
Decoding the Myanmar Crisis: Domestic Factors Behind Coup, External Players Help Sustain it

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Abstract

For Myanmar, which has been under authoritarian military rule for several decades, the restoration of partial democracy in 2011, in a power-sharing agreement with an elected civilian government, notwithstanding the military's dominance, was a ray of hope. In spite of being under the shadow of a military-dominated constitution, Myanmar achieved considerable progress under such a "semi-democratic" setup. Yet, due to the defective constitution, framed by the military with the intent to preserve its control over state power, the threat of subversion of its civilian institutions has always loomed over Myanmar's democracy. While the government-military relations worked relatively smoothly during the four-year tenure of the military-backed USDP government, they became increasingly tenuous since Aung Sang Suu Kyi's NLD assumed power in 2015. The sweeping victory of NLD in 2020 for a second consecutive term, demonstrated not only the rising popularity of Daw Suu Kyi but also the sidelining of the military's voice in the elections, which exacerbated the paranoia of the army and led to the overthrow of the civilian government in February this year. In the confused situation that followed, despite widespread international condemnation of the coup, efforts by the international community to restore democracy seem unlikely to succeed as some key nations still back the junta, mainly to secure their own economic and strategic interests.

Keywords

Myanmar coup, democracy, Tatmadaw, sanctions, Aung Sang Suu Kyi, China

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For nearly five decades since independence from the British empire in 1948, Myanmar had been under suppressive military (Tatmadaw) rule (1962-2011). In 2011, the Tatmadaw itself dissolved the rule of the military and brought in a “semi-democratic civilian government” in a “power-sharing agreement”, with former military general Thein Sein as President. (Brenner, 2017; Maizland, 2021) Halting the process of Myanmar’s democratic transition, the military- Tatmadaw- seized power in a coup on 1 February 2021. The overthrow of the elected government shattered the democratic aspirations of Myanmar's millions and hampered the progress that the country had made during a decade of civilian governance.

The military has started court trials against Suu Kyi, alleging electoral fraud, which Myanmar's Union Election Commission and the international community deem baseless.

Coup and Subsequent Assault on Democracy

To bend the entire system to its will, the military ruthlessly crushed democratic values and human rights. The imposition of military rule was accompanied by the detention of Nobel laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the democratically elected “de-facto Head of the State” as also that of the nominal President Win Myint, and other

leaders of the ruling National League for Democracy (NLD). (Reuters, 2021) On short notice, the military expelled 24 ministers of the elected government, and nominated eleven others to manage critical ministries. Notably, several military appointees have served as ministers in the previous (Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP)) government from 2011-16, thus reinforcing the Tatmadaw's endorsement of the USDP. (Nitta, et al., 2021) In spite of the UNSC and the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres demanding Suu Kyi's discharge, Tatmadaw has not released her. (Reuters, 2021; Un News, 2021) Instead, the military has started court trials against her, alleging electoral fraud, which Myanmar's Union Election Commission (UEC) and the international community deem baseless.

As apprehensions of suppressive military rule loomed, larger protests raged across the country, across ethnic lines, against the coup. (Myers, 2021) The Tatmadaw unleashed widespread violence and abuse of national institutions in order to suppress the protests. (Poling & Hudes, 2021) Aimed at thwarting the voices of dissent, the military rampantly shut down internet facilities across the country and imposed heavy monitoring over both the conventional media and social media platforms. (International Crisis Group, 2021) Thousands of activists, journalists, and political leaders were detained, including renowned economist and Australian national Sean Turnell, who held the post of

advisor to Daw Suu Kyi, thus forcing the rest of the military regime's targets to go into hiding.

