

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Root of Conflict Podcast

Episode: Political Resistance in Myanmar

featuring
Jason Gelbort

interviewed by
Sahara Chen and Anupriya Nag

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Full Transcript

Reema Saleh: Hi, this is Reema, and you're listening to the University of Chicago Public Policy Podcasts.

Reema Saleh: You're listening to Root of Conflict, a podcast about violent conflict around the world, and the people, societies, and policy issues it affects. In this series you'll hear from experts and practitioners who conduct research, implement programs, and use data analysis to address some of the most pressing challenges facing our world. Root of Conflict is produced by UC3P in collaboration with the Pearson Institute for the Study and Resolution of Global Conflict, a research institute housed within the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago.

Reema Saleh: In February 2021, the Myanmar military initiated a coup, throwing the country back into its long history of authoritarian rule. As the military has taken control, public resistance against it has become unprecedented. In this episode, we speak with Jason Gelbort, an international lawyer and legal advisor working in Myanmar. He is the founder and executive director of Upland Advisors, a nonprofit organization supporting sustainable peace building initiatives and human rights advocacy.

Sahara Chen: Hi, I'm Sahara. I am a fourth-year undergraduate student at the University of Chicago. I major in public policy, political science and philosophy. I'm really interested in protection of human rights and women's right.

Anupriya Nag: My name is Anupriya Nag. I am a first year MPP candidate at Harris and I'm a Pearson Fellow. And I'm primarily interested in the human impact of conflict in post-colonial settings.

Jason Gelbort: Hi, my name is Jason Gelbort. I'm the executive director of Upland Advisors, doing work related to the situation in Burma or Myanmar. Happy to be here with you all. Thank you.

Anupriya Nag: We want to talk mainly about the current situation in Myanmar. Or before we start, should we say Myanmar or Burma?

Jason Gelbort: Either is fine.

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Anupriya Nag: Okay. But before we do that, could you walk us through a short history of democratization in Myanmar?

Jason Gelbort: Sure. I think in order to talk about the current situation is helpful to talk about democratization as well as the history of conflict in the country. The civil wars in the country basically date back to independence and over 70 years. So, it's arguably the longest running civil war in the world and multiple civil wars.

Jason Gelbort: So, it's a highly multiparty complicated set of internal conflicts that involve multiple different ethnic groups basically resisting the central government and military trying to impose central rule in different areas. And often, we think of civil war as sort of insurgencies, trying to take power away from the central government... But for much of this history of civil war, it's actually been the central government trying to expand power into areas where they've never had control.

Jason Gelbort: And so that's been going on for a very long time. And you know, since over 60 years, there's been military rule of different kinds, direct dictatorship, and different types of military authoritarian regimes. The military imposed their own constitution that is called the 2008 Constitution, but it was put into practice following elections that were neither free nor fair in 2010.

Jason Gelbort: And then elections subsequent to that where the National League for Democracy began to get a shared power with the military. So, there was an opening period starting in 2010, but we wouldn't say it was a trajectory towards liberal democracy... more of an opening of some economic liberalization and some sharing of power between a civilian government and a military government. That's a very brief overview.

Sahara Chen: As we all know here, it has been a year since the military coup in February 2021. Could you please walk us through a little bit about what happened back then?

Jason Gelbort: Sure. There was another election in November of 2020 where the National League for Democracy won in a massive landslide. And there was a power struggle between the commander in chief of the military and the leadership of that NLD party... that's the party led by Aung San Suu Kyi. And for perhaps numerous reasons, early in the morning before the new parliament was to take office, the military basically rounded up much of the elected leadership, including the President Aung San Suu Kyi and democratic activists, unlawfully detained them, and attempted to take control of the country.

Jason Gelbort: So that was February 1st of 2021. There was, after a few days, mass protests in the streets that were initiated mostly at first by young people, labor movement, young women, people working in the civil service, medical professionals... but spread throughout much of the country, probably many millions of people simultaneously. And after about a couple weeks, the military responded with real severe violence and a deadly force against the protest.

Jason Gelbort: We could walk through what happened since then, but it's been a brutal, brutal, brutal campaign by the military to try to suppress the opposition by the people. I think often when we think of a coup around the world, we think of some group of people, perhaps the military, taking over power of a government and of a country. It's not that simple archetype in this case.

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Jason Gelbort: In Myanmar, the military doesn't have its own base of support other than its own troops and the families of the troops and a real small amount of people. You have the mass of the population in opposition to the military, and there's no natural support base for them. They lack any popular support. They haven't been able to govern the country. They basically have been using violence to attempt to control territory and have been actually losing control over territory. But have been using artillery, airstrikes, et cetera, to basically destroy villages, destroy cities, kill their enemies, which are just the people of the country.

