

Myanmar's Military Coup

Security Trouble in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Myanmar's military junta overturned the 2020 general election result and seized power by a military coup on 1 February 2021. An estimated 800 people have already died in the lethal response by security forces. The Myanmar coup has had great repercussions in the effort to establish democracy in Myanmar and to maintain security in the Indo-Pacific region.

This article highlights the tyranny of the military junta and the backsliding of democracy in Myanmar (formerly known as Burma), contending that Russia and China's unwavering support of Myanmar's military makes it difficult to restore the democratic process and reestablish peace and stability. It also proposes that the triangular nexus of China–Myanmar–Russia propels apprehensions for the rise of autocracy and its impact on South Asia and Southeast Asian security architecture and regional stability.

Introduction

It has been many months since the military coup in Myanmar, and people are still protesting in the streets. The military junta has imposed many restrictions to prevent the flow of communications, including disrupting internet access and phone lines. There is no arguing about Myanmar's long history of repressing peaceful protest, infringing fundamental rights, and arbitrary arrest. In a recent move, the state election commission has shown its intention to dissolve democratic leader Aung San Suu Ki's political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), for its alleged involvement in the 2020 general election, citing election fraud, and could charge its leaders with treason. On 24 May 2021, Aung San Suu Kyi appeared before the court for the first time after her detention in the coup. She seemed determined to stand by the democracy supporters and avowed that her party exists as long as the people exist.

Myanmar has witnessed ruthless military rule since its independence from Britain in 1948.¹ On 1 February 2021, the Myanmar military detained many political leaders, activists, and senior leaders of NLD in Naypyidaw and other parts of the country. The popular leader Aung San Suu Kyi was detained in her

house. It is assumed that the coup took place due to the defeat of the military-supported candidates and the NLD's landslide victory in the general election, which was held in November 2020.² The NLD won 346 seats in parliament, more than the 322 seats required to form a new government.³ The election results favoring Aung San Suu Kyi, a democratic icon, startled the military regime.

The army is trying to reverse the election, alleging unfair and biased processes. Aung San Suu Kyi remains detained by the military, which has filed several charges against her. On this constitutional crisis of Myanmar, UN Secretary-General António Guterres said that the election turnover is "unacceptable" and urged the international community "to make sure" the military takeover and coup fail.⁴ Ironically, Myanmar had a short-lived experience of a quasidemocratic system after 2011 when the powerful military, named "Tatmadaw," started parliamentary elections. Despite the military reserving 25 percent of all the seats in parliament for itself and putting other safeguards in the constitution for its own benefit in the 2015 general election, Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD won big in both houses.⁵ It was highly expected that the NLD's victory would begin a new chapter in Myanmar's democracy transition process and would limit the power of the military. On the contrary, Tatmadaw remained all-powerful, with control over legislating and the power to choose the president; Aung San Suu Kyi was barred from holding any executive power under the constitution.⁶ She held a "state counselor" position and was a *de facto* leader. She had personally witnessed the military atrocities against ethnic minorities, yet she also rejected the international criticism of "ethnic cleansing" of the Rohingya and even defended the military-influenced government against alleged human right violations in the International Court of Justice on 10 December 2019.⁷ Aung San Suu Kyi's support of the Myanmar government, which was held responsible for the "genocidal intent" against ethnic minority Rohingya by the United Nations International Fact-Finding Mission Report, maligned her image as a democratic icon, resulting in a loss of international credibility.

The worst phase came after the February 2021 military coup in which the military took control over the country and the military leaders (working as the State Administrative Council) launched brutal crackdowns against pro-democracy demonstrators. This article holds that the military coup has killed the hope of democracy in Myanmar and fostered growing concerns over a civil war in Myanmar. It contends that this represents alarm bells over the rise of autocracy in the region and the potentially catastrophic impact on the region's security and stability.