The military crackdown resulted in 802 fatalities as of 17th May 2021, according to the civil society group - Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP). (Reuters, 2021) As per reports, the Tatmadaw even opted to use heavy artillery to suppress the protests that took a violent turn at many places. (Fishbein, et al., 2021) On the governance front, the coup completely derailed measures to contain Covid-19 and the country is facing a health crisis. (Poling & Hudes, 2021) As protests have raged, the economy has collapsed, government and banking services have plunged to minimal levels, prices skyrocketed, even as the Covid-19 pandemic spreads rampantly across the country. With the military having unleashed extreme violence to suppress the surging agitation, Myanmar has fallen into an acute humanitarian crisis and its people are experiencing major human rights violations. (Kurlantzick, 2021)

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The Politics Behind the Coup

As the power-sharing arrangements between the Tatmadaw and the civilian government had been running relatively unstressed under the Suu Kyi, the exact motives behind the coup are yet unclear, and remain debated. To end the country's prolonged international political and economic isolation, Tatmadaw had itself initiated Myanmar's road to democracy in 2011, limiting its powers. For the army, the limited democratic experience of 2011 was an attempt to adapt to the changing socio-economic scenario, test a new administrative mechanism instead of the military governance which had abysmally failed to bring any development, and reverse the international sanctions against the country, without compromising its own control over state power. (Nehru, 2015)

However, the 2008 constitution - drafted by the military and still in effect (before the coup) - revealed the general's continued hesitation to cede power. (Nehru, 2015) The 2008 constitution provides 25% reservation of seats in the Parliament for the Tatmadaw, thereby empowering the military with a "de facto veto" against any constitutional amendment since any such move would require support of more than 75% of members. Besides, the constitution assigns critical defense, border management, and home affairs ministries to the Tatmadaw, which, in effect, renders to the military a crucial say over the country's foreign policy. (Poling & Hudes, 2021) Laura Edwards - former consultant at U.N. and Asia Foundation - argues, that the 2008 constitution "enabled it

(military) to enjoy complete autonomy and impunity, whilst internationally the veneer of democracy allowed the country to benefit from foreign investment and shielded the military from some of the worst international criticism for the genocide of the Rohingya.” (Edwards, 2021, para. 1)

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Daw Suu Kyi’s Thumping Victory and Allegations of Electoral Fraud

The coup occurred following the decisive victory of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) for a second consecutive term in the general elections held in November 2020. In the second multiparty elections in Myanmar's history, the NLD achieved a colossal success, securing 396 of 476 elected seats. (Maizland, 2021) In fact, Suu Kyi's NLD scored thumping victories both in the 2015 and 2020 parliament elections. On the other hand, the principal opposition, USDP- often referred to as Tatmadaw's "Proxy"- faced a hammer blow in elections for the second consecutive term, shrinking to mere 33 seats. (Maizland, 2021)

Faced with the NLD's electoral juggernaut, the USDP alleged that the elections were manipulated by the NLD and asked for a repoll in several constituencies. (Strangio, 2021) Backing the USDP's claims, by January-end of 2021, the Tatmadaw also raised similar charges of electoral fraud against the NLD. Tatmadaw's spokesperson Brigadier General Zaw Min Tun's statement that "We will take action according to the constitution and existing laws if they don't resolve the issue," (Naing, 2021) had already flagged the intentions of the army.

When the elections were publicly declared to have rendered to the NLD an overwhelming majority, military officials, without submitting any proof, alleged they found 8.6 million individual cases of fraudulent electoral practices. (Strangio, 2021) In January 2021, the UEC of Myanmar rejected Tatmadaw's claims of electoral fraud, citing the absence of any concrete evidence. (Strangio, 2021) Though the military initially justified its coup as an effort to resist electoral fraudulence and restore democracy, and continues to do so, experts see the claim as nothing more than a political cover for their illegal action. While the international community and experts say the 2019 elections were “flawed” for lack of inclusiveness, they raise no severe questions over its “legitimacy.” (Maizland, 2021; Poling & Hudes, 2021; U.S. Department of State, 2021)

Suu Kyi Growing Popularity and Tatmadaw's Threat Perceptions

The coup, as of now, seems to be a combined outcome of a multitude of factors. The friction between the Suu Kyi-led civilian government and Tatmadaw leadership over the distribution of powers- the roots of which lies in the military-drafted constitution of 2008- has been one significant factor. (Naing & McPherson, 2019; Poling & Hudes, 2021) The complex relationships between the civilian and military power centers were exacerbated when applied in relation to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Suu Kyi was never a comfortable partner for the Tatmadaw, given her decades-long fight against the military junta to bring in democracy and her 15 years of detention had complicated matters for the Tatmadaw leadership. Thus, in the constitution which it framed, the military had incorporated provisions which were clearly directed against Daw Suu Kyi assuming the Presidential office - which, according to the constitution, was supposed to head the executive branch of the civilian government. (Parameswaran, 2019)

