

# **The February 2021 Military Coup in Myanmar: Its Impact on Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy**

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## **Introduction to Myanmar**

Myanmar is located in the extreme top left of mainland Southeast Asia. It was colonized by the British as an extension of their empire in India following three major Anglo Burmese Wars that ended in 1888. Despite the victory over the monarchy and native residents the colonial authorities were unable to rule the entire country and limited their governance to the lowland delta areas while signing treaties with the highland elites in areas that were heavily forested and posed the threat of malaria. Additionally, the country was home to ethno-linguistic heterogeneity with the British cataloguing 135 ethno-linguistic groups in 1939 prior to the outbreak of World War II. The majority Bamar ethnic group that comprised about two thirds of the population lived primarily in the lowland areas while the ethnic minorities occupied the highlands.

Following the end of World War II, the British were keen on negotiating independence for many of their colonial territories and Burma was similarly offered independence early on in 1948. However, independence came without territorial consolidation since the British were unable to weld the country geographically prior to independence. Similarly, the post-independence government was unable to exert control and govern over the entire country. Additionally, the presence of a large Chinese Kuomintang army that was trapped in the northern Shan states of the country also meant that the area was subjected to international conflict through a proxy war between the United States and China.

Burma drifted towards ethno-linguistic insurgency against the central government from early on and the government of Prime Minister U Nu exaggerated the situation by tending towards Bamar Buddhist nationalism. The disaffection among the minority groups eventually led to a first military coup in 1958 that lasted for 18 months and a second in 1962 that ousted the civilian government and introduced

military rule. The coup that was led by Ne Win relied on an ideology of radical socialism and opted for a policy of passive neutrality premised on isolationism. In the decades following the coup major industries were nationalized leading to an outflow of investments and local professionals. As a result, the country's economy and development deteriorated badly.

Ne Win relinquished power in 1988 and the affiliated Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) government collapsed in 1988. The collapse of the government coincided with widespread demonstrations for democracy in major urban cities that was violently crushed by the military leading to the death of some 3,000 protestors. Subsequently, the military junta in power held nationwide elections in 1990 that was overwhelmingly won by Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) party. Suu Kyi, who had returned to the country in 1988 to care for her ailing mother, was the daughter of independence hero General Aung San who led the movement for independence against the British.

The military junta in power ignored the outcome of the elections and imprisoned many politicians from the NLD including Suu Kyi who was regularly detained under house arrest. In 1994, General Than Shwe who led the junta announced a seven-point roadmap to democracy and convened national conventions that eventually paved the way for a new Constitution that was promulgated and swiftly endorsed in 2008 against the backdrop of the devastation caused by Cyclone Nargis that killed some 135,000 people. In 2010 General Than Shwe stood down from power and the military junta held nationwide elections that installed a new government headed by President Thein Sein who was from the military. Thein Sein drew on a large number of senior military officers who similarly switched to civilian garb and manned the cabinet through the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) that was formed by the military prior to the elections. Suu Kyi and the NLD boycotted the 2010 elections that was widely regarded as rigged in favour of the USDP.

## **The semi-democratic period and lead up to the coup**

The period from 2010 to 2020 is often regarded as a semi-democratic period. The reason for this assessment is the transition towards more democratic and liberal norms that included the freeing of most political prisoners, the right of political

exiles to return without persecution, liberalization of the mass media, the start of ceasefire negotiations with 16 ethnic armed groups and a generally more liberal political and economic climate. These reforms by the Then Sein government were reciprocated by Western countries through the lifting of an international sanctions regime that had been in place since 1990 and broadened from 2003.

Against the momentum associated with political liberalization and international recognition of the newly elected government Thein Sein invited Suu Kyi to the capital Naypyitaw in August 2011 that led to a thaw in relations between the incumbent government and the NLD. Subsequently, the NLD was allowed to reregister as a political party and competed in the 2012 April by-elections where it handsomely won 43 out of the 45 seats that it contested. Following on from this spectacular showing Suu Kyi became the leader of the opposition and her aura and political prestige grew immensely. In the second and 2015 November elections the NLD won an overwhelming victory again and was able to form the government without support from other parties. Both Suu Kyi and the NLD were able to capitalize on their performance during their second term of office and were rewarded with a third term in the November 2020 elections with an even larger majority. However, this turned out to be a pyrrhic victory since army chief General Min Aung Hlaing staged a coup on 1 February 2021 before the NLD could assume office for the next 5-year term.

