, investors fleeing, and the near-total collapse of the financial sector. The approach taken by the military junta government in dealing with the pandemic is a "whole-of-government" approach which is a challenge because there are political players and scenarios at play, especially in the context of conflict, peace, and security in Myanmar. Efforts to reduce CDM actions were carried out by the junta government through increasing repressive actions and implementing many restrictions, including turning off internet access and access to social media such as Facebook, which are used to coordinate CDM activities [15].

UNICEF also reported an increase of GBV cases in Myanmar, around 32% than before COVID-19, most of which were carried out by partners [16]. In addition to increasing levels of violence, COVID-19 has also increased psychological and economic stress, decreased access to services, including health services and legal services, and the fragmentation of social network support. Restrictions on access to social media such as Facebook also hinder awareness campaigns about GBV (Gender Based Violence), where information and support for survivors are needed through these media. At least 217 people have been killed during interrogations and more than 12,000 people arrested for anti-regime activities[17]. Junta also murdered at least 2,404 civilians since the coup February last year [18].

Human insecurity cases in Myanmar are interconnected, and pandemic exacerbated conflict. The conflict shows that state security is still prioritized compared to human security. Myanmar people and especially Rohingya people must deal with an oppressive junta and also the threatening COVID-19. The phenomenon in Myanmar in era of COVID-19 relate to what Newman states about critical human security approach which see the manifestation of human insecurities as a reflection of the structural inequalities and abuses of power that exacerbated the impact of COVID-19 pandemic. By the human security perspective, the condition in Myanmar also exposes social and economic disparities, gendered impact of COVID-19, food insecurities, ethnic and racial minorities, migrants and forcibly-displaced persons, and also exposes government that has involved repression, control and surveillance among its citizens during COVID-19 [19].

4. Conclusion

From Human Security point of view, *first*, there are needs to initiate regional and international dialogue to address human security needs, to protect asylum seekers of Rohingya and Myanmar people. *Second*, we have to exert pressure to Myanmar government to cooperate with other actors (State and non-state actors) to give aid and humanitarian assistance dealing with COVID-19 and also enforce Myanmar junta to continue “COVID cease fire” among its people. The functions of control, supervision, coordination, solidarity, and preparedness of countries in the region in facing various risks and threats in a dynamic global world must continue to be improved.

The Myanmar government must be able to resolve domestic conflicts concerning ethnic conflicts and conflicts of separatism by peaceful means. Using a coercive approach in dealing with the issue of separatism and ethnic conflict will hinder conflict resolution efforts. Respect for human rights and efforts for peaceful conflict resolution is very important. The regime needs to work hard to uphold human rights and democratize. This is important to improve the image as a regime capable of creating national stability to strengthen the pillars of substantial democracy and first address economic and social problems at the domestic level. Decades in the grip of the military junta regime with isolationist policies that caused political and economic stagnation caused Myanmar to become one of the underdeveloped countries where political and economic progress was slow. The Myanmar government also needs to change the orientation of the country’s political and security policies, which tend to be inward-looking to more outward-looking.

Conflict of Interest

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Acknowledgment

The Author would like to say thank to Faculty of Social and Political Science, Universitas Jenderal Soedirman that provide funding for the publication of this paper.

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