



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



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Déjà vu in Myanmar

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Healthcare workers in Yangon display the three-finger salute in protest of the military coup. Source: Twitter/@cvdom2021

Anti-coup demonstrations in the Sagaing region of Myanmar, March 27, 2021. Source: Twitter/@cvdom2021

The Karen National Union (KNU) held candle vigils on March 27, 2021. Source: Twitter/@cvdom2021

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Abstract

Over the past two months, Myanmar has plunged into a political crisis. Myanmar's tentative political transition towards democracy, which started in 2010 and gained momentum after the 2015 elections, has been reversed. The military (Tatmadaw) has staged a coup d'état and arrested democratically elected leaders, including President Win Myint and State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. This paper maps the ongoing civilian protests as a result of the coup as well as the National League for Democracy's attempts to prevent consolidation by the military junta. It reflects upon the military's attempts to win over various stakeholders in Myanmar politics, including ethnic groups. The international community's response to the coup and the debate around the nature of sanctions that need to be deployed are dwelled upon. Specifically, the paper examines the responses of actors such as the US, China and ASEAN to the coup. The paper concludes by noting that the durability of the military coup will be contingent on the resilience and ability of three important stakeholders – youth who are at the forefront of the protests, Monks and Buddhist institutions, and ethnic organisations/armed groups – to put up a prolonged fight for democracy.

Déjà vu in Myanmar

by

Sanjay Pulipaka and Mohit Musaddi

Introduction

The Myanmar constitution of 2008 envisaged the “flourishing of a genuine, disciplined multi-party democratic system”.¹ The developments in the country over the past two months have been anything but disciplined. Myanmar had been under sustained military rule from 1962 onwards well into the 21st century. However, given the various ethnic insurgencies and persistent demands for participatory political processes, a new Constitution was drafted in 2008 by the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw). The adoption of a semi-democratic political system facilitated conditions for lifting severe punitive sanctions imposed by the international community on Myanmar. More importantly, the 2008 constitution was seen as a first step towards facilitating the emergence of a more decentralised political structure in the country. The constitution institutionalised the national leadership role of Tatmadaw and ensured that the military had a permanent stake in the political processes of the country. It mandates that 25 per cent of seats in the national legislature and key portfolios such as defence, border and home affairs are reserved for Tatmadaw.² It was on the basis of this constitution that elections were held in 2010 and 2015. In 2010, the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) under President Thein Sein came to power as the leading opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) boycotted the elections.³

In 2015, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi came to power with the NLD winning just under 80 per cent of the contested seats.⁴ Suu Kyi’s charisma, a sustained campaign for democracy and the aura of being the daughter of Aung San, the father of the nation and the founder of the Myanmar armed forces, meant that she has been Myanmar’s most dominant political personality. Aspirations for a genuine move towards a fully democratic and decentralised governance structure have been consistently articulated in Myanmar over the past ten years.

In the past two months, Myanmar’s transition to democracy has been reversed and the nation is now defined by violence and chaos. On February 1, 2021, the Tatmadaw led by commander-in-chief General Min Aung Hlaing staged a coup and detained State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint. Tatmadaw imposed military rule in the country on the pretext that electoral fraud had been committed in the November 2020 elections. The

specific allegation by Tatmadaw related to voter lists, which it said had nearly “10.5 million instances of irregularities”.⁵ The army claimed that the lists revealed cases that allowed citizens to vote multiple times by being registered at different places.⁶ It also claimed that the “voter lists contained almost five million names without associated national registration cards”.⁷ However, election observers, including the US-based Carter Centre, had observed that “voting [in the November 2020 elections] had taken place without major irregularities”.⁸ More recently, in addition to electoral fraud, there have also been multiple allegations against Suu Kyi’s financial irregularities by Tatmadaw.⁹ Multiple arguments are being articulated as the cause for the military coup.

Perhaps, the military generals anticipated a fragmented verdict that would give them greater leverage in the formation of the government and defining its agenda. However, the fact that the NLD won more than 80 per cent of the contested seats seems to have defied the political calculus of Tatmadaw. It is also being argued that Suu Kyi was moving too close to China, which made Tatmadaw uncomfortable. There were allegations that her charities received donations from Chinese state-owned companies and that she was more willing to accept the repatriation of the Rohingya refugees under Chinese mediation.¹⁰ Furthermore, the military could have been apprehensive that by calling for a national unity government, Suu Kyi and the NLD were looking to consolidate their hold on the legislature, subsequently providing a ground for large-scale constitutional reforms.