### **Issues central to the coup**

A number of factors that were central to the coup can be discerned by reviewing Myanmar's recent political history. The first and perhaps most important trigger for the coup was the clearly waning popularity of the military's political party, the USDP. The trend in the election results of the two elections held after 2010 in 2015 and 2020 makes it very clear that the electorate voted overwhelmingly against the USDP. Conversely, the NLD that was led by Suu Kyi garnered the lion's share of the vote. This displacement effect of the waning popularity of the USDP and the corresponding popularity of the NLD left the military frustrated that its political vehicle to ensure its relevance in domestic politics was being severely undermined within a democratic environment. In fact, during the 2020 elections many analysts had originally predicted that the smaller parties representing the minority ethnic groups would secure sufficient votes to play the role of king maker and force the NLD to coopt them in order to achieve a majority in parliament. However, this fear

was unfounded since the NLD was returned with an even larger majority in the 2020 elections. Consequently, it was clear that if the ongoing trajectory of developments were to be sustained, the NLD would overwhelm the domestic political scene and parliament.

The second issue that the military found irksome was the personal appeal of Aung San Suu Kyi. She held a very strong personal appeal to the electorate and commanded the kind of moral and political attraction that was unmatched in the country. She was popularly referred to as Ameh (Mother) Su and drew large crowds wherever she went. This almost personality cult that surrounded her was never broken from 2012 when she entered parliament and only became stronger. The NLD truly personified her and all other office holders in the party could not claim similar legitimacy notwithstanding many complaints that she was a micro manager and that her style was stifling bureaucratic efficiency. The military hated her for this popularity and its 25 percent of appointed members in parliament rose in unison to protest the creation of the rank of State Counselor that she subsequently appropriated to bypass the rules of the 2008 Constitution that forbade her from holding the position of President of the country. Through this structural change Suu Kyi was able to place her own confidants as Presidents and rule the country indirectly.

What infuriated the military was also Suu Kyi's repeated attempts to revise the 2008 Constitution that structurally empowered the military in domestic politics through the assignment of seats without electoral contest and the control of important ministries in the government (to be discussed in the next section). Through her leadership the NLD formed several committees to recommend important revisions to the Constitution that would have deprived the military of such automatic appointments. Again, the military appointees in parliament clearly opposed such attempts and one of General Min Aung Hlaing's favourite and oft repeated phrases was that all actions should be "according to the Constitution." Suu Kyi understood that parliament was the only venue to attempt to modify the Constitution and even though she failed on the basis of inbuilt constraints to such changes the actions had a clear demonstration effect on the electorate. In fact, amendment of the Constitution was one of the NLD's campaign promises during the 2020 elections. Suffice it to say then that her actions were regarded by the military as an affront to its claim to political power based on a Constitution that was skewed in its favour. Suu Kyi's efforts demonstrated to the public in general that the Constitution was not a demo-

cratically inspiring document. Such thinking was heretical to the military that sought to institutionalize its presence in the country's political process indefinitely. It also undermined the military's claim to be the guardian of democracy and the country at large when the document that its power was vested on was so openly challenged.

During the NLD's term of office from 2015 when it won an overwhelming majority in parliament Suu Kyi refused to convene the National Defence and Security Council (NDSC). The Council which had a total of 11 members was composed in favour of the military that held 6 out of the 11 appointments to it. Suu Kyi realized that the NLD government would be easily outvoted in such a situation notwithstanding having won the elections and holding an overwhelming majority in parliament. The military regularly called for the NDSC to be convened especially when the security situation in parts of the country like Rakhine state was problematic owing to widespread conflict with the Arakan Army (AA). Suu Kyi realized that the military would use such an opportunity to simply declare a state of emergency and rule by martial law. This development would have left the government unable to control developments in such areas. Consequently, her preferred approach was to declare a state of emergency in townships affected by conflict and retain control over governance rather than convening the NDSC and transferring political power to the military.

