HIGH SCHOOL JOURNAL FOR ACADEMIC RESEARCH
hsjar.org

The Burma Catastrophe

Myanmar's Civil War: How It Started, Who's Fighting, and Where It's Going

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Abstract

Myanmar's army seized power on February 1, 2021, and set off a war it has not been able to win. The fight is old. Ethnic groups have resisted central rule since independence in 1948, and the army has run the country for most of that time. What changed in 2021 is scale. For the first time, the Bamar heartland rose up alongside the ethnic armies on the borders.

The coup was led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. It ended ten years of partial democracy and pushed peaceful protesters to take up arms. Today the army faces the National Unity Government (NUG), its People's Defence Force (PDF), and a set of ethnic armed groups.

This paper covers six things:

- How the conflict started, from the 1947 Panglong Agreement to the 2021 coup
- Who is fighting on each side
- How the war turned, led by the Operation 1027 offensive in late 2023
- What the war has cost in lives, homes, and money
- What China, Russia, the US, ASEAN, and Myanmar's neighbors want
- Four ways the war could end

1. How It Started (1947 to 2020)

1.1 British rule split the country in two

The British ran Burma as two separate places. "Ministerial Burma" covered the central lowlands, where most people are Bamar. The "Frontier Areas" covered the hills, home to the Shan, Karen, Kachin, Chin, and Karenni. These regions were governed differently and never fully joined up. That split outlasted colonial rule (Smith, 1999; Thant Myint-U, 2020).

1.2 Panglong promised autonomy, then the promise broke

In February 1947, independence leader General Aung San signed the Panglong Agreement with Shan, Kachin, and Chin leaders. It promised them self-rule, control over their own money, and for some states, the right to leave the union after ten years (Smith, 1999).

Aung San was killed in July 1947. Under Prime Minister U Nu, the new state moved toward central rule built around Bamar identity. Minority groups saw this as a betrayal. Within months of independence in 1948, Karen, Mon, communist, and other armed groups were in revolt (Smith, 1999).

1.3 The army made itself the guardian of the nation

The army, called the Tatmadaw, came to see itself as the only force that could hold the country together (Callahan, 2003). General Ne Win took power in a 1962 coup and set up a military dictatorship under the "Burmese Way to Socialism" (Steinberg, 2010).

In the late 1960s, the army adopted the "Four Cuts" strategy. The goal was to cut rebels off from food, money, information, and recruits. In practice, that meant burning villages, forcing people from their homes, and punishing whole communities (Smith, 1999). The army still fights this way today.

1.4 The 2008 constitution kept the army in charge

Mass protests in 1988 and 2007, plus years of Western sanctions, pushed the generals to write a new constitution in 2008. It gave the army 25% of all seats in parliament. That was enough to block any change to the constitution. The army chief also kept direct control of three ministries: Defense, Home Affairs, and Border Affairs (Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2008).

1.5 Ten years of partial democracy

The 2010 election brought a mixed civilian and military government under President Thein Sein. In 2015, Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won by a landslide. A Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement was signed that same year with several ethnic armies, but real peace never came (Thant Myint-U, 2020).

The army also kept its grip on the economy. It owns two huge business groups, Myanma Economic Holdings Limited and the Myanmar Economic Corporation, which gave it money and power outside civilian control (Human Rights Council, 2019).

2. The 2021 Coup and the Return to War

2.1 The army lost an election and took power anyway

In the November 2020 election, the NLD won 396 seats in the national parliament, more than 83% of the seats where voting went ahead (Eleven Myanmar, 2020). The army's party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party, lost badly across the country.

Min Aung Hlaing claimed mass voter fraud but offered no proof. On February 1, 2021, hours before the new parliament was due to meet, soldiers arrested President Win Myint, Aung San Suu Kyi, and other civilian leaders. All state power went to a new military body, the State Administration Council (SAC) (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2026).