Ruthless Military Rule since the Dawn of Burma's Independence

The tyranny of the military has a long-standing history in Myanmar, dating to when it was known as Burma. The assassination of General Aung San in 1947, a national hero of Burma's independence and the founder of the Burma National Army, started Burma down the path of becoming a military-dominated state. However, it remained a type of parliamentary democracy with heavy military influence, until a military coup led by General Ne Win in 1962. Ne Win imposed a harsh authoritarian regime, including suspension of the 1947 constitution, suppression of demonstrations, arrest of political opponents, and heavy crackdowns on "ethnic armed groups."

The resentment against Ne Win's regime exploded into a mass protest in 1988, predominantly led by students demanding a multiparty system, resulting in the replacement of the old military regime with a new one and the formation of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). The new military regime was established at the expense of democracy, leading to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of protesters.⁸

At the same time, pro-democracy voices grew stronger, and the SLORC relented and allowed the registration of political parties. It was during this major development that Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Major General Aung San, founded the NLD and raised her voice against abuses of power by the military and led pressure on the military regime to hold elections. This show of power threatened the military junta, which placed her under house arrest.⁹

Under domestic and international pressure, the military regime held an election in 1990. The NLD won the elections, but the junta refused to accept the election results, maintaining tight control over the government, arresting elected leaders and activists, and keeping Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest, a condition of isolation in which she remained intermittently for two decades.¹⁰

In 2008, the military regime adopted a new constitution in a controversial referendum, ensuring its control over the government by reserving 25 percent of parliamentary seats for military officials. The new constitution also disqualified the spouses and parents of foreign nationals from serving as the president of Myanmar, which excluded Aung San Suu Kyi. The generals called these constitutional changes "disciplined democracy."¹¹ Nonetheless, Aung San Suu Kyi sought popularity at the national and international levels, and her party kept winning elections in 2015 and 2020.

Military Regime and Genocide

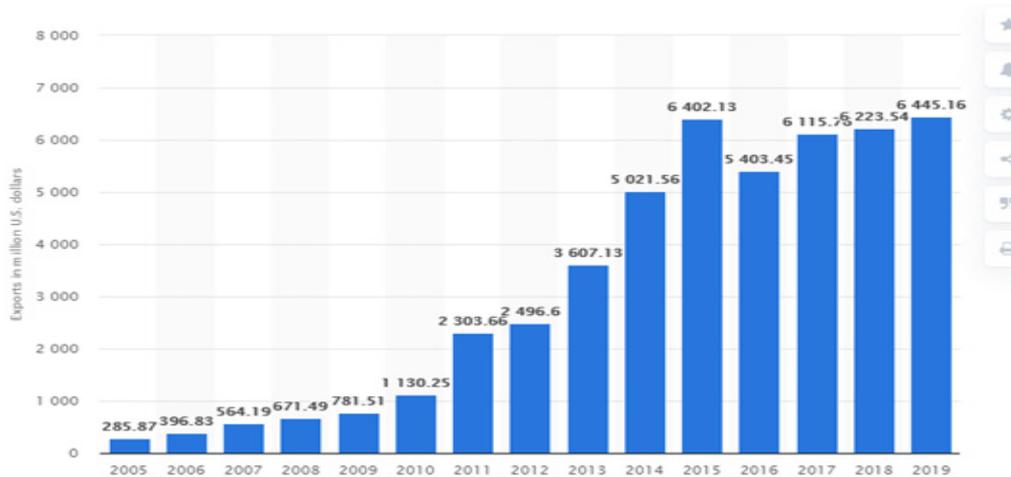
The brutal side of the military regime showed itself in 2017, when it started “clearance operations” to wipe out ethnic minorities, mainly Muslim Rohingya. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Since then, an estimated 745,000 Rohingya—including more than 400,000 children—have fled into the Cox’s Bazar.”¹² The former High UN High Commissioner for Human Rights described the military’s “clearance operations” as “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing” and stated that its actions seemed to be “a cynical ploy to forcibly transfer large numbers of people without possibility of return.”¹³

In 2019, an independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar, established by the United Nations Human Rights Council, submitted its report of the military regime’s “genocidal intent” against ethnic minorities in Myanmar. Marzuki Darusman, chair of the fact-finding mission, said: “The international community must hold the Myanmar military to account for the tremendous pain and suffering it has inflicted on persons of all genders across the country.”¹⁴ Despite such severe opprobrium at the international level, the Myanmar security forces’ unrelenting clearance operations continue to demonize the ethnic Rohingya, furthering the humanitarian crisis.