A combination of all the issues highlighted in this section is what made the military decide on staging a coup against the elected NLD-led government to return to power just like the situation before 2010. The consistent and progressively enlarging power base of the NLD and the concurrent diminution of the USDP left the military with little option except to reverse the ongoing political process if it wanted to retain power. Hence, notwithstanding the observation by many international and local monitors that the 2020 elections were carried out fairly the military alleged widespread voter fraud and chose to stage a coup to deny the NLD its electoral victory—a situation reminiscent of the military's refusal to acknowledge the NLD victory in 1990. The earliest signal of an impending coup was the delayed sitting of parliament in January 2021 and the attempts by General Min Aung Hlaing to negotiate a situation favourable to himself and the military. Subsequent pronouncements by President Win Min indicated that the military had asked for his resignation so that his office could be filled by someone else. The collapse of discussions between

General Min Aung Hlaing and the NLD leaders was the final straw that led to the staging of the coup. Since then, most senior leaders of the NLD have been charged with various crimes and held in isolation or imprisoned—again a situation akin to that prior to the onset of democratic reforms in 2010.

### **Structural norms favouring the military**

In the earlier section it was mentioned how the 2008 Constitution that was promulgated by General Than Shwe in 2008 and then swiftly ratified at the end of that year contains many provisions that favour the military and entrench it as an institution within the domestic political process. The first and foremost of these provisions is the one that automatically allocates 25 percent of all seats in regional and the federal parliament to representatives of the military. What this effectively means is that only 75 percent of all seats available in parliament are actually contested. Tied to this proviso is another that requires a super majority of more than 75 percent of members of Parliament to approve any changes to the Constitution. Since the military always votes as a bloc in favour of its own corporate interest this second requirement effectively means that the Constitution is immune to any changes in parliament which is why all the recommendations of committees in parliament for such reform were easily defeated. Over and above these two requirements one out of the three Vice Presidents from which the President is selected must come from the military.

Another major provision to entrench the military is that the Ministries of Border Affairs, Defence and Interior are controlled by the military. In other words, Ministers representing these three ministries are automatically nominated by the military. Additionally, and importantly, the military and its budget is also not subjected to parliamentary scrutiny. This freedom from scrutiny goes against the classic democratic principle of civilian supremacy over the military. As mentioned earlier, the military controls 6 out of 11 seats in the NDSC that can be invoked to deal with threats to law and order and reinstate public security. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the 2008 Constitution allows the military to stage a coup and take power from an elected civilian government in the face of a threat to national security. It was this clause that General Min Aung Hlaing invoked in defence of the coup to save the country and its citizens from alleged massive electoral fraud. Another caveat in the Constitution that is often regarded as being specifically written to

target Suu Kyi is the one that bars local citizens from assuming the office of the President if their spouses or children are foreign nationals. Suu Kyi's husband was British and her two children also carry British passports, which is why she never held the appointment of President despite leading the NLD to victory in 2015.

The military also has control over a large number of state-owned enterprises. These are collectively held through a number of omnibus organizations that in turn fund the military. The largest of these is Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL) and Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC). Additionally, the military also controls the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE) that has in recent years provided much by way of funding through the extraction and sale of oil and gas abroad. All these holding companies provide the Myanmar military with a steady flow of cash and were put in place by the government of Ne Win after the 1962 military coup that resulted in the nationalization of industries.

### **Impact of the coup on domestic politics**

The 2021 coup had a deleterious effect on the nascent emergence of democracy in Myanmar that began with a semi-civilian government in 2010. While there were structural rules in the 2008 Constitution that prohibited a fully functioning democracy, the short democratic experiment had unleashed tremendous support for Suu Kyi and the NLD government. The popularity of both the party and its leader rose immensely and there was nothing that the military could do to reverse the process. If anything, the coup was meant exactly to arrest the surging fortunes of the NLD and find some way of salvaging the sagging fortunes of the USDP and its military sponsors. In this regard, the annulment of the 2020 election results dealt a mortal blow to the democratic process and its consolidation and reverted the country back to the period of military rule before 2010.

