

The Myanmar Military Coup Two Years on: Its Domestic and Regional Impact

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The Myanmar military or *Tatmadaw* staged a coup on 1 February 2021 and usurped power from the National League for Democracy (NLD)-led elected government that was headed by Aung San Suu Kyi. The NLD had won an overwhelming victory in the November 2020 elections and was scheduled to return to power in January 2021 when the appointment was delayed by the military in the capital city Naypyitaw. Then after a month long delay the coup was staged by the military citing widespread voter fraud during the 2020 election. The 2008 Constitution that was crafted by General Than Shwe contains a provision that allows for the military to usurp power from an elected government if there is a perceived threat to national security. And this was the clause cited by the military that claimed the coup was legal and constitutional.

Shortly after the coup, the military cited the Constitution again to impose a 2 year long state of emergency to stabilize the domestic political situation before arranging for a new election. It then appointed a State Administration Council (SAC) that was led by the army chief General Min Aung Hlaing and his deputy. When the emergency expired in February 2023, the military extended the emergency by another 6 months citing an unusually challenging domestic political and security situation – a reference to widespread resistance to military rule.

Resistance to the coup was indeed swift and widespread. The civilian population immediately embarked on a Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) that affected many sectors of the public service. Resistance was notably strong in the education and health sectors leading to a collapse of both the sectors with the attendant disruptions. Banging of pots and the three fingers salute reminiscent of the Thai resistance to the military coup of May 2014 by General Prayuth Chan-ocha were also popular forms of resistance. Over time, and with encouragement from the elected civilian government-in-exile, the CDM morphed into armed resistance against the military called People's Defence Forces (PDFs) in May 2021. Shortly afterwards, the SAC labelled the PDFs terrorist organizations.

The shadow government-in-exile is helmed by members of the NLD who have gone into hiding and calls itself the National Unity Government (NUG). The NUG is active in collaborating with like-minded organizations and individuals that oppose the military coup. It has won the support of a number of Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) that have fought the military for a long time. Such groups that draw on the country's ethnic minorities include the Karen National Union (KNU) and its armed affiliates, Kachin Independence Organization/Army (KIO/KIA), Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and its armed affiliates, Chin National Front (CNF) and armed affiliates in particular. These ethnic armies have collaborated with the NUG and offered training and weapons to the PDFs and more recently operated alongside each other against the military. There are approximately 20 EAOs in Myanmar and the previous elected government had a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) with 10 of them although the agreement was fraying since 2016.

The political violence between the military and the PDFs and EAOs is widespread and especially intense in Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Magwe and northern Shan states and the Sagaing region. The army has conceded that the security situation is challenging while the NUG claims to control more than half the country's territory. The military regularly uses random and indiscriminate violence to try and suppress the armed resistance. As a result of the ongoing situation, there have been approximately 3,000 civilians who have lost their lives with some 200,000 internally displaced persons. A large number of those who resist the military have also been imprisoned. The military has been regularly laying siege to areas with strong resistance and burning houses and forcing occupants to flee into hiding. EAO and PDF-led ambushes and attacks have been rising and the military has responded with aerial attacks using aircraft and helicopters.

The SAC is determined to stage an election and seek victory for the party that represents the military's corporate interests – the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). In order to facilitate this development, it has appointed a new Union Election Commission (UEC) and required political parties to register again in order to compete in the planned elections. The NLD and many other parties have neither the intention nor the interest in participating in this staged election to legitimize the coup and ongoing military rule. In fact, the NUG has been encouraging attacks against the military and thwart the planned elections. It has also achieved success in raising its international profile and raising funds from the Myanmar diaspora abroad. In 2023 alone it has raised \$100 million and hopes to raise the amount to \$250 million. Funds are often raised through direct donations and the sale of confiscated military properties and planned construction of apartments after the successful completion of the revolution to rid the country of military rule.

Both the SAC and the NUG/PDFs/EAOs regard each other as terrorist organizations and are unwilling to compromise and there are no ongoing attempts to negotiate a truce and end the violence domestically. Hence, the death and destruction has continued and in fact worsened over time. The general appreciation of the situation is that this is going to be fairly long and drawn out conflict with neither side prepared to negotiate. Additionally, the violence has not spared urban areas unlike previously where it was limited to the areas that often housed the ethnic minorities rather than the Bamar majority. Consequently, it is notable that for the first time in the country's political history large numbers of Bamar are involved in resisting the military. Urban areas also attract assassinations against military informants, administrative appointees and allied civilian militia groups called *Pyu Saw Htee* that are armed and trained by the military.

