

Electricity shortages add to woes in Myanmar after coup

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People line up to fill containers with water in Yangon on March 14, 2022, as thousands of people faced water shortages due to power outages in the city.
STR/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

On Feb. 1, exactly one year after the military coup in Myanmar, a man set himself on fire in front of his local electricity office. According to media reports of the incident, he was protesting against increasing power outages which had affected his iron fence business. He died later that day, leaving behind a handwritten note: "May all Myanmar citizens have light 24 hours a day. We are not going back to 2001-2002."

Back then, the country was isolated under military rule and was considered one of the world's least developed. Less than half of the population had electricity access, and extended power outages were common even in urban areas. This changed with the end of a half-century of direct military rule in 2011. Millions of people gained access to electricity in the ensuing years, while power outages decreased in frequency and duration.

The 2021 coup, however, has thrown Myanmar into an economic crisis and put its electrification plans in peril. Along with stopping cash flows and prompting a fall in currency value and rising food and fuel prices, the military takeover has triggered an energy crunch that has plunged communities across the country into darkness for hours on end every day.

The problem has been steadily worsening since around October, and has accelerated since the onset of the hot season in February. By early this month, water shortages had ensued in Yangon, and the residents of some neighbourhoods were lining up with buckets to collect water from charity groups.

On March 18, Yangon Electricity Supply Corp., which sits under the military-run Ministry of Electricity and Energy, announced it would begin supplying electricity on a timetable, with power outages happening for eight hours a day in the city and 12 hours a day in neighbourhoods on its outskirts, including its industrial zones. Although the formalization of rolling blackouts helps alleviate water shortages, it is another benchmark in the rollback of development gains made during the past decade's democratic transition, before the coup.

Street food vendors wait for customers during a power outage in Yangon on March 3.
-/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Most electricity in Myanmar comes from hydro power and offshore gas, and in public statements released in January and this month, the military has blamed the electricity shortages on rising global gas prices, maintenance work and the destruction of power lines.

But several other factors may play a role in the crisis. Since the coup, many international investors in the energy sector have pulled out or paused their projects. The regime's isolation is bound to continue with the U.S. declaring recently that the military committed genocide against the country's Rohingya people during a 2017 campaign of killings, arson and rape.

Since the coup, the Ministry of Electricity and Energy has struggled to operate its infrastructure, honour contractual obligations, cover costs or follow through on projects, according to a report published by a group of independent financial experts.

Contributing to the ministry's financial losses is a public boycott on paying electricity bills. The National Unity Government, or NUG, Myanmar's government in absentia, estimated that only two to three per cent of electricity customers in Yangon and Mandalay were paying their meter bills and 20 per cent in other parts of the country as of September, and found that these boycotts had cost the military US\$1-billion.

Myanmar leader vows to 'annihilate' opponents of army rule

U Soe Thura Tun, Minister of Electricity and Energy with the NUG, said in a written response that the current electricity crisis is not surprising, and that his ministry had been promoting solar power for home use and advising the public to prepare themselves since November.

He attributed the main cause of the power outages to "mismanagement." The military administration, he said, had not dedicated sufficient budget to continue subsidies, which were offered under the civilian government, and "didn't try to improve the power system."

A military spokesperson and three deputy director-generals with the military-run Ministry of Electricity and Energy did not answer calls seeking comment. A call centre operator for Yangon Electricity Supply Corp. said they were not authorized to speak to the media.

A child carries a container to fill with water in Yangon on March 14.
AFP CONTRIBUTOR/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

The power shortages are hurting homes and businesses across Myanmar, and add to mounting hardships for the urban poor. But with no foreseeable fix to this crisis, people have been forced to adapt. The Globe and Mail spoke to a number of people about their experiences and the ways they have responded. The Globe agreed not to name them to protect them from retribution by the regime.

One woman, who runs a hair salon in Yangon, said the power outages have complicated tasks from washing to blow-drying hair, and have caused operating costs to increase. Her water supply often runs out, and she has to buy it by the bucket from hawkers. She bought a generator this month, but uses it sparingly because of high fuel costs.

At 3,000 Myanmar kyats (about \$2.10) for a cut and dry, it is becoming harder to make a profit. "We have to pump water quickly and do people's hair quickly," she said. "When we finish washing someone's hair, we wrap it with a towel and ask the customer to wait. We do the same with three to four customers and then we run the generator and blow them all dry at the same time."

The power outages are happening during the hottest months of the year, leaving older people especially vulnerable. In Yangon, a 70-year-old man said he was struggling to sleep. If something were to happen to him while his children were out, he would have difficulty calling for help, however, because he is unable to charge his phone.

Thousands flee as Myanmar military hits rebel forces with air strikes, shelling

Another woman, 66, also said she lies awake at night in her apartment in Yangon because of the heat and mosquito bites, while water shortages leave her unable to shower regularly. "I feel uncomfortable and tired," she said. Her family, who earn a living as food vendors, are now using charcoal and gas for cooking because of the power outages. She said an increase in the price of these items has added to their difficulties.

The power outages have affected people's work and education as well.

Millions of students have refused to attend school under the military administration, and many are studying online instead. A medical student in Taunggyi, Shan State, said she is on strike but taking online courses through a university in the United States. However the power outages have caused her to miss lectures and fall behind on assignments. "I have to make a lot of excuses to my academic advisers and professors," she said.

For young people, living without electricity is also demoralizing. One young man, who was active in the non-violent protest movement and left Yangon in January because of safety concerns, is now farming in a rice paddy with his grandfather in Mon State, where he has just three hours of electricity a day.

He worries that young people in Myanmar will fall further behind the rest of the world. "[The power outages] close opportunities for young people and block our futures. They force young people to go backward," he said.

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