Sahara Chen: And in your opinion, what are some events that led to this military takeover?

Jason Gelbort: I don't know that we fully know all the answers to that. I think there's a few different likely contributing factors. A major one would be the personal interests of the commander in chief. What led many people not to expect this type of action to take place was that the military had designed the political system that was in place. They created the 2008 constitution. That constitution gave the military a lot of different elements of political power.

Jason Gelbort: The military was the most important economic actor in the country. They have holding companies where they control many different elements of the economy. And certainly, the top generals and their families are incredibly wealthy through the system. You would rationally... it would seem that maybe they were very well off and didn't need to do that. But clearly, they made the calculation that it was better to fully take control of the country rather than continue to share it.

Jason Gelbort: And so, one reason would be that the commander in chief wasn't content with his position. Technically, he was supposed to retire in July of 2021. Although he had been supposed to retire five years earlier and hadn't in an arrangement with the NLD president. That might have been a factor. He certainly wanted to become president himself. And now he's declared himself the de facto authority of the country. There's some personal power interest there.

Jason Gelbort: Clearly, there were some miscalculations about how easy it would be to take control of the country, that they thought that they would be able to just do this and then the people would allow them to do so. There had been previous coups throughout the history of the country and all of them went more smoothly than this one has from the perspective of the military.

Jason Gelbort: So, I think those are some of the calculations. They certainly would've included in their calculation some international pressures coming about after their actions. And maybe there's been more pressure internationally than they calculated, but probably not enough that they would've behaved differently knowing the lack of real international pressure to try to reverse the actions that they took.

Anupriya Nag: And in trying to maintain this kind of blanket control over the population, what are some of the control mechanisms that the military has used this time around?

Jason Gelbort: I mean, really the answer is violence. I mean, we should be clear that they don't have what we would call effective control over the country, where the public have not acquiesced to their attempt to govern. I mean, it's pretty remarkable and I think hard to fathom living in the United States or much of the rest of the world that there are still protests every single day in many parts of the country.

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Jason Gelbort: They've had to adapt. They're no longer thousands of people on the street because they'll be murdered. They're done in more safe way before the sun comes up or they're flash protests, things like that. People are still demonstrating that they reject the military. There's something called the civil disobedience. I'll get to your question after I mention some of these things. There's something called the civil disobedience movement, where at least 400,000 members of the civil service have refused to work in the administration under the military control.

Jason Gelbort: These are doctors, bankers, people throughout all parts of a public administration. And basically, a general strike. And I mean, I think it's incredibly remarkable for people to give up their livelihood. And in most cases, their housing and other basic necessities for survival are tied to their jobs if you work for the government there. And then, you have people boycotting companies that are consumer facing, that are linked to the military.

Anupriya Nag: Could you give us some examples?

Jason Gelbort: The most well-known example is Myanmar Beer, which is the most popular beer brand in the country and incredibly profitable. There's calculations that, in the past year, they've lost tens of millions of dollars in revenue.

Anupriya Nag: And are they linked to the military?

Jason Gelbort: They're half owned by the military and half owned by Kirin Beer, which is trying to get out of that partnership, the Japanese beer company. There's... people have published basically all of these different consumer brands that are linked to the military that they're refusing to make profitable.

Jason Gelbort: People from the military are leaving the military, are defecting. And the military is finding it hard to recruit new troops. There's lots of things that are happening, making it hard for them to function and making it costly for them. The military is mostly using violence. They're threatening. People aren't paying their taxes; people aren't paying their electricity bills. For example, now military police or soldiers will go and basically tell people "We're going to shut off your electricity if you don't pay your bill" or physically threatening people to pay their electricity bill, because they need that revenue.

Jason Gelbort: But the biggest thing is basically shelling into villages and towns where people oppose military more openly. There's dozens of villages being burned down. Hundreds and hundreds of civilian homes have been completely destroyed. Dozens of religious buildings have been destroyed. I think the highest number of attacks on healthcare workers and facilities in the world took place in Myanmar last year.

Jason Gelbort: For example, there was a huge surge in COVID last year there. And part of that was they destroyed the healthcare system because people didn't trust the military and people didn't want to work for the military. But also, basically they were doing sting operations against anyone who was providing healthcare not under their control and arresting doctors who weren't working for them.

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Jason Gelbort: They've arrested over 10,000 people who opposed them as political prisoners, often torturing them, sometimes to death. It's really horrendous. I mean, there's atrocity crimes taking place every day. People being tortured, burned to death, sexual violence. It's terrorism against the population.

Anupriya Nag: Speaking of human rights abuses, what are the implications of the coup for the roughly 600,000 Rohingya that are still in Myanmar?