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Since "Chapter 3, Article 59(f) of the constitution" bars an individual from assuming President post on grounds of foreign citizenship of "one of the parents, the spouse, one of the legitimate children or their spouses" Suu Kyi was ineligible as her late husband, and two sons are British citizens. (Barker, 2015) Though Suu Kyi held discussions after her 2015 election victory, with Tatmadaw to become the President of Myanmar, amending the constitution, military generals did not pay heed to her demands. (The Guardian, 2016)

Military generals unjustly blocked Suu Kyi from heading the civilian government in 2015 against the overwhelming popular mandate, winning 77% of the available seats. (Holmes, 2015) Nevertheless, in a severe blow for Tatmadaw leadership, Suu Kyi emerged as the de-facto head of the state by creating a special post of "State Counselor." (Cochrane, 2016) Given these, both the military and Daw Suu Kyi began to harbor suspicion of each other, despite the absence of explicit friction. (Poling & Hudes, 2021) Some sources aver that Suu Kyi and the Tatmadaw leadership had hardly exchanged words since 2016. (Strangio, 2021)

Even if the "de-facto veto" power provides military the ability to preempt any constitutional amendment, the agenda of constitutional reform limiting the military's powers, which Daw Suu Kyi had sought to push forward, increased the military's threat perception of her. (Parameswaran, 2019) The campaign for

constitutional reforms, which, in effect, was spearheaded against the Tatmadaw, had been Suu Kyi's electoral agenda through which she mobilized her vote base. (Parameswaran, 2019) In February 2019, the latest development in this sequence occurred when Suu Kyi constituted (Naing, 2019) a parliamentary committee to suggest constitutional amendments, which was one further step in her challenge of the Tatmadaw.

The sweeping victory of the NLD for the second consecutive term, which also, incidentally led to USDP gasping to preserve its own electoral relevance, widened the Tatmadaw's threat perception from Daw Suu Kyi. (Strangio, 2021) Aside from its continued hold on the mandatory 25% reserved seats, the voice of the military had literally vanished in Myanmar's parliament. Stanly Johny, International Affairs Editor at The Hindu, rightly points out, "The Generals may have sensed that even the limited democratic experiment was gradually threatening the military's entrenched interests with Suu Kyi remaining immensely popular." (Johny, 2021)

Another major factor that many experts believe could have acted as a major proximate cause for the February coup is the personal political ambitions of the Senior military general and Commander-in-Chief of Tatmadaw, Min Aung Hlaing. (Poling & Hudes, 2021) (Edwards, 2021) Min Aung Hlaing reportedly had hopes of assuming the Presidential office. (Johny, 2021) Edwards says that the intentions of Aung Hlaing

to stick on to power would have contributed to the coup as he was supposed to retire from service soon. Yet, this could not be the sole reason as Edwards says the coup may not have occurred if the Tatmadaw-backed USDP had come to power in elections. (Edwards, 2021)

International Response to Coup: Choosing Between “Ethics” and “Interests”

Within weeks after the military quashed Myanmar's democracy, the U.S., U.K., E.U., New Zealand, and Canada responded with sanctions

Except for the Tatmadaw, nobody wanted the coup. Yet, the global response to the coup varied according to each country's distinct interests. While countries such as United States, European Union, and the United Kingdom excoriated the military takeover and were quick to impose sanctions, others, including China, India, ASEAN members, and U.S. allies like Japan, having more direct interests in Myanmar, either limited their response to condemning the coup or in some case even hesitated to "condemn" it.

The harsh response to the military takeover came from Washington and its allies. Within weeks after the military quashed Myanmar's democracy, the U.S., U.K., E.U., New Zealand, and Canada responded with sanctions to pressurize the junta to restore democracy.

(Lewis, 2021) Aimed at further pressurizing Myanmar's generals, U.K., Canada, and the U.S. in May and E.U. in June, declared fresh sanctions. (Al Jazeera, 2021; Reuters, 2021) Notably, all these have been "targeted sanctions" against specific military officials, their supporters and intended to harm their economic interests, thus ensuring that ordinary citizens of Myanmar did not suffer.