Unworthy Role of Russia and China

Myanmar relies heavily on China and Russia for diplomatic support, arms and weapons, and trade and commerce. There are several reasons behind Russia’s and China’s support for the military regime. The first is *ideological*: to discredit and disregard any democratic process in the neighborhood and thereby promote authoritarianism. Second is *geopolitical*: to maintain an ally in Southeast Asia to rally with and oppose Western countries. And the third is *economics and arms trade*: Myanmar is largely dependent on Russian and Chinese arms and is an attractive market for Chinese investment and infrastructure projects.

China used its veto power in the UN Security Council to stave off any action against Myanmar’s military regime, and Chinese media called the coup a “cabinet reshuffle.”¹⁵ China has been diplomatically supporting Myanmar and shielded the military regime in the United Nations for crime against humanity as well. China has cemented its bilateral relations with Myanmar by investing heavily in infrastructure, pipelines, special economic zones, and a deep-sea port under its massive development project known as the Belt and Road Initiative. The statistic shows that China’s export to Myanmar has risen exponentially, from 285,000 USD in 2005 to 6.445 million USD in 2019.¹⁶



(Source: Statista)

Figure 1 Value of goods exported from China to Myanmar from 2005 to 2019.

Notably, Myanmar's geographical location in the Indian Ocean is of strategic significance; it provides easy access to sea lanes for Chinese oil imports from the Middle East. The overland route of the Kunming–Kyaukpyu gas pipeline between Myanmar and China has already started. In addition, China is the main supplier of arms, constituting 48 percent of total arms imports to Myanmar.¹⁷

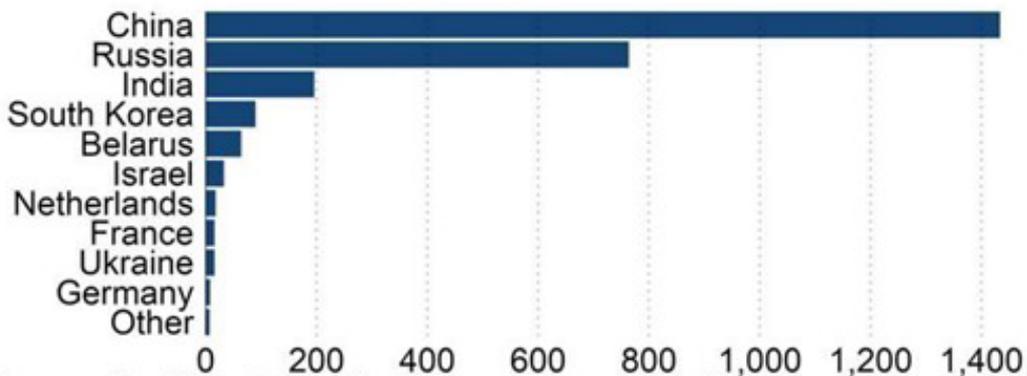
Russia has also supported Myanmar's military regime by blocking, with China, a joint UNSC statement condemning the February 2021 coup.¹⁸ After that, in March, Russian deputy minister of defense Colonel General Alexander Fomin attended Myanmar's Armed Forces Day event at Naypyidaw and expressed its desire to bolster Russia–Myanmar relations and enhance military-technical cooperation.¹⁹ In response to his visit, Myanmar's General Min Aung Hlaing thanked Russia for its support in the UNSC.