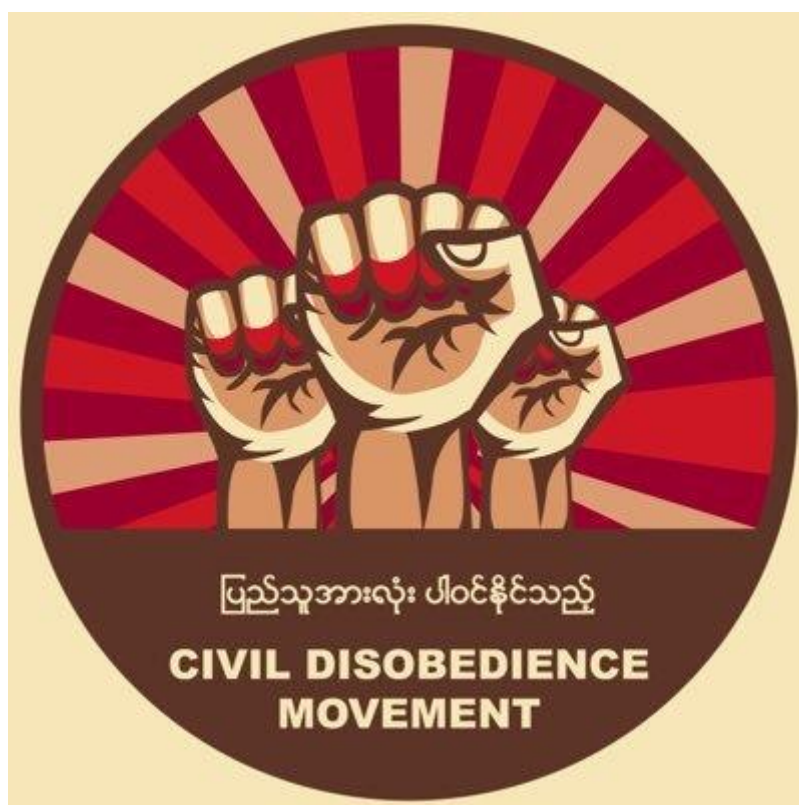
Since the coup, Tatmadaw has been unable to consolidate power. A large number of civilians have taken to the streets to protest against the military takeover. Indeed, if Tatmadaw had hoped that it could quickly consolidate its hold over the country, it has been proven wrong. Instead, the scale and intensity of protests have increased rapidly.

Protesting the Coup

Protests have been widespread throughout the country and have taken place in Bamar-dominated as well as in ethnic regions of Myanmar. Citizens have used various tactics and tools such as banging pots and pans at night, honking cars in a coordinated manner, and even using popular TV references such as the three-finger salute to express disapproval.¹¹ Innovative placards with photographs and messages have been displayed all across the country in support of NLD and Suu Kyi. Such sustained and dispersed forms of protest are being interpreted as an expression of deep disappointment and discontent against Tatmadaw’s actions.

A defining feature of the protests has been the participation of a cross-section of society. Various civil society organisations and individuals have acted in a coordinated manner through digital platforms. There have been intermittent disruptions of internet services (usually from 1 am to 9 am), but that has not hampered the large anti-coup rallies. Instead, during internet shutdowns, protestors have used SMS services to communicate and have also increased the use of virtual private networks (VPNs).¹²

Moreover, the protests – now called Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) – are spread across all social classes and age-groups. Youth from across economic backgrounds seem to be proactively involved as well. The advent of social media has enabled the youth to mirror the demonstrations in Hong Kong and adopt tactics such as “retreating when security forces advance, and avoiding direct confrontations.”¹³ The youth are also live-streaming the protests on various social media platforms.¹⁴ The young generation’s “decision to fight is born of a desire to protect what the country has gained over the past decade”.¹⁵ The fear of returning to autarkic economic policies coupled with limited interactions with the outside world is propelling the youth to participating proactively in the protests.



Logo of the Myanmar Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM).

Source: Twitter/@cvdom2021

Key personalities from Myanmar's movie industry have participated in the protests, while some have been arrested.¹⁶ Healthcare workers, doctors, teachers and even some police officers have broken rank to protest against the coup. For instance, over 115 members belonging to the Ministry of Information refused to work for the military and have joined the CDM.¹⁷ Approximately 18 labour organisations have declared their support for the CDM.¹⁸ It has also been estimated that almost 30 per cent of officials from the Myanmar Ministry of Foreign Affairs are participating in the CDM.¹⁹ The CDM has reportedly been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by six academics at the University of Oslo, Norway.²⁰



Healthcare workers in Yangon display the three-finger salute in protest of the military coup. Source: [Twitter/@cvdom2021](https://twitter.com/cvdom2021)

Tatmadaw's Contested Legitimacy

Initially, Tatmadaw's allegations about large-scale irregularities in the voting lists in the November 2020 elections were seen as part of a more extensive bargaining process to protect the military's interests. Hence, the coup on February 1 came as a surprise to many and allowed the Tatmadaw to define the agenda and exercise control. However, as the nature of the coup became evident, large, widespread civilian protests picked up momentum.