The military swiftly arrested President Win Min and State Counselor Suu Kyi and held them incommunicado at an undisclosed location. Subsequently, a number of charges were levelled against them including breaking curfew rules related to the coronavirus when campaigning and corruption. Charges were added over time and prison sentences meted out for them slowly with many more pending including the continued addition of new charges. Similarly, ranking members of the NLD government and cabinet were also arrested and imprisoned. A state of emergency was

declared from the date of the coup and it was just extended for another 6 months in February 2022. Civil liberties have been suspended and the military has carried out a ruthless campaign of killing those opposed to the coup and detaining over 11,000 persons many of whom were tortured. At the time of writing some 1,500 citizens have died in the year following the coup. The military has promised to hold a “free and fair” election at an appropriate time which is a code word for disallowing the NLD and its office bearers to compete and rigging the situation to ensure that the USDP will win the elections. It is expected that the newly installed Union Election Commission will disband the NLD prior to the elections on the basis of the earlier fraud claims that led to the coup in the first place. Additionally, it has just now introduced proportional representation in parliament that is intended to favour the military and its proxy party.

From the day of the coup there has been widespread resistance to it from the general public including civil servants. The resistance began in the form of organized marches opposed to the coup at the outset and the banging of pots and pans which is a traditional way of indicating unhappiness. Subsequently the resistance became much more organized and led to the emergence of a civil disobedience movement (CDM). Large numbers of people took part in the movement and daily life came to a grinding halt. The three fingers salute which is popularly used in Thailand to indicate resistance to the government of general Prayuth Chan-ocha that also came to power through a coup in May 2014 was adopted by the CDM. Ministries began openly defying the military junta and organizing and publicizing their resistance on social media sites. The education and health sectors were especially active in such protests and both sectors virtually collapsed in the country. Those from the younger generation in their teens and 20s made it very clear that they were opposed to the coup and prepared to fight the military even if it meant risking their lives in the process. Over time elements from the CDM became much more organized and armed and began attacking police and military personnel.

Following a call by the NLD government in exile to take up arms against the military junta, many members of the CDM morphed into much better organized People’s Defence Forces (PDF) and started staging daring attacks on military convoys through the use of improvised explosive devices that were followed by ambushes. Since the start of the coup the military has been strongly and violently attacked especially in Chin, Kayah, Magwe and Karen states. The military is unac-



customed to this level of resistance and violent attacks against it and has responded through indiscriminate violence and the torching of houses and villages. It has also called in air support in the form of fighter aircraft and helicopter gunships to try and defend itself during and after large engagements. Finally, it has armed and trained civilians as part of a paramilitary militia group called Pyu Saw Htee to support it and fight against the PDFs as well. Such fighting has led to a large number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) within the country in states and regions where there has been protracted resistance and fighting.

Concurrently the NLD announced from early on the setting up of a parallel government in exile called the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (parliament) or CRPH. This body regularly issues press statements and together with some of the ethnic armed groups the CRPH has also created a larger body called the National Unity Government (NUG). Both these organizations actively participate in domestic politics as well as international affairs by claiming to be the rightfully elected government and have been recognized by many Western countries, like the United States and those from the European Union. Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, member countries of the Commonwealth, have also recognized these organizations.

Earlier in this section it was suggested how the education and health sectors in Myanmar have collapsed as result of widespread support for the CDM. Additionally, the economy and the banking sector have also come to a screeching halt. Many foreign investors have withdrawn from the country especially from the manufacturing sector and oil and gas industries. There has been a run on the banks, and they have been unable to keep up with the demand to draw out savings from deposit holders. To worsen the situation, the Myanmar Kyat currency has also collapsed against foreign currencies and is now worth less than half its value a year into the coup. So, for example, it was trading at about 1,260 Kyats to the US dollar before the coup and is now trading slightly below 3,000 kyats to the dollar. The military junta is also facing a cash crunch since many residents in the country have refused to pay their bills for utilities like water and electricity. PDF groups have also been active in attacking assets belonging to the military and these have included factories and telecommunication towers. A combination of all these factors has also meant that the inflation rate is now very high.