Russia's desire to intensify relations with Myanmar's military regime is driven by arms exports to Myanmar. Russia is the second largest arms supplier to Myanmar, constituting 15 percent of arms imports.²⁰

Myanmar has been a long time buyer of Russian arms and has received 30 MiG-29 jet fighters, 12 Yak-130 jet trainers, 10 Mi-24 and Mi-35P helicopters, and eight Pechora-2M anti-aircraft missile systems from Russia since the 2000s.²¹ In addition, Russia will supply Myanmar with Pantsir-S1 surface-to-air missile systems, Orlan-10E surveillance drones, and radar equipment, and it intends to be a major partner in Myanmar's military modernization, a long-term plan of General Min Aung Hlaing. The bilateral ties between Russia and Myanmar have

Myanmar's major arms suppliers in 2011-2020

(In millions of dollars)



Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

(Source: SIPRI Fact Sheet, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2020")

Figure 2 Myanmar's major arms suppliers in 2011–2020.

grown in recent years, with Russia providing army training and university scholarships in addition to selling arms to the military. Due to such bilateral activities, Russia has been held responsible by the United Nations and several Western countries for alleged atrocities against ethnic minorities. Russia's official visit to Myanmar is an attempt to legitimize the military junta and the coup. Russia is complicit in the military's campaign of crushing people's voices and the decay of democracy in Myanmar; likewise, President Vladimir Putin allegedly tried to assassinate, and then imprisoned, a domestic political opponent, Alexei Navalny.

Russia sees long-term profit potential by ramping up its ties to the military junta, a customer of Russia's arms and a strategic partner in Southeast Asia that can possibly provide a foothold to Russia to benefit its Indo-Pacific interests. Russia's pragmatic foreign policy serves its own best interests by providing support to Myanmar's military regime.

It seems certain that Russia and China, the two autocratic global powers, have no sympathy with pro-democracy movements in Myanmar. Both those countries have strategic, geopolitical, and economic interests in Myanmar, and both want to retain and expand links given that Myanmar is so significant, strategically speaking, in East Asia. Therefore, Russia and China have no intention of condemning the coup at any point, and Moscow's and Beijing's support for a military dictatorship in Myanmar has hampered the pro-democracy movement.

Notably, Myanmar's internal politics and decision-making process is imbued by the China–Russia convergence. However, both China and Russia, being “revi-

sionist powers” with their own authoritarian systems, are best aligned with Myanmar’s military junta to impede Myanmar’s democratic process. Therefore, the burgeoning relationship with China and Russia affects domestic politics—and raises a growing concern for regional security.

However, the White House under President Joseph Biden strongly condemned the military coup and the detention of Aung San Suu Kyi, calling it an “assault on democracy and rule of law.”²² The international community has been largely condemning the coup d’état, with the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and the European Union imposing sanctions and Japan suspending Myanmar’s financial aid.²³ The West as a promoter and guarantor of democracy and human rights, has minimal influence on the military junta.

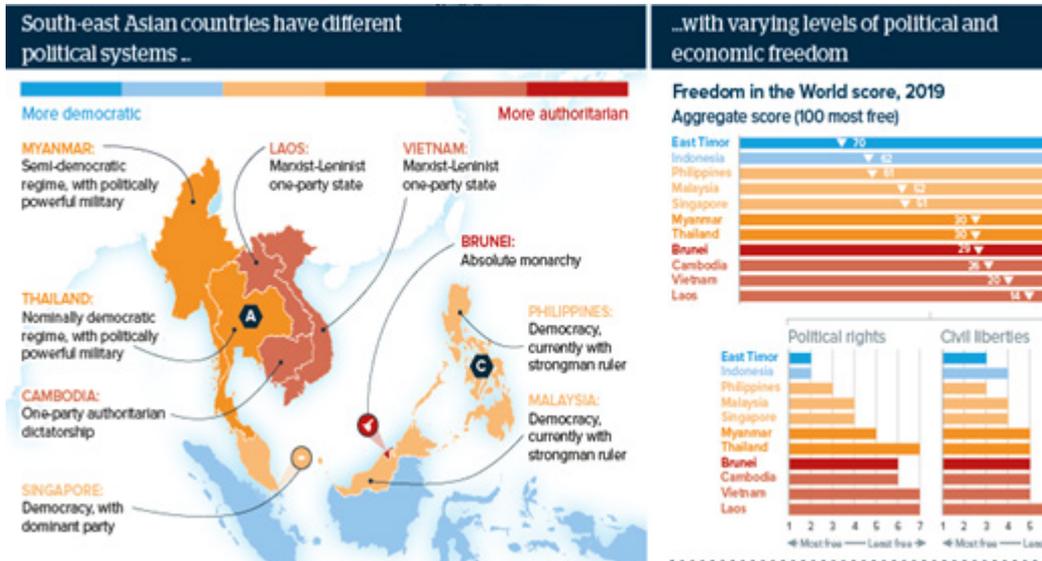
Alarms for the Rise of Autocracy in the Region