During the early days, there was a Facebook post by General Hlaing, where he sought to explain the coup, but it was quickly disregarded by the general public and thus failed to have any real impact.²¹ Since then, Facebook has barred Tatmadaw members from using its platform and prohibited military-owned businesses from advertising.²² This assumes greater significance because more than half of Myanmar's population uses Facebook.²³

In an attempt to provide some legitimacy to the coup, General Hlaing, on February 2, formed and became Chair of the State Administrative Council (SAC), which comprises military officers as well as civilians. The civilian SAC members are mostly members of political parties opposed to the NLD.²⁴ A spokesperson of the Arakan National Party (ANP), which has the largest number of seats in the Rakhine State parliament, has also been appointed to the SAC. The SAC has set up a five-member election commission and appointed the governor of the Myanmar central bank as well as the attorney general.²⁵ Interestingly, Tatmadaw has also formed an advisory board to the SAC, and one of its seven members reportedly is a US citizen.²⁶ In response to SAC, elected members of Myanmar's ousted Parliament formed the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) on February 5 and appointed Mahn Win Khaing Than acting Vice-President.²⁷ It also nominated others to serve as its representatives on various international platforms.²⁸ On March 5, the CRPH issued four visions, namely, "to end military dictatorship; to ensure the unconditional release of all unlawful detainees including President U Win Myint and State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi; to achieve full-fledged democracy; [and] to rescind the 2008 Constitution and write a new Constitution based on the federal system".²⁹

Meanwhile, General Hlaing has cautioned publications against referring to the military as the "regime" or "junta" as it contends that the military has constitutionally formed the SAC.³⁰ For failing to abide by such regulation, Tatmadaw has cancelled the licences of five media organisations, including "7Day News, Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), Khit Thit Media, Mizzima, and Myanmar Now."³¹ Further, the Tatmadaw has drafted a cyber-security bill that reportedly includes clauses that "would give it sweeping powers to access user data, block websites, order internet shutdowns, and imprison critics and officials at noncomplying companies".³²

Almost two months after the coup and with no sign of protests abating, Tatmadaw has scaled up the use of force. Tatmadaw has deployed armoured vehicles in urban areas, and there are reports that the Myanmar Special Forces have also been deployed in some regions.³³ According to the watchdog group Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), 423 people have been

killed with almost half of them being under the age of 25.³⁴ March 27 was the deadliest day of the coup so far with at least 90 casualties.³⁵ Moreover, nearly 3,000 people “have been arrested, charged or sentenced” in relation to the coup.³⁶ There have reportedly also been two deaths of officials from the NLD as a result of military detention.³⁷

Tatmadaw has granted over 23,000 prisoners amnesty as it urges civilians to “join hands” with the military for democracy.³⁸ While every year on Union Day, prison sentences are commuted, this year, there are concerns that hardened criminals are being released to perpetrate violence and to create space for political prisoners.³⁹



Anti-coup demonstrations in the Sagaing region of Myanmar, March 27, 2021.

Source: Twitter/@cvdom2021

Military and Ethnic Groups: Divide and Rule?

In recent weeks, Tatmadaw has been trying to win over ethnic groups to contain the spread of the CDM.⁴⁰ There is a perception among ethnic groups that negotiations on federalism have not progressed significantly under the Suu Kyi government. Some analysts have noted that Tatmadaw is deploying a divide-and-rule policy by offering administrative positions to ethnic parties in the new administration.⁴¹ While the Mon Unity Party (MUP) has accepted the military’s SAC governing council, the New Mon State Party (NMSP) has opposed the military coup.⁴² The Kachin Democratic Party (KDP) severed its ties with the Kachin State People’s Party (KSPP) after the KSPP met with the new military constituted Union Election Commission (UEC) to discuss electoral reforms.⁴³ The KDP and KSPP had an electoral understanding in the November

2020 elections.⁴⁴ One of the largest ethnic parties, the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD), refused to participate in the UEC meetings.⁴⁵ The Ta'ang National Party (TNP) also declined to participate in the discussions.⁴⁶ The General Secretary of the Kayah State Democratic Party (KySDP) declared that his party “did not accept the military coup that has affected so many people.”⁴⁷