2.2 Peaceful protest turned into armed revolt

The first response was peaceful. Through the Civil Disobedience Movement, hundreds of thousands of doctors, nurses, teachers, bank staff, and civil servants walked off the job. Key parts of the economy shut down. Millions marched in Yangon, Mandalay, Naypyidaw, and other cities, many raising the three-finger salute.

The junta answered with snipers, live rounds, mass arrests, and night raids. That violence pushed the movement to arm itself. The timeline moved fast:

1. April 2021: ousted lawmakers formed the National Unity Government as a shadow government.
2. May 2021: the NUG created the People's Defence Force as its armed wing.
3. September 2021: the NUG declared a nationwide "defensive war" against the junta (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2026).

3. Who Is Fighting

This war is not confined to the borderlands like past ones. Fighting has spread into Bamar heartland regions such as Sagaing and Magway. Old ethnic armies now fight next to new pro-democracy militias.

3.1 The resistance

The NUG and its People's Defence Force coordinate hundreds of local defense units and city guerrilla cells across central Myanmar. They started with hunting rifles and homemade bombs. They now use captured army weapons, black market arms, and guns built in their own workshops.

The ethnic armed groups fall into three camps, shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Ethnic armed groups in the war

Group	Camp	Where	Role
Karen National Liberation Army	Openly with the resistance	Kayin State	Trains new units, shares bases and heavy weapons
Kachin Independence Army	Openly with the resistance	Far north	Trains new units, shares bases and heavy weapons
Karenni Army	Openly with the resistance	Kayah State	Trains new units, shares bases and heavy weapons
Arakan Army	Three Brotherhood Alliance	Rakhine State	Overruns army bases, takes and holds territory
Ta'ang National Liberation Army	Three Brotherhood Alliance	Northern Shan State	Overruns army bases, takes and holds territory
Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army	Three Brotherhood Alliance	Kokang region, Shan State	Overruns army bases, takes and holds territory
United Wa State Army	Neutral	Eastern Shan State, on the China border	Runs its own armed mini-state, avoids fighting, sells arms across the region

3.2 The junta

The junta still has the regular army, navy, and air force. But years of fighting on many fronts have worn them down. Troops are tired, morale is low, desertion is high, and new recruits are hard to find.

To fill the gaps, the junta leans on two other forces. Pyusawhti militias are armed, ultra-nationalist village groups set up to fight local resistance. Border Guard Forces are former ethnic militias folded into the army's chain of command.

4. How the War Is Being Fought

4.1 Operation 1027 turned the war

The Three Brotherhood Alliance and its partners launched Operation 1027 in late October 2023. It changed the course of the war. By early January 2024, the offensive had taken more than 200 army camps and 10 townships in northern Shan State, along with major border crossings and key trade routes to China (Radio Free Asia, 2024a).

The biggest prize was Laukkai. On January 4, 2024, the army's regional command there surrendered, and the alliance said about 2,389 troops and family members gave themselves up. It was one of the largest command-level defeats in the Tatmadaw's history (Radio Free Asia, 2024a).

The win in Shan set off a chain reaction. Resistance forces attacked at the same time in Rakhine, Chin, Karenni, and Karen states (bdnews24, 2023). They took dozens of towns, main roads, and border posts along the Thai and Indian borders.

4.2 Cheap drones vs. air power

The resistance turned store-bought drones into bombers. They use them to hit artillery, supply lines, and command bunkers.

The army no longer has enough foot soldiers to hold ground in the border regions. So it fights from a distance with air strikes, long-range artillery, and shelling from ships. It also burns villages to deny the resistance local support.

4.3 Forced conscription backfired

Short on troops, the junta announced on February 10, 2024, that it would enforce the 2010 People's Military Service Law (Radio Free Asia, 2024b). Instead of filling the ranks, the draft set off a mass exodus. Many young people went into hiding, fled to resistance-held border areas, or left the country (Radio Free Asia, 2024b).