Jason Gelbort: I mean, it only makes the situation for them far less secure and more dangerous. The military is using again, extremely racist rhetoric against Rohingya. And certainly, isn't even pretending to try to treat them as full humans. I think they're in an incredibly risky situation. And also, where they live, there's an ethnic resistance organization, called the Arakan Army, that has grown in strength and prominence over the past few years.

Jason Gelbort: And the military also tries to use the Rohingya to try to destabilize the situation, to prevent the Arakan Army from gaining strength. I think that there's definitely a very little likelihood that they'll regain their rights under military dictatorship of any kind. There's greater risk of insecurity and lack of humanitarian support. And there's a greater risk of future active violence that could be spurred on by the military.

Anupriya Nag: I ask because last month, Secretary of State Blinken finally referred to the atrocity as a genocide. I was wondering if this has changed anything that's been happening on the ground nationally or in the international community's response to the genocide.

Jason Gelbort: Whether Secretary of State Blinken's declaration has? I mean, I think it's interesting. It took a few years for that to come, but the military is committing, like I said, atrocity crimes every day against many communities in the country. And the genocide against Rohingya, there's a risk of that becoming worse again.

Jason Gelbort: I think the military is certainly aware that there's a lot of attention on the crimes they're committing, but they're by no means in any ways decreasing what they're doing. They're doing horrendous things all over the country. And there is more and more attention on it. There's lots of evidence being collected. There's a case at the International Court of Justice related to the genocide convention. There's an investigation at the International Criminal Court related to the deportation of the Rohingya.

Jason Gelbort: And then there's ongoing investigations related to crimes against Rohingya and crimes against other groups of people in the country, in the recent past and what's currently going on. So, I think the declaration by the U.S. government is an acknowledgement of what happened, and it reflects perhaps increased international attention to the continuing crimes as well.

Jason Gelbort: I think the U.S. has continued to put significant resources into human rights documentation and the humanitarian needs of the Rohingya community. I think that's one follow up on that declaration. But we're yet to see the positive results for people living in the country, or people displaced outside the country. And there's massive displacement. There were probably around a million people displaced inside the country now, and at least that in terms of refugee populations as well.

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Anupriya Nag: I know that the Rohingya have a lot more visibility in terms of the international community knowing about them. But could you maybe give us a couple of other examples of ethnic groups that we should be aware of who are facing horrific conditions as well?

Jason Gelbort: Yeah. The Rohingya have faced huge discrimination and persecution in multiple waves over the decades and rightly received a lot of international attention when the huge act of violence was committed against them. Over the past few years, there's close to a million who have been pushed into Bangladesh. And certainly, more than 10,000 were killed in a very short period of time in addition to many other crimes being committed against them in a short period of time.

Jason Gelbort: In terms of other ethnic groups and communities, there's many. It's a massively diverse country in terms of ethnicity, religion, linguistic groups. Some of the larger ethnic groups would be the Karens and Karenees and Mon and Shan live in the eastern side of the country. In the north, you have Kachin, Ta'ang. In the Northwest, Chin and Rakhine. But there's many others. And the majority group is the Myanmar or Burman. And of the non-Burman ethnic groups they're divided between Buddhist and Christian and other religions.

Jason Gelbort: It's incredibly diverse. And that's where a lot of the ongoing civil wars also come from is there's more than 20 different ongoing resistance organizations that are ethnic based as well.

Sahara Chen: You mentioned so far, there are certain ways that the international community has reacted to the atrocity happening in Myanmar. What are some other ways that the international community and international organization can do to help the ethnic groups in Myanmar going forward?

Jason Gelbort: Yeah, so some of the major calls both from different ethnic groups as well as from the rest of the prodemocracy movement... and I think it's important to note that we're at a really interesting social and political moment perhaps now, over the past year and going forward in that, particularly prior to 2021, there were still... Well, and there are now as well, but there were very large divisions politically between most of the Burman population and the other ethnic communities politically. But now, there's been much more, not perfect, but much more commonality between political leadership and communities because they have come more to recognize that there's a common problem in the military.

Jason Gelbort: The military is committing the same types of abuses and human rights violations against different ethnic communities around the country but also against majority Burman communities. And they're burning down villages in the Burman heartland and in the ethnic regions more in border areas. And people who have experienced expanded freedoms for a period of years, have now lost those freedoms and now have family members in prison and things like that and that crosses across different ethnic identities.

Jason Gelbort: There's much more of a shared political feeling and identity and movement now than ever before. That's really important. And something that I think sometimes is overlooked when we look at elite level politics and things, there's certainly in the protests you saw this, the large scale protests a year ago, or just over a year ago. But still, there's a real potential for social change to happen in addition to elite level change.