On the day of the military coup, the Myanmar military reached out to various armed groups.⁴⁸ In the first week of February, ten Peace Process Steering Team (PPST) members agreed to stick to the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA).⁴⁹ However, after the discussions on February 19-20, the PPST announced that it would suspend talks with the military regime, announced support for the CDM, called for the release of all detained leaders and expressed willingness to work with “national and international actors... to end military dictatorship”.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, the Karen National Union (KNU) has promised to protect people protesting the military coup.⁵¹ Given the KNU's stance in support of the protests, it anticipates a large influx of the population from cities to areas under its control along the Thailand border.⁵² The Karen National Police Force in the Tanintharyi Region stood up in support of the CDM protestors.⁵³ On March 11, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) attacked a Myanmar military outpost in the Hpakant Township of Kachin.⁵⁴ Ten days later, the KIA was able to take over another Myanmar military base in southern Kachin state near the Chinese border.⁵⁵



The Karen National Union (KNU) held candle vigils on March 27, 2021. Source: [Twitter/@cvdom2021](https://twitter.com/cvdom2021)

Representatives of Myanmar's ethnic groups and political parties have marched through the streets in a sign of broad resistance to the military. Even though some of these ethnic groups have resisted Suu Kyi's governance style, the "deep mistrust of the military, which has brutally repressed their armed struggles for more autonomy", has allied them with the CDM.⁵⁶

The ANP, on the other hand, has not been part of the protests, and its spokesperson is a member of the SAC. In response to ANP's collaboration with the military, a joint statement has been issued by 47 Rakhine-based civil society organisations (CSOs) "urging the ANP to distance itself from Myanmar's military".⁵⁷ On March 11, when the Tatmadaw declared that the Arakan Army (AA) is no longer a terrorist group, it appeared that the AA and the military had reached an understanding.⁵⁸ However, on March 23, the AA condemned the military by referring to current events as "cruel and unacceptable".⁵⁹ The current dynamic in the Rakhine state may further widen fault-lines between the Burmese and Arakan Buddhists.



A prayer by the Buddhist monks from the Moe Kaung monastery in Mandalay.
Source: Twitter/@GraceyKai

Myanmar's Buddhist monks have also taken part in some of the protests against the military in Yangon and Mandalay.⁶⁰ A daily procession of Buddhist monks and ordinary citizens has taken place since February 8 under the Sangha Union Mya Taung Protest March banner.⁶¹ Mya Taung monastery in Central Mandalay is well respected and has been an important organisation guiding protests in Mandalay city.⁶² However, there have been cases where monks have assaulted the protestors' vehicles for disrupting normalcy.⁶³ In an important development, the Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (Ma Ha Na) has called on the military regime "to end the violent arrest, torture and killing of unarmed civilians by the armed minority and to prevent the looting and destruction of public property."⁶⁴ The Ma Ha Na has also called for solutions that would take into account the "image of the nation" and pride of the younger generation.⁶⁵ The Ma Ha Na reportedly regulates the functioning of over 600,000 Buddhist monks and nuns.⁶⁶ Even though the Buddhist monks have not initiated the protests, unlike during the Saffron Revolution protests of 2007, the growing participation of Buddhist organisations will provide an added impetus to the anti-coup demonstrations.

International Response

For many liberal democracies, the developments in Myanmar pose familiar challenges with difficult foreign policy options. There is the impulse to impose punishing sanctions, and yet there is a recognition, based on past experience, that full-spectrum sanctions rarely yield the desired results. While the expression of strong displeasure from the US and the EU was along expected lines, it is notable that they have not applied full-spectrum sanctions. On February 11, the Biden administration sanctioned ten current and retired top-ranking leaders of the Myanmar military.⁶⁷ Earlier, the US State Department had announced that "all direct US financial assistance to the Government of Myanmar would cease" under the provisions of the country's 'coup clause'.⁶⁸

Further, on February 21, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said that "The US will continue to take firm action against those who perpetrate violence against the people of Burma as they demand the restoration of their democratically elected government".⁶⁹ Subsequently, on March 10, the US sanctioned Aung Hlaing's two children and the six companies that they control.⁷⁰ On March 22, Washington extended the sanctions to Burma's Chief of Police, the Bureau of Special Operations commander, as well as two army units.⁷¹ On the same day, the EU also "imposed restrictive measures on eleven individuals responsible for the military coup".⁷² The measures include a travel ban and asset freeze in the EU. Moreover, EU companies have been "forbidden from making funds available to the listed individuals and entities".⁷³ On March 25, the US and the