5. Outside Players

Myanmar sits on major trade routes between China, India, and the Indian Ocean. That makes its war a regional problem, not just a domestic one. Table 2 sets out what each outside player wants and does.

6. The Human and Economic Cost

6.1 Millions displaced, more than 100,000 dead

Nearly 3.8 million people had been forced from their homes inside Myanmar as of June 2026 (UNICEF, 2026). Hundreds of thousands more have fled to Thailand, India, and Bangladesh (UNHCR, 2026). Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) counted more than 100,000 conflict-related deaths on all sides by July 2026 (RTÉ News, 2026).

Rights groups have documented war crimes by the army. These include deliberate air strikes on schools, temples, churches, clinics, and camps for displaced people (Khaosod English, 2026). The Rohingya in Rakhine State are trapped between both sides. They face new waves of displacement, forced recruitment, and continued denial of basic rights (Human Rights Council, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Table 2. Outside players in Myanmar's war

Player	What it wants	What it does
China	Protect its Belt and Road projects, including the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, oil pipelines, and deep-sea ports	Keeps ties with the junta and with the strong ethnic armies on its border; brokers short ceasefires to keep trade moving (bdnews24, 2023)
Russia	Keep a client state and arms buyer	Main foreign arms supplier to the junta: fighter jets, attack helicopters, armored vehicles; shields it at the UN (UN News, 2023)
US and Western nations	Pressure the junta, support the opposition	Sanctions on junta leaders, army-owned firms, and jet fuel suppliers; under the BURMA Act, the US gives non-lethal aid and technical help to opposition and civil groups (Burma Unified Through Rigorous Military Accountability Act of 2022; Radio Free Asia, 2023)
ASEAN	Contain the crisis inside the region	Set out a Five-Point Consensus peace plan in April 2021; the junta ignored it, so ASEAN now bars its political leaders from top summits and accepts only non-political envoys (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2021; Al Jazeera, 2021)
Thailand and India	Stable borders	Keep working security ties with the junta to manage refugees and cross-border crime, while watching resistance gains near their borders

6.2 The economy is in free fall

The kyat has lost much of its value. Prices have soared, many families cannot afford enough food, and big cities lose power every day.

With no law and order in the border zones, illegal business has boomed. Large-scale online scam compounds and drug trafficking networks now operate openly in these areas (Al Jazeera, 2023).

7. Four Ways This Could End

Analysts point to four likely outcomes. They are not equally likely, and the war could move between them.

Table 3. Four possible outcomes

Scenario	What happens	What would drive it
Long stalemate and a divided country	The junta holds the big cities and key infrastructure. The resistance holds the border states. Myanmar splits in practice, if not on paper.	Neither side can break the other
Slow resistance victory	The resistance cuts off army commands and cities one by one. Supply problems become too much, and the army collapses or its leaders are replaced from within.	Continued battlefield losses, desertion, failed conscription
Collapse into warlord rule	Central power falls apart with no united group to replace it. The country breaks into armed fiefdoms run by regional strongmen.	Junta collapse before the resistance agrees on a shared government
Negotiated federal deal	Military losses and outside pressure push the main players into a real ceasefire and talks on a federal democracy.	Army weakness plus pressure from China, ASEAN, and the West

8. Bottom Line

The coup was meant to lock in army rule. Instead, it united much of the country against the army for the first time since independence.

The junta still has the bigger guns, the only air force, and steady arms from Russia. What it has lost is control of the ground and any claim to legitimacy. It now holds less territory each year and cannot draft enough soldiers to win it back.

The resistance faces the opposite problem. It has proven it can beat the army in the field and get Bamar and ethnic groups to fight side by side. It has not yet shown it can agree on how to share power once the fighting stops. That question, more than any battle, will decide which of the four outcomes Myanmar gets.

For outside governments, three moves matter most: keep aid flowing to the nearly 3.8 million displaced, cut the junta's access to jet fuel and arms, and back talks on a federal constitution before the country splinters further.

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