Regional impact and reactions to the conflict

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) of which Myanmar has been a member since 1997 convened a meeting in April 2021 to deal with the coup. General Min Aung Hlaing who attended this meeting agreed to a Five Points Consensus (5PC) plan that involves dialogue with all stakeholders in the country, cessation of violence and a return to democratic governance. ASEAN has also attempted to assist the country achieve the goals of the 5PC through the appointment of a Special Ambassador. However, there has been no progress on the matter and succeeding Special Ambassadors from Brunei in 2021 and Cambodia in 2022 have been unable to persuade the military government to abide by the 5PC. A new appointee from the current ASEAN Chair, Indonesia will soon be appointed to oversee the 5PC.

ASEAN member countries have been unhappy with the ongoing situation and since late 2021 have barred members of the Myanmar military government from attending Ministerial level meetings. Instead, they have requested the presence of a senior bureaucratic representative. The SAC has simply responded by not sending a representative to the meetings to express its displeasure in turn.

Within the ASEAN member countries there appear to be a split position on how to deal with the Myanmar crisis. Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore from maritime Southeast Asia have been more critical of the SAC and refused to deal with it. Malaysia is the harshest critic that has begun dealing with the NUG government publicly.

Countries neighbouring Myanmar in mainland Southeast Asia appear more willing to deal with the SAC government suggesting that de facto power may be regarded as constituting legitimacy. Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and until more recently, Vietnam fall into this category. Thailand has traditionally borne the brunt of political violence in Myanmar in the form of refugees and undocumented migrants. It already hosts some 93,000 refugees from the past and there are now additional refugees, especially in the town of Mae Sot, across from the Myanmar border said to number some 30,000. The country also relies on Myanmar for workers in the marine, construction, plantation and service sectors in particular and has traditionally been home to some 2 million Myanmar workers. Over and above this dependency, up to 20 percent of Thai energy needs is provided by oil and gas from Myanmar.

It remains to be seen how Indonesia will respond to the situation as the new ASEAN Chair going forward. The situation on the ground in Myanmar does not look promising and is in fact getting worse. Hence, the situation is likely to lead to protracted and intense conflict for the next 3 to 5 years before some form of settlement may arise.

Other than ASEAN, India has borne some brunt from a refugee influx from Chin state in the west of Myanmar into its northeastern states like Assam and Manipur. China, that has a long and porous border with Myanmar also maintains ties with some of the EAOs from the northern Shan states and Kachin state. In fact, 7 of the northern groups often enter into ceasefire talks with the Myanmar military through a Chinese intermediary and fly in from Kunming in Yunnan province. This development has always left the Myanmar military suspicious about China's intentions and goodwill. Ethnic groups like the Wa and Kokang used to be fighters of the Burmese Communist Party (BCP) that was supported by China and collapsed in 1989. Nonetheless, China and Russia have shielded Myanmar from more diplomatic fallout internationally. Russia has also been a major arms supplier of fighter aircraft and helicopters to Myanmar more recently.

Japan's special relationship and position

Japan has always claimed a special relationship with Myanmar that dates back to the struggle for the country's independence against the British. The 30 Comrades that led the independence movement and included Aung San were trained by the Japanese army. Hence, even after the 1962 military coup that led to the onset of a lengthy military authoritarian government under General Ne Win that lasted till 1988, Japan always maintained bilateral relations with Myanmar. This relationship was impervious to the isolationist foreign policy of passive neutrality adopted then as well.

During the semi-democratic period that spanned the 10 years before the 2021 coup, Japan's bilateral relations with Myanmar grew considerably and it was the first country to open an international port at Thilawa in Rakhine state in December 2015. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe provided very generous financial assistance following the lifting of sanctions against Myanmar and appointed Yohei Sasakawa as Special Envoy of the Government of Japan to the country. And Japan remains the only foreign country with 2 special economic zones adjacent to Thilawa port although international pressures have led to some divestments as well. One of the most recent Japanese companies to divest from Myanmar was Kirin Brewery that had a joint venture with a Myanmar beer producer that is part of the military's economic empire.

At the present time, Japan's Nippon Foundation provides support to internally displaced persons from the ongoing conflicts. Yohei Sasakawa was also responsible for arranging the truce between the Arakan Army in Rakhine state and the Myanmar military that has generally held quite well. Japan has allowed Myanmar nationals to stay on in the country rather than repatriating them after the coup on humanitarian grounds and there are ongoing negotiations for the country to source more labour from Myanmar. It also has an agreement to source for medical and health care workers from Myanmar annually, just like it does from Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines as well. An interesting observation made by many Myanmar nationals who are now in exile is that Japan is the only country trusted by both the NUG and the SAC and therefore uniquely placed to broker a truce. Whether the country will rise to the challenge remains to be seen.