UK imposed sanctions on military-operated giant conglomerates Myanmar Economic Holdings Public Company Ltd (MEHL) and Myanmar Economic Corporation Ltd (MEC).⁷⁴ On the March 27 killings, Secretary Blinken said the events demonstrated that the “junta will sacrifice the lives of the people to serve the few”.⁷⁵ On the same day, the US Embassy in Burma confirmed that “shots were fired at American Centre Yangon”.⁷⁶

Subsequently, on March 27, Chiefs of Defense of 12 countries including the US, UK, Japan and Germany issued a Joint Statement condemning the “use of lethal force against unarmed people by the Myanmar Armed Forces and associated security services”.⁷⁷

On February 18, the UK government had imposed sanctions on three Myanmar military leaders in addition to the officers it had previously sanctioned for “complicity in atrocities against the Rohingya”.⁷⁸ Canada, on February 18, sanctioned nine Myanmar military leaders while New Zealand, on February 9, suspended all high-level and political contacts with Myanmar and imposed travel bans on Tatmadaw leaders.⁷⁹ Australia has suspended military cooperation and condemned “the use of lethal force or violence against civilians”.⁸⁰ In fact, noted Australian economist Professor Sean Turnell, who worked as an adviser to the NLD government, was the first foreign national detained along with Aung San Suu Kyi.⁸¹ The state media reported that Professor Sean Turnell had attempted to flee the country with “secret state financial information”, which prompted his arrest.⁸² Many academics and others have condemned the arrest of Professor Turnell on spurious grounds.

Nevertheless, on a larger scale, there is hesitation in deploying sanctions as a tool to push the Myanmar military to restore participatory political processes. Moreover, the Tatmadaw do not fear sanctions or isolation. When the UN Special Envoy to Myanmar warned the military on the possibility of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) taking stringent measures, the Tatmadaw reacted by saying, “We are used to sanctions, and we survived those sanctions in the past”.⁸³ On possible isolation, Tatmadaw said, “We have to learn to walk with only a few friends”.⁸⁴

The UNSC, on March 10, issued a Presidential statement expressing “deep concern at the developments” in Myanmar.⁸⁵ The statement strongly condemned the “violence against peaceful protestors” and expressed “support for the democratic transition in Myanmar... [through] the pursuance of constructive dialogue and reconciliation”.⁸⁶ The statement also supported regional organisations, particularly ASEAN and the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on Myanmar, to “engage intensively with the relevant

parties”.⁸⁷ However, the UNSC statement made no reference to imposing sanctions on Tatmadaw. Going forward, it is likely that many countries’ response will be contingent on the intensity and duration of the protests. The continued brutal crackdowns by Tatmadaw may make it difficult for governments to refrain from imposing punitive measures to deal with the military junta.

In recent weeks, Russia’s support to the Myanmar military has been more apparent. as Russia’s Deputy Defence Minister attended the Myanmar Armed Forces Day parade on March 27 and also held meetings with the Myanmar military, including Aung Hlaing.⁸⁸ Moscow has a long-term defence partnership with the Tatmadaw and from 1999-2018 was the second-largest arms supplier (43.0%) to Myanmar after China (44.2%).⁸⁹ Russia and Burma also have a nuclear agreement, which was signed in May 2007.⁹⁰ Given that Russia is a permanent member in the UNSC, a high-level representation is indicative of Moscow’s support to the military regime in Nay Pyi Taw.

Another permanent UNSC member China, has also been leaning towards the Tatmadaw. On February 20, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed hope that “relevant parties in Myanmar, on the basis of the fundamental and long-term interests of the country and the nation, will solve the problems peacefully and within its constitutional and legal frameworks and continue to promote its democratic transition in the country in an orderly manner”.⁹¹ However, since the coup, there is anger at China’s support for Tatmadaw and the Chinese economic activities in Myanmar are being subjected to critical evaluation. After choosing not to condemn the coup at the UNSC on February 13, China (along with Russia) maintained that its ongoing issues are “Myanmar’s internal affairs”.⁹² In response, the pro-democracy activists have questioned whether Beijing will continue with a similar approach if there are attacks on China’s oil and gas pipelines in Myanmar.⁹³ Beijing has reportedly called on Myanmar authorities to take adequate measures to protect Chinese economic assets.⁹⁴ Even so, on March 14, fires broke out in Chinese-owned factories in Myanmar after the Tatmadaw launched an offensive against anti-coup protestors in that area.⁹⁵ There were reports that trouble started because Chinese factories “cooperated with Myanmar’s military to trap and kill local workers”, which were denied by Chinese news agencies.⁹⁶

