

# The Military Coup in Myanmar: Back to the 'Normality' of Autocracy?

Written by Cecilia Ducci and Pak K. Lee

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CECILIA DUCCI AND PAK K. LEE, FEB 5 2021

On 1 February, Myanmar's *Tatmadaw* (Myanmar's armed forces) launched a coup d'état to detain the *de facto* leader Aung San Suu Kyi and other politicians, including President Win Myint, and declared a state of emergency for a year. The military's seizure of power represents a major setback in the country's gradual democratisation which, beginning in 2011, has allowed the National League for Democracy (NLD) to win a majority of seats in the Parliament in 2015 and to run the country. Myanmar's parliament has two houses. The upper House of Nationalities (Amyotha Hluttaw) has 224 seats and the lower House of Representatives (Pyithu Hluttaw) has 440 seats. The military retains 25% of the seats in each of the two houses, according to the 2008 Constitution. Only 498 seats are open for competition. The NLD obtained 370 seats (135 and 235 seats in the upper and lower houses respectively) in 2015. It won a landslide victory in the November 2020 general elections, taking 396 seats (138 seats from the upper house and 258 seats from the lower one). This victory was even larger than the 2015 one. The pro-military Union Solidarity and Developmental Party (USDP) only managed to secure 33 seats (7 and 26 in the upper and lower house respectively).

Despite the NLD's success, the *Tatmadaw* still maintains a firm grip on the political system, with the control of the key ministries of defence, home affairs and border affairs. Although in the last few years the NLD and its leader Suu Kyi has proposed amendments to the Constitution to reduce the number of seats allocated to the military, such a constitutional change never succeeds because the Constitution stipulates that an amendment to the Constitution requires the approval of more than 75% of the MPs. With 25% of the lawmakers assigned by it plus the presence of USDP, the *Tatmadaw* is wielding effective veto on any political changes.

To understand the logic behind the coup, we need to consider what the *Tatmadaw* would likely lose if they did not take over the government. Given the fraying relations between the NLD and the *Tatmadaw* over the constitutional changes – rumour has it that Suu Kyi and Senior General Min Aung Hlaing have not been in talks for at least a year – there are grounds for speculating that the newly re-elected civilian government would take steps to reduce the entrenchment of the military not only in politics, but also in the economy. Min Aung Hlaing was supposed to retire five years ago. Then, the retirement age for his position was revised from 60 to 65. Even so, he was anticipated to step down this year. The direct prompt for this coup might be that Min Aung Hlaing failed to reach any accord or compromise with the civilian government over the army's (or his and his clients') overwhelming control over the economy. The *Tatmadaw* not only operates two business conglomerates but also has close ties with state-owned enterprises and large private firms in the country. It might also speculate that backlash from the West would only be moderate because of Suu Kyi's fall from grace in the West due to her defence of the *Tatmadaw* in relation to the alleged genocide against the Rohingya, as well as the West's preoccupation with fighting against the pandemic.

While we agree that this coup represents a regression of the country into a military dictatorship, we also add that Suu Kyi herself is a 'victim' of the partial democratisation. In face of the constraints imposed by the 2008 Constitution, she needs to accommodate the military in order to secure her and her party's position in the country. To earn votes in general elections, she also needs to take into account the interests and preferences of the masses of which nearly 90% are Buddhists. Ultra-nationalist Buddhist organisations, in particular, the 969 movement and the MaBaTha (the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion), have promoted Bamar-Buddhist nationalism, a form of ethno-

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religious nationalism, and Islamophobia. While they are anti-Muslim, they are not anti-military but have indeed given support to the armed force. Ashin Wirathu, the leader of the 969 movement, had called on his fellow monks to vote out the NLD in the last elections. Accused of inciting racial violence against the Rohingya, he defended that he only wanted to protect his 'people'. To get re-elected, Suu Kyi and her party must accept compromises with the electorate and the military and defer to them over the Rohingya crisis. This has unfortunately alienated her from the West and international human rights activists. Nonetheless, her domestic popularity has risen substantially, as the recent elections demonstrate; the biggest concern right now is how the country faces widespread turmoil and uprisings.

The putsch has crucial implications on the international stage. It will likely jeopardise the process of accountability for the crimes committed against the Rohingya, which was initiated by The Gambia at the International Court of Justice in December 2019, and the resolution of the refugee crisis in Bangladesh. The military takeover is likely to move Myanmar farther away from the United States and the EU, and closer to China, thus further consolidating Chinese influence on Myanmar. Two Chinese companies have joint ventures with the two Myanmar conglomerates and 19 Chinese companies have contractual or commercial ties with them. China has had experience with working with foreign armed forces for economic and commercial projects, as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor demonstrates. China's unwillingness to take concrete measures against the military is evident from the fact that it blocked a UN Security Council statement condemning the coup on 3 February. This is in line with its long-standing policy of non-interference in what are deemed to be "internal affairs" of other sovereign states.

The hands of the US are somewhat tied. While openly affirming the US role as promoter and guarantor of democracy, the US does not have the policy tools to discourage the military junta from usurping power. The US may exert influence over the Tatmadaw if it is keen to advocate liberal democracy in Asia and if Myanmar relies on the US militarily and/or economically. For the latter, that is, when the US is a security provider of Myanmar and/or a major source of foreign direct investment in Myanmar or a key market for Myanmar's exports. However, as shown above, China now has stronger economic ties with Myanmar than the US does, so the latter does not have any real leverage over the junta.

Seasoned observers find that US commitments to liberal democracy are a myth. In reality, it has never been fully committed to promoting liberal democracy in Northeast and Southeast Asia, except Japan, since 1945. During the Cold War era, the primary strategic goal of US foreign policy towards the region was to contain communists or, to be more precise, the most threatening communists. The US had tolerated or propped up anti-communist, autocratic/military regimes. Examples abound: Ngo Dinh Diem (and his successors) in South Vietnam, Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan; Syngman Rhee, Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo-hwan in South Korea; Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines; Suharto in Indonesia; and Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore. Although Thailand has *formally* been a constitutional monarchy since the bloodless coup of 1932 (known as the Siamese revolution of 1932), the military has been a powerful political force in the country. Since 1945 there have been 14 coup attempts in Thailand. Even after the end of the Cold War, promotion of liberal democracy was not high on US policy agenda. The successful transition to democracy in South Korea and Taiwan was more due to their internal efforts and struggles to liberalise the political system after economic take-off and the growth of an independent middle class. Taiwan's democratic transition took place in the 1980s after the US severed diplomatic relations with it.

Furthermore, it is less likely that the US has key partners in the region to discipline the Tatmadaw. Japan was "slow" in joining the condemnation of the armed coup. The cooperation of ASEAN is not guaranteed either. Only the Philippines have openly "commented" on the coup; while first expressing "deep concern", it subsequently stated that Myanmar's current situation is an "internal matter". ASEAN adheres to its policy of non-interference into the domestic affairs of Member States, a cardinal principle of a regional norm known as the ASEAN Way. If the Biden administration is determined to impose sanctions against the military junta, it will likely have to do the same against the Thai military, which came to power in the coup in May 2014. It is open to question whether ASEAN would agree to such a confrontational approach to two of its member states, as US punitive action against both Thailand and Myanmar would likely force them to align with China.

Once again, like with the Rohingya crisis, the international community seems to be reluctant or unable to take effective measures to ensure the respect for liberal values and democracy in Asia. The harsh reality there remains

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that liberal democracy is the exception rather than the rule.

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