Finally, the peace process with the Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) that was started by the Thein Sein government in 2012 and which culminated in the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) that engaged 8 out of the 16 ethnic armed groups in the country has collapsed. The NCA achieved partial success under the first NLD-led government when two more EAOs signed on to it. However, the coup has unraveled the document and the process altogether. Major EAOs like the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Restoration Council of the Shan State (RCSS) are now engaged in open conflict with the military. More importantly, the larger groups like the KNU and the Kachin Independence Organization/Army (KIO/A) have also helped to train members of the PDF in the areas that they control, much to the chagrin of the military. Additionally, the convergence of interests between the two groups has resulted in collaboration at the ground level in terms of staging coordinated and joint attacks against the military.

### **Impact of the coup on international relations**

The 2021 coup in Myanmar attracted swift and strong retaliatory action from the international community and Western countries at the outset. The European Union which was a major sponsor of the ethnic peace process swiftly imposed economic sanctions on the country that included an embargo on trade and economic investments. The United States adopted a similar policy together with other like-minded countries like Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. These sanctions were subsequently expanded over time to target those who were perceived as being directly involved in the military coup and the affiliated administration afterwards. Additionally, there were widespread calls to release those from the previous NLD government that had been imprisoned and a restoration of democracy based on the outcome of the 2020 elections. At the international level the United Nations whose special envoy to the country had long been denied access to the country was replaced with a Singapore national. Hopes were raised that she may assist to broker the situation given her familiarity with the country, the military junta and coming from the region. However, thus far her efforts have also come to naught and the military government has actually shut down the office of the UN special envoy in the capital city of Naypyitaw.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) attempted to broker the situation by undertaking regional initiatives. Indonesia, which is *primus inter pares* in

the grouping, hosted the first meeting of regional leaders that included General Min Aung Hlaing. That meeting led to an agreement that Myanmar would accede to a 5-point plan to deal with the domestic political situation. Subsequently, Brunei convened a meeting of foreign ministers to deal with the situation as the rotating chair of the organization. The country's second minister for foreign affairs was appointed the special ambassador to deal with the military government and see to the implementation of the 5-point plan. The appointment of the ASEAN envoy was delayed since a number of countries including Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand also offered initial candidates for the envoy position. Notwithstanding the subsequent appointment the plan and agreement came to naught since the Myanmar military refused the envoy access to Suu Kyi in order to try and broker the situation.

In 2022 Cambodia now holds the ASEAN chair and Prime Minister Hun Sen attempted to mediate the situation on his own with a trip to the country where he met with General Min Aung Hlaing. After that the country's own foreign minister was appointed as the new ASEAN special envoy and there was an attempt to host the ASEAN foreign ministers meeting in late January that included the minister from Myanmar. Citing difficulties travelling during the corona virus-linked restrictions, many ASEAN ministers subsequently declined attending the meeting. It then became clear that the organization was unwilling to go along with Hun Sen's plan to engage the Myanmar military government without progress at the ground level on the implementation of the 5-point agreement. Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong openly called for more progress on the plan before any resumption of engagement with the junta. Malaysia and Indonesia also voiced dissatisfaction with the stalemated situation.

Notwithstanding the negative responses to the Myanmar military coup from ASEAN and Western countries, both China and Russia have offered Myanmar diplomatic and material support. China that has traditionally never abided by conditionalities for trade and investments continued supporting the post-coup government. It has also expressed interest in the protection of its investments and interests in the country including the oil and gas pipeline from Kyaukphyu in Rakhine state to Kunming in Yunnan province in China that became operational in 2017. China has traditionally offered Myanmar strong diplomatic and material support when the latter was subjected to wide ranging international sanctions prior to 2010. Russia has also supported the Myanmar military junta and has had high level exchange of

visits and supplies weapons and parts to the country and its air force. The support of both these major powers has helped Myanmar to stave off some of the criticisms at the international level.