On the other hand, the protestors claimed that the arson was the work of “plainclothes security forces” and not the CDM. According to Chinese news reports, “a total of 32 Chinese-invested factories have been vandalised in attacks in Yangon, Myanmar, with property losses reaching 240 million yuan (\$36.89 million)”.⁹⁷ There is growing anger towards China, and there have been

protests, including in front of the Chinese Embassy in Myanmar, against Beijing's policies.⁹⁸ The factory fires have prompted many workers at other Chinese establishments to stay back at home, which does not portend well for Chinese businesses in Myanmar. There have also been reports that the Chinese authorities have asked their state firms to evacuate non-essential staff.⁹⁹ A Chinese state-media report noted that "if the authorities cannot deliver and the chaos continues to spread, China might be forced into taking more drastic action to protect its interests".¹⁰⁰ The reference to 'drastic action' may not have gone down well with opposition groups in Myanmar, and there are a lot of anti-Chinese sentiments among the public.¹⁰¹ There has also been a significant drop in the export of rare earth metals from Myanmar to China, as the protests have undermined the logistic networks.¹⁰² Further, if the mining labour also joins the protests, then the disruption in the export of the rare earth metals will be prolonged.¹⁰³ Chinese leaders are confronted with a difficult choice; they have "no qualms about working with an authoritarian government [and]...they tend to prize stability above all else", but the anarchy on the streets of Myanmar is a threat to their business interests.¹⁰⁴ However, as the Chinese backed Myitsone Dam's suspension in 2011 suggests, the disappointment with Chinese economic activity has a long history.



Fire burning at a Chinese-owned factory in a township on the outskirts of Yangon.

Source: Vietnam Times/EPA

Meanwhile, anti-coup protestors in Myanmar have called for solidarity from fellow activists in the 'Milk Tea Alliance' countries. The 'Milk Tea Alliance' hashtag originated in Thailand, Hong Kong, and Taiwan as a response to social media attacks from China.¹⁰⁵ The fact that activists in Myanmar have defined their struggle as part of a larger struggle for democracy on the Chinese periphery is indeed noteworthy.

During earlier episodes of instability, due to the absence of social media and relatively less domestic scrutiny, ASEAN was able to carry out its policy of constructive engagement with Myanmar. There is already considerable disappointment in many Southeast Asia countries with Myanmar's handling of sectarian violence. For instance, in the Chair's Statement on the Informal ASEAN Ministerial Meeting issued on March 2, a full paragraph was dedicated to sectarian violence and the need for a "repatriation process for displaced persons from Rakhine State."¹⁰⁶ Therefore, it was not surprising that some of the ASEAN countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore seem to be concerned with the uptick in violence. Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong termed the use of lethal force against civilians as 'disastrous'.¹⁰⁷ Subsequently, Singapore's Foreign Minister remarked that "it is the height of national shame for the armed forces of any country to turn its arms against its own people".¹⁰⁸ The Foreign Minister discussed the coup with his Indonesian counterpart on March 25¹⁰⁹, the Malaysian Foreign Minister on March 23¹¹⁰ and the Brunei (current ASEAN co-chair) Minister of Foreign Affairs on March 22¹¹¹. However, Singapore has been sceptical about the effectiveness of the sanctions as a tool to bring about change in Myanmar.¹¹²

Among the ASEAN members, Indonesia has reportedly been the most proactive in urging its "Southeast Asian neighbours to agree on an action plan over Myanmar's coup that would keep the junta to its promise of holding elections, with monitors to ensure they are fair and inclusive".¹¹³ Jakarta has been pressing for a joint action plan to be adopted by the ASEAN members. The Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi travelled to countries in the region to rally support.¹¹⁴ She also met the Myanmar foreign minister Wunna Maung Lwin in Bangkok. Indonesian President Joko Widodo's call for a high-level ASEAN meeting to discuss the coup has been termed as 'bold', 'unusual' and 'unASEAN-like'.¹¹⁵ On March 19, the Malaysian Prime Minister also expressed support for Indonesia's call to hold an emergency ASEAN Summit on Myanmar.¹¹⁶

Major powers such as China and the US are likely in favour of an ASEAN-led initiative.¹¹⁷ However, Indonesian attempts have not been received well. Myanmar's social media has been dominated with hashtags such as

“#rejectASEANresolution”, “Respect our vote”, and “We voted NLD” to indicate disappointment with Indonesian efforts. Marsudi has stressed the need to restore democracy and has underlined “that the will, the interest and the voices of the people of Myanmar must be respected”.¹¹⁸ Meanwhile, on March 18, General Aung Hlaing attended the 18th ASEAN Chiefs of Defence Forces’ Meeting chaired by Brunei and held via video-conferencing.¹¹⁹

