

Opinion – Saving Myanmar?

Written by Martin Duffy

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MARTIN DUFFY, OCT 25 2021

In over three decades at the coalface of United Nations fieldwork, the scenes witnessed by the author during humanitarian service in Myanmar in the past two years, are among the worst visited on any people, in any part of the world. Having served extensively in the Congo, Afghanistan, Sudan, Somalia, Syria, Rwanda, Cambodia, and Tigray, these conflicts all brought their unique challenges, but there is a desperation to the Myanmar situation that exceeds even the misery of those other notorious conflicts. First, the Myanmar crisis has created the world's largest camp of displaced populations. Second, the country is ridden with internecine, intractable and atavistic ethnic conflict of a brutality seldom evidenced in the modern world. And finally, as of February 2021, the entire country, and its sprawling communities of the displaced, has just imploded in a vicious coup.

Myanmar once again leaves all those advocating human rights with a sense of deep despair. Military rule in all but name, the violent suppression of protest, the incarceration of the innocent, and the fate of the displaced, all cry out for international action. Yet virtually the only moral victory achieved so far is ASEAN'S token rejection of the country's military thugs at its own far from scrupulous diplomatic table. Street resistance has been ongoing throughout Myanmar since the army took over on 1 February 2021, suffocating a legitimately elected government and effectively disappearing its leadership. Elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi and members of her National League for Democracy (NLD) party are among those detained (Cuddy, 2021.)

Thousands of innocent people, many of them accidental casualties of state crackdown, have been murdered. Yangon, Mandalay, and the diplomatic enclave of Nay Pyi Taw have run with the blood of fervent popular protest. With a yearlong state of emergency, and media suppression, the outside world can only imagine the unspeakable brutality perpetrated by an illegitimate junta impervious to outside scrutiny. "Elections are easy", a veteran politician in a neighbouring country told me once, "It is the results which are difficult". In the face of another landslide victory by Ms. Suu Kyi's NLD party the junta plainly knew their pseudo-government's writing lay on a blood-stained wall.

The Myanmar armed forces had backed the opposition, who were demanding a rerun of the vote, claiming widespread fraud which the election commission declared as totally unsubstantiated. The generals are not good listeners. Thus, the army coup took place precisely as a new session of parliament was scheduled to open, and with the country's legitimate leader behind bars. Ms. Suu Kyi remains "vanished".

Worryingly, Ms. Suu Kyi's location remains a state secret. She is still under criminal investigation for an assortment of grave charges, including violating the country's official secrets act, possessing illegal radios and for public statements that may "cause fear or alarm". NLD MPs who avoided arrest formed a new group in hiding. Their leader has urged protesters to defend themselves against the crackdown. The military commander-in-chief Min Aung Hlaing has taken power. Min has long wielded significant political influence, successfully maintaining the power of the Tatmadaw – Myanmar's military – even as the country acquired a cosmetic facade of democracy.

Min has received international condemnation and sanctions for his alleged role in the military's attacks on ethnic minorities but is quite impervious to censure, almost relishing public protest as evidence of positive effect. Knowing how much Min relies on soothsayers, Min's actions follow his latest astral advice. In his first public comments after the coup, Gen Hlaing sought to justify the takeover. He claimed the military backed the people and would form a "true and disciplined democracy". This proclamation was made even as Rangoon's detention centers were packed to

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capacity with genuine democrats and the streets ran with the blood of protestors. In that light Min's claim that the military will hold a "free and fair" election once the state of emergency is over, must be taken with great circumspection.

An uneasy peace had characterized the last two years of the "pseudo-democracy" the military had reluctantly tolerated and now (predictably) protests over the coup have been the largest since the so-called Saffron Revolution in 2007, when thousands of monks revolted against the military regime. The credibility of "the Lady" had been dented by her appearance at the Hague, and as the Burmese public anxiously awaited how the generals would react to unwelcome news from the polls. Perhaps the only glint of optimism is that even if Ms. Aung's fall from grace is fatal, the pro-democracy movement has now developed an autonomy which can exist independent of any leader.

In Myanmar, the backbone of protest are the professional classes. The poor are so immiserated and vulnerable to reprisal to risk defiance of the army. Protesters include teachers, lawyers, students, bank officers and government workers. The military has imposed ignominious restrictions, including curfews and limits to gatherings. Security forces have used water cannons, rubber bullets and live ammunition to try to disperse protesters. The protestors kept on coming which is itself a testimony to the popular fervor which underlies Burmese democracy.

On 27 March, in the deadliest day since the coup, more than 100 people were killed. There have been several days since where there has been an equal loss of innocent life, and still international action has been limited. The ineffective powers of the United Nations have been exposed, such as might bring tears to former Secretary General U. Thant as he lies reposing in his modest mausoleum close to the gilded stupa of the Shwedagon Pagoda.