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As in the past, such as during the Rohingya crisis, international response to the coup has been divided, based on "liberal" and "realist" perspectives. While countries including the U.S., Canada, and E.U. have followed a "liberalist" perspective and a policy that prioritized human rights and democratic values, countries such as China, Russia, Japan, and even India have opted for "realist diplomacy," aimed at keeping their economic and strategic interests intact. Moscow, which had hardly anything to lose from the coup (unlike China), and having little or no concern about undermining democracy, has emerged as the largest beneficiary of the coup. Seizing every opportunity from Nay Pyi Taw's international estrangement, Moscow has emerged as the most prominent active supporter of the Tatmadaw

and has reportedly begun negotiating arms sales. (Forrest, 2021)

Following the coup, all eyes have turned to Beijing, as it has been the largest external stakeholder in Myanmar, thus having most interests at stake and had been Tatmadaw's most significant source of backing, whenever it faced global outrage. Beijing was "unhappy" about the military takeover since the political instability, and the chaos resulting from the coup would hamper wide-ranging Chinese investments and the rollout of mega-Chinese infrastructure projects. (Tower & Clapp, 2021; Tiezzi, 2021) Nevertheless, it is indisputable that Beijing would back the junta to minimize any damage to its own interests, through a policy that Elliott Prasse-Freeman- a Myanmar expert at the National University of Singapore- describes as "tacit support, if not emphatic endorsement." (BBC, 2021; Tiezzi, 2021)

The conflicting interests of major powers on the issue, resulting in opposite and conflicting actions, in fact, complicate the crises. Since Beijing and Moscow back the Tatmadaw for economic and strategic purposes and are expected to "veto" any move against the junta at the UNSC, as in the past, which in turn would restrict the UNSC's capacity to act on this issue. Simon Denyer (2021) points out that the "extensive business interests, a genuine belief in engagement and a desire not to cede strategic ground to China" limit support for the U.S.-led sanctions from even its own allies. (para. 1)

On its part, New Delhi - wary of increased Chinese influence in its neighborhood - would continue to work with Myanmar's generals with the motive of keeping China under check and securing its own connectivity, economic, security, and strategic interests. (Parthasarathy, 2021) The "Lower House" of the Japanese parliament passed a resolution against the military takeover, but refusing to bring in sanctions, Tokyo has signaled that it would continue engaging with Myanmar. (The Japan Times, 2021) Though Tokyo perceives the coup as disruptive, trade, investment, and fear of Beijing taking advantage of international isolation, makes Tokyo work with Myanmar's generals. (Denyer, 2021) As countries such as India and Japan, apprehensive of Chinese expansionism, fear that international isolation would only provide ground for increased China's strategic grip over Myanmar, the scope of collective actions against the coup, even from the like-minded democracies, has been constrained. (Reuters, 2021)

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Future of Myanmar's Democracy: Need for Coordinated Action

In fact, over the years, the threat of a military takeover was hanging over Myanmar's democracy like a sword of Damocles. With weak institutions, civil society, and a constitution that places the military above an elected government, Nay Pyi Taw's civilian government has always been susceptible to being undermined by the military generals. What had been going on in Myanmar was a "conditional democracy," where the "terms and conditions" were predominantly defined by the military generals. In spite of the limitations of a "semi-democracy," Myanmar's democracy had been making substantial progress under the elected government. The coup has inflicted a high cost on this process of democratic transition.

Going backward from its own promise to conduct elections after a year, the military has announced a new date of August 2023 for election, thus reinstating concerns of military rule indefinitely extending. (AlJazeera, 2021; Maizland, 2021) While the intensity and scale of popular resistance against the coup has come down, the risk of outbreak of an outright civil war still persists.

At present, restoring democracy in Myanmar seems challenging as the generals will not accommodate Daw Suu Kyi and they are aware she would easily return to power if a “free and fair” re-election is conducted. Therefore, given the Tatmadaw's persisting influence in

Myanmar's judicial system, analysts view the court trial initiated against Suu Kyi as an effort to impede her from future elections. (Edwards, 2021) The present sanctions are incapable of yielding a desired level of coercion as Myanmar's Asian partners would work against it. Thus, to restore Myanmar's democracy, reaching a consensus, at least among the U.S. allies and like-minded nations is vital.

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