The current unrest in Myanmar seems to represent an artifact of the past in Southeast Asian nations, when people’s resistance took place against Suharto in Indonesia and Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines. If the turbulence in Myanmar were to continue for a longer period or deteriorate, the effect could spill into neighboring countries in Southeast Asia, where many countries maintain illiberal democracies and strongmen in power. These populist strongman leaders do not have any desire to uphold democratic values. Pluralism, electoral politics, and civil liberties have eroded, in fact, from one-party states such as Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam to democratic states with strongmen rulers such as Thailand, the Philippines, and Malaysia.

Additionally, it is highly likely that the outflow of new refugees (after Rohingya) from Myanmar to neighboring countries may destabilize the region. And concern over civil war erupting in Myanmar has only grown. The UN special envoy for Myanmar, Schraner Burgener, warned in a 24 May 2021 virtual conference of the possibility of civil war given the perpetual violent attacks on civilians by the military force, compelling them to use offensive actions. She called the situation in Myanmar “very bad,” and since then more than 800 people have been killed, more than 5,300 arrested, and more than 1,800 arrest warrants issued by the military. These are the figures reported in the media, but there may be many more going unreported.²⁴

The 10 member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) agreed on a five-point action plan at a summit on Myanmar in April 2021, which was attended by the mastermind of the coup himself, General Min Aung Hlaing. The five points include: the immediate cessation of violence, constructive dialogue between the military and its opponents, facilitation of mediation, allowing humanitarian assistance, and permitting a visit by a special ASEAN envoy.²⁵ How-

ever, in an interview with Chinese television, General Hlang said that he “doesn't see those five points can be implemented” and refused the visit from the Southeast Asian envoy until security and stability are established.²⁶



(Source: Freedom House; The Heritage Foundation; Oxford Analytica)

Figure 3 Southeast Asia's political system.

Options

There are several options. The regime has no intention to work with civil society or any international human rights group. The military wants to maintain tight control over the country. First, the UNSC should take stringent steps immediately, either constituting a special commission or sending a special envoy to Myanmar to assess the situation and consolidate support with the Burmese. The role of regional actors, notably ASEAN and others with a regional outreach, is significant in condemning the military coup, alerting regional leaders to its repercussions, and warning the military of a state failure in Burma.

Second, the UNSC unanimously voted against the use of coercive power by the military on protesters and minorities. The UNSC members should vote for a complete arms embargo for Myanmar. Third, like-minded countries should protect the protesters' rights and maintain safeguards for a safe solution that brings back normal domestic relations. Finally, civil society should come together and evaluate options to solidify human rights protection in the region.

Conclusion

The vision for democracy in Myanmar became complicated when conflict was reignited between military forces and ethnic minority insurgent groups. The civilians who have been protesting and marching on the streets for so long started using more aggressive means to protest, as they are unwilling to accept military rule. Until now, it was well understood that Tatmadaw is very powerful, and it is likely impossible for the military to accept election results and cede power to people's representatives. It is widely believed that major Western countries and the UNSC could not do much to resolve the Rohingya crisis, as China and Russia continue to support the Myanmar military and its oppressive actions in the UNSC.

It is worth pondering that mere condemnation and limited sanctions by the United States and other members of the international community would not subdue military rulers to bring normalcy back and transfer power to elected leaders as long as the military enjoys the support of China and Russia. ❖

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