## **Likely future trajectories**

The ongoing political situation in Myanmar is clearly indicating deterioration over time. Fighting between the PDFs units and often in coordination with the EAOs and the military has become much more intense and widespread. It would be fair to note that the country is steadily drifting in the direction of civil war and that the military is losing control of large swathes of territory in a number of states and regions. Additionally, this time around the violence has also spread to the urban cities of Yangon and Mandalay. What is perhaps more important is that many of the younger recruits of the PDF are from the Bamar majority who have drawn common cause with the ethnic minorities and their grievances against the military. This situation is unprecedented in the country's history where fighting tended to be typically confined to the rural and highland areas involving the ethnic minorities. Interviews with Myanmar nationals resident in Singapore indicated the widespread thinking among locals that the military has lost its legitimacy to rule. The younger generation of fighters who are opposed to military rule have also indicated that they are prepared to fight for the long run and lose their lives in the cause if necessary. There is a constant reference to reversing the country's current trajectory and ending military rule in the country. On the other hand, the military appears to be equally prepared to continue its position and fighting the PDFs and the EAOs. The result of this intransigence between both sides is that civilians have been disproportionately affected and there are now large numbers of IDPs in the country without access to the basic necessities of life.

The domestic economy has to all intents and purposes collapsed. The local currency is worth less than half its value since the coup and the banking sector has collapsed as well. The inability of the military government to collect payments for basic services and the lesser revenue streams can only mean more difficulties over time. There are already reports of spiraling inflation and food shortages while the country remains cut off from much needed international assistance. Myanmar has become much more isolationist again just like the situation prior to 2010 and regional attempts to broker the domestic political situation have not yielded any success. In

this regard, the downward drift of the domestic political and socio-economic situation does not bode well for the medium term. In fact it appears likely that the country is headed for much more turmoil and violence before any progress obtains. Most observers are pessimistic about the country's future without some kind of break in the political impasse.

## **Conclusion**

The Myanmar military staged a coup in February 2021 and usurped power from the NLD-led government that had won the November 2020 elections with an overwhelming majority that was sufficient for the party to dominate both the upper and lower houses of parliament. The military claimed widespread voter fraud as the reason for the coup and claimed legitimacy on the basis of the 2008 Constitution in order to safeguard the country's national security. Most international observers of the elections had certified that the elections were generally conducted fairly and transparently. The coup has effectively ended Myanmar's transition from military rule that began in 2010 that tended in the direction of democracy. There has been widespread regional and international criticisms of the coup and a call for the return of the elected civilian government into office. Additionally, many countries have also subjected Myanmar to economic sanctions.

The military has indicated that it will not reverse the coup and claims to be working towards the restoration of "free and fair" elections that is widely interpreted as a rigged election that favours its own party the USDP while marginalizing the NLD whose popularity it has been unable to contain. In this regard the military is working towards institutionalizing its own power just like the situation before 2010. The ousted NLD government has created a parallel government that has been recognized by many Western countries as the legitimate government of Myanmar. This CRPH government in exile has also joined forces with many ethnic armed groups to form the NUG. Both the CRPH and NUG regularly issue statements and attempt to guide the resistance against the military.

The coup has triggered strong resistance from the domestic population as well that began with the CDM that has since morphed into the PDF that regularly engage the military and often in collaboration with the ethnic armed groups. The KNU, Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and the Kachin Independence Organization

(KIO) have trained young recruits from the PDF and staged attacks on the military. This collaboration is likely to continue since many youths from the younger generation think that this is a historic opportunity to rid the country of military rule. This stalemated situation means that much more violence is likely to occur and lead to the displacement of a large number of civilians as IDPs. The military has resorted to indiscriminate attacks against civilians when attacked including the use of aircraft to bomb villages and opposition fighters.

The ethnic peace process that was inaugurated by the Thein Sein government in 2012 culminating in the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in 2015 has effectively come to an end. The domestic political situation has caused consternation within ASEAN that is trying to help resolve the situation, but this effort has not yielded any visible success. ASEAN has thus far refused to recognize the military government even as Cambodia that now holds the ASEAN chair is attempting to broker the situation.