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Jason Gelbort: And so the calls that you see for international action come across a very wide swath of groups, not from only specific communities or interest groups or things like that. And those fall in a few different categories. One would be to politically isolate the military junta. There is, you have the military who are trying to impose their will and have control over the capital. But you also have a competing government called the National Unity Government that was formed by elected members of parliament and representatives of ethnic communities and civil society.

Jason Gelbort: And so, you have two competing governments in this situation. And so, a call is to increasingly recognize the government that's viewed as legitimate by the people. And to isolate the military, which is not viewed as legitimate by anybody just able to use violence to kill people. That means not letting them join different international meetings, not treating them as a government.

Jason Gelbort: A big one is to shut off access to funding to the military because they're using that funding to purchase weapons, especially from Russia. They're purchasing new jets, they're purchasing munitions, and they're using those to target people who are resisting them militarily, but especially, they're firing right into villages and urban centers and killing people every day. To try to cut off those funds, there's been a lot of sanctions, but pretty much only done by the U.S., EU, Canada and the U.K.

Jason Gelbort: There's been the major actors on financial sanctions, and there's still a lot of other areas that would be hugely significant on sanctions, especially on oil and gas, which is the major area of revenue for the junta, and on the financial sector to prevent access to funds flowing to the military. And also, more coordination internationally on these things.

Jason Gelbort: And then, another area would be more work on the human rights accountability side to level that up with support to local organizations that are doing documentation and to increase the international pressure on that. And I think the fourth thing would be to increase the direct support to the people on the ground. That there's a massive humanitarian crisis, economic bottoming out in the country.

Jason Gelbort: People are really suffering, and people are very resilient in helping each other, and also building up new local administrations and expanding how they provide different services for each other... humanitarian services, healthcare, education. Especially there's lots of parts of the country that the military doesn't reach other than with jets and helicopters. There's a lot that can be done to directly provide financial assistance, technical assistance, to help the people build up those services and help each other.

Anupriya Nag: And speaking on the role of the international community, what are some constraints on the provision of humanitarian aid that have arisen from post the coup?

Jason Gelbort: I'd say the largest constraint is international actors who choose to allow themselves to be constrained by wanting permission from the military. If they ask for permission from the military and want to get an agreement to work with the military and get travel authorization and form partnerships with the military. One, they're legitimizing the military. Two, they're being manipulated by the military. They're only going to be given permission to...

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Jason Gelbort: Basically, there's no way to do that in a neutral way. They're doing that, thinking that they're doing it in a neutral way, but this military has done this for decades. They know how to manipulate international actors, and they won't be able to get humanitarian assistance to the people who really need it. And that's been proven out over the past year, it was proven out previously. And starting in 2016, the military blocked the UN and others from crossing front lines in areas where they were still fighting in the north of the country. And they're doing that again.

Jason Gelbort: Basically, trying to make agreements with the military. The military is going to probably find ways to take a cut of that assistance. And more importantly, they're going to get to direct where it goes to their benefit in order to punish some parts of the civilian population and reward others.

Jason Gelbort: There's many other ways to try to deliver assistance. It's very difficult, but there's lots of ways to deliver assistance across borders, through local organizations. And yeah, I'd say there's many constraints, but that's a major one that has really limited access is the military itself.

Sahara Chen: As we are coming to an end here, could you please tell us a little bit more about what work is Upland Advisor doing for Myanmar?

Jason Gelbort: Yeah. I direct a not-for-profit organization called Upland Advisors. And we provide trusted advice on strategy, policy and law related matters, supporting a range of key stakeholders who are working to try to gain a more peaceful, just and democratic society that respects human rights.

Jason Gelbort: It's mostly involves responding to requests from those different actors, ethnic resistance organizations, civil society organizations, other democratic actors on how they can work together to advance their goals politically and engaging with the international community. It's a really challenging time for everyone that we try to work with. But it's also one where it's an honor to try to help anyone who is struggling to try to overcome these challenges.

Anupriya Nag: And to wrap up, what do you view or hope is the future of Myanmar? What do people in Myanmar hope is the future?

Jason Gelbort: I mean, I have many friends who are working really hard on things on the ground there and facing incredible hardships. I think they have to be driven by a real hope that there is an opportunity for transformational change and a goal of a future for themselves and their future generations, where the military is not a force in their politics.

Jason Gelbort: And through that they can have a country that is more democratic, more peaceful and has more quality across all the different groups of people living in the country. There's a lot to overcome right now, but I think there is hope that's embedded in the work that people are doing.

Reema Saleh: Thank you for listening to this episode of Root of Conflict, featuring Jason Gelbort. This episode was produced and edited by Reema Saleh and Ricardo Sande. Thank you to our interviewers, Sahara Chen and Anupriya Nag. Special thanks to UC3P and the Pearson Institute for their continued support of

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