Regional players will likely be more comfortable with an ASEAN-led reconciliation process. However, ASEAN must be wary of outside influence and be careful not to succumb to the geopolitical games of the big powers. In case ASEAN fails to facilitate discussions and generate a positive outcome, it will dent the organisation’s credibility. An unresolved Myanmar crisis may also corrode “ASEAN centrality and widen divisions within the group”.¹²⁰

Thus far, Japan has adopted a cautious approach in responding to the military coup. While Tokyo expressed ‘grave concern’ and suspended the announcement of new ODA projects, it has refrained from imposing sanctions.¹²¹ Subsequently, with the increase in the scale of violence, Tokyo has come under increasing pressure to adopt punitive measures against Tatmadaw. In response to such criticism, Japan’s chief cabinet secretary noted that “going forward, Japan will consider how to respond to the situation in Myanmar in terms of economic cooperation and policies by monitoring developments in the situation while taking into consideration responses from countries concerned”.¹²² The gist of this longwinded response is that Japan may not immediately reverse its existing commitments but could gravitate towards more vocal criticism in the coming weeks. For instance, Myanmar’s first satellite, which Japan’s Hokkaido University built and has cameras designed to “monitor agriculture and fisheries”, is being held by Japan at the International Space Station.¹²³ There have been concerns that Tatmadaw may use the cameras in the satellite for military purposes. Japan is one of the biggest donors to Myanmar and is operationalising large projects such as the Thilawa Special Economic Zone (SEZ).

After the violence in Myanmar on March 27, the Japanese government issued a critical statement highlighting that, “The Myanmar military leadership should recall that the military is an organization for protecting the lives of its people from foreign threats... [and that] use of live ammunition against peaceful protests can never be tolerated”.¹²⁴



Even as Tatmadaw celebrated its Armed Forces Day on March 27, at least 90 civilians were killed in a single day during anti-coup demonstrations across the country.

Source: Twitter/@Okarko2

Given that India shares a long border with Myanmar, the military coup has had a spill-over impact in India, especially in the north-east region. There have been reports that more than 1,000 people, including police personnel and their families, have crossed over from Myanmar to Mizoram since late February.¹²⁵ As a response to the increased movement of people into India, on March 13, the Ministry of Home Affairs of India instructed border states – Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh – to “maintain strict vigil” and to only allow people into the country when it is “absolutely essential on humanitarian grounds”.¹²⁶ Subsequently, India has “sealed all entry points along the border” with Myanmar.¹²⁷

In February 2021, the Indian Foreign Secretary had indicated that India is “in very close touch with the civilian government of Aung San Suu Kyi as well as the military leadership, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing... [and also] in touch with all concerned, including democracy activists”.¹²⁸ He further added, “We are playing a constructive role both within Myanmar and the international community, and the Security Council... in ensuring that we restore that essential balance in Myanmar and that democracy is restored in the earliest possible time”.¹²⁹ On sanctions, the Indian Foreign Secretary said, “we are not in favour of unilateral or UN-induced sanctions, and there are better ways to

engage the current leadership and to ensure that they restore democracy”.¹³⁰ It should be noted that in October 2020, the Indian Foreign Secretary and the Chief of Army Staff had led a joint delegation to Myanmar and held conversations with senior leaders, including State Counsellor Suu Kyi and General Aung Hlaing.¹³¹ In the long run, the consolidation of diverse representative institutions in the political landscape of Myanmar will be in India’s interest. Even in the economic realm, Delhi would prefer if Myanmar has more diversified trade relationships.

Overall, India, Japan, Australia and the US are deeply invested in the success of Myanmar’s political transition. Despite their different geopolitical locations and the diverse nature of economic interactions with Myanmar, the four countries, in the Quad Leaders’ Joint Statement issued on March 12, emphasised “the urgent need to restore democracy and the priority of strengthening democratic resilience”.¹³² Given the political resources that the four countries can deploy, a coordinated approach in Myanmar can have a significant impact. In the long run, once the crisis is resolved, the Quad should prioritise connectivity and development assistance projects in Myanmar.