Aung San Suu Kyi had become a global icon in the 1990s for campaigning to restore democracy. She had spent 15 years in detention between 1989 and 2010, after organizing rallies calling for democratic reform and free elections. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 while under house arrest. In 2015, she led the NLD to victory in Myanmar's first openly contested election in 25 years. Now (alas) many see her as Myanmar's democratic icon who fell from grace. Ms. Suu Kyi's international reputation has suffered greatly because of Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingya minority.

Myanmar considers the Rohingya simply as illegal immigrants and denies them citizenship. Over decades, many have fled the country to escape persecution. Thousands of Rohingya were killed and more than 700,000 fled to Bangladesh following an army crackdown in 2017. Ms. Suu Kyi appeared before the International Court of Justice in 2019, where she denied allegations that the military had committed genocide. Her reputation has never quite recovered. Numerous countries have condemned the military takeover and subsequent crackdown. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has accused the security forces of a "reign of terror". The U.S., U.K. and European Union have all responded with targeted sanctions on the army. It has been to little avail.

As expected, China blocked a UN Security Council statement condemning the coup, but has backed calls for the release of Ms. Suu Kyi and a return to democratic norms. The country has previously opposed international intervention in Myanmar. Southeast Asian countries have been pursuing diplomatic efforts to end the crisis. In one of the more significant affronts, the UN chief strategically delayed his ASEAN meeting to avoid the Myanmar army envoy (BBC News, 15 Oct. 2021). The army did not relish this public disgrace in front of their ASEAN neighbors, but Guterres decision comes as ASEAN prepares to hold further emergency meetings amid frustration at the Burmese military's failure to implement the ASEAN peace plan.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres postponed a virtual meeting with ASEAN at the last minute to avoid the Myanmar regime's foreign minister. The ill-fated meeting between the UN secretary-general and foreign ministers from the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) – including Wunna Maung Lwin, the foreign minister appointed by the military – is a tentative sign that the international community are resolute against the junta. However, it is troubling that Myanmar won't allow ASEAN'S envoy to meet Aung San Suu Kyi. UN diplomats, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Guterres had a real headache over the decision by UN member states on who will sit in Myanmar's seat at the world body. Rival claims were made by the military and Kyaw Moe Tun, the current UN ambassador who was appointed by the elected government.

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ASEAN agreed on a five-point consensus with Min Aung Hlaing in April, but the generals have made no progress in its implementation and have also ruled out allowing a regional envoy, Brunei's second foreign affairs minister, Erywan Yusof, to meet Aung San Suu Kyi. The military was supposed to end its crackdown on opponents to the coup under April's five-point consensus, but violence continues. It also continues to crack down on those opposed to its rule, with at least 1,171 people killed since the power grab and more than 7,000 people arrested, according to local monitoring group the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners. The army has also been accused of attacks in ethnic minority areas in the country's border regions that have forced thousands to flee, as well as targeting churches and Christian clergy. The Rohingya and other minorities have also again suffered from the backlash.

In an open letter ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights, a group of regional lawmakers, urged ASEAN not to invite the regime to its summit because of its "blatant disregard" for the five-point consensus. ASEAN regretted: "A lack of decisiveness and consequences for the military's total contempt for the ASEAN leaders' agreement risks undermining the bloc's legitimacy as a key regional player that can bring peace and stability," said their letter, which was also signed by dozens of other civil society groups and activists. United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken added his voice advocating with ASEAN: "to hold the Burmese regime accountable to the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus and facilitate a meaningful visit by ASEAN'S Envoy, Ambassador Erywan to Burma to include engagements with all stakeholders," the State Department confirmed. The unscheduled virtual ASEAN meeting, hosted by Brunei, the current ASEAN chair, has only further enraged Myanmar's junta according to multiple sources based in ASEAN member countries, including diplomats and government officials, in a communique to Reuters. A UN committee, which includes Russia, China and the United States, must consider Myanmar's competing credential applications. The military has put forward Aung Thurein as its candidate for Myanmar's UN seat.

With no sign of junta retrenchment, the big question remains as to how even a vestige of Myanmar's democracy can be salvaged from the spoils of coup. Once again, we are in the nation's emergency room with Burmese protesters fighting to their last breath. Can any sense of Myanmar democracy be saved? Or the more pertinent question remains, was it ever anything more than a strategic illusion? Perhaps saving Myanmar belongs only in that filing cabinet of intractable conundrums along with the likes of Israel-Palestine or Western Sahara that just defy UN paracetamol. Ilan Pappé deftly portrays the Occupied Territories as the "biggest prison on earth" (Pappé, 2017). Here in Myanmar, humanity is tolerating the largest refugee compound the world has recently seen, and probably one of the greatest displacements of population in recent history. I am not sure it can be saved, still less that there is an international conscience resilient enough to apply more than a band-aid to the humanitarian and political disaster which is Myanmar today.

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About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and

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the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.