Economic Consequences

There is growing concern that the military coup will have a negative impact on Myanmar’s economic growth. Some of the important employment generating sectors such as textiles are likely to be negatively affected. As a result of ongoing protests, there has already been a disruption in banking and transportation services, especially in the major cities.¹³³ Myanmar’s agricultural exports have been suspended, which has led to a decrease in the price of commodities by approximately 10 per cent (compared to the end of January).¹³⁴ Imports of urad dal from Myanmar have been disrupted due to the coup, increasing prices of the commodity in India.¹³⁵

A dozen multinational companies (MNCs) in Myanmar, including Nestle, Coca Cola Myanmar and Hennes & Mauritz (H&M), have issued a statement “voicing deep and growing concern over developments in the country”.¹³⁶ H&M has also announced that it is temporarily halting new orders from Myanmar.¹³⁷ However, for the moment, it seems that civilians are willing to put up with disruptions for the restoration of democracy. Moreover, there are reports that a large number of people are moving out of urban areas such as Yangon, and neighbouring countries such as Thailand are getting ready to receive Myanmar refugees.¹³⁸ The forced migration of people will have a deleterious impact on the overall economy of the country.

Conclusion

For a country with a population of just over 50 million and a relatively small economy of USD 76 billion, Myanmar's political developments have surprisingly always received significant attention from world capitals. In fact, even historically, Burma has figured prominently in geopolitical calculations of big powers.

During the Second World War, Burma was seen as strategically important to contain Japanese military advances. Subsequently, during the Cold War, Burma's developments were closely examined to ensure that the Communist bloc did not have easy access to the Indian Ocean. While the Burmese leadership talked about socialism, they were also very staunch followers of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), so much so that they did not find the NAM sufficiently non-aligned and therefore withdrew.¹³⁹ Further, the democracy movement under the iconic figure of Suu Kyi had established networks among the elites in Western capitals and contributed to the global attention that Myanmar receives.

Myanmar is also a country that is enormously rich in natural resources, which harbour "high levels of biodiversity, endemism and spices richness."¹⁴⁰ It is also well known for the production of precious stones such as Jade, which are exported in large quantities to China, and has significant forest resources, including the famed Burma teak. Myanmar is also a leading producer of rare-earth metals, and China is an important export destination. Even before oil production started in America, Burmese oil fields were producing modest outputs by 1859.¹⁴¹ Today, Myanmar is also a producer of natural gas, which is exported to Thailand as well as China.

With the rise of China, its double-digit defence expenditure and declared intent of altering the geopolitical landscape in Asia, Myanmar's strategic location has started to draw greater attention in the 21st century. For China, Myanmar assumed importance for accessing the Indian Ocean as part of its "two-oceans" strategy.

More recently, the proliferation of social media has ensured that political developments and human rights abuses in the country were always under the global civil society's scanner. Unlike during the 8-8-88 Uprising or the monk-led Saffron Revolution in 2007, the country today is flooded with mobile phones and associated technology. Even in the midst of internet shutdowns, the protestors have coordinated using SMS and VPN services. Moreover, the military is confronted with a young population that is deploying technology

with greater effectiveness not only to communicate within the country but also with the international community.

Therefore, Tatmadaw has found itself in a difficult spot. It needs to ensure sustainable peace for economic activity to pick up momentum. However, the mood on the street indicates an unwillingness to reconcile with sustained military rule. Instead, the coup has been met with widespread protests, which has deepened Myanmar's COVID-induced economic crisis. Given Tatmadaw's increased use of force in recent weeks, the reconciliation process is also unlikely to take off in the near future. Moreover, the NLD and other democracy activists may be reluctant to go in for another round of elections under the current political atmosphere, in the unlikely event these are offered. This will be widely viewed as an unfair process, given Tatmadaw's hold and because of the perception that the November 2020 elections, in which the margin of victory for the NLD was bigger than in 2015, were free and fair.

On federalism, as noted, many ethnic parties have not been happy with the NLD's performance. Even though Suu Kyi organised four 21st Century Panglong Peace Conference meetings, the discussions did not make significant progress on the decentralisation of power. Despite such disappointments, Suu Kyi and the ethnic parties have continued dialogue, and there have been attempts by the NLD to build a National Unity Government through wider participation of ethnic parties. Therefore, for these parties, collaborating with the military now does not bestow them with any additional political advantages. Many of these ethnic groups are contesting against the centralised nature of governance, and Tatmadaw has not come up with alternatives to foster decentralisation in the country. Yet, some ethnic parties have indeed chosen to side with the military and have also participated in the SAC.

For the country's future course, a lot will depend on the cost-benefit analysis of the senior Myanmar military leadership. Tatmadaw may have underestimated the shifts that have taken place in Myanmar's political and social realms since the turn of the last decade. The above analysis demonstrates that the important stakeholders are the youth who are at the forefront of the protests, monks and Buddhist institutions, and ethnic organisations/armed groups. While there seems to be little appetite today for non-representative forms of governance, the military regime's longevity will eventually be contingent on the resilience of such stakeholders to put in a prolonged fight for democracy.

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