

Civil disobedience after military coup - 'We're not brainwashed': a week of turmoil in Myanmar

Saturday 6 February 2021, by [BORGER Julian](#), [ELLIS-PETERSEN Hannah](#), [Guardian reporter](#), [Guardian staff in Yangon](#), [RATCLIFFE Rebecca](#) (Date first published: 5 February 2021).

Protests have spread across country since military coup, as citizens resist return to dictatorship

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On Friday evening, after darkness fell, the sound of car horns and the clanging of pots and pans and metal railings echoed around the compact grid of central Yangon. It was the fourth consecutive night that people had gathered on their balconies to loudly voice their fury at the military junta now running Myanmar.

It was Monday morning when the public had awoken to find that Aung San Suu Kyi, whose party had won a landslide election in November, had been detained, and that the army had seized all legislative, judicial and executive powers.

The country - which spent five decades under military rule before it began transitioning to democracy in 2011 - was once again under direct control of the army.

Despite the army's history of using deadly violence against demonstrators, protests have sprung up, and public rage is mounting.

In Yangon on Thursday, small groups of activists played a cat-and-mouse game with police, holding impromptu protests before racing away to avoid being arrested. At Sule Pagoda a truck slowly released a cloud of red balloons into the sky - the colour of Aung San Suu Kyi's party - to signal their loyalty to the ousted leader, who is now under house arrest with other senior officials.

Drivers, meanwhile, threw flyers disparaging the army's commander-in-chief, Min Aung Hlaing, from their car windows. On Friday, hundreds of students gathered at Dagon University on the outskirts of the capital, with smaller gatherings taking place elsewhere.

The military has "beaten down" the people and destroyed their dreams, said one student, who demonstrated outside Yangon University. He asked to remain anonymous because he feared being targeted. "I hope our generation will be the last to experience military rule," he said.

A civil disobedience campaign has gained pace over recent days, with medics from dozens of hospitals refusing to work, as well as many teachers, students and youth groups. In photographs

shared online, protesters wore red ribbons to show support for Aung San Suu Kyi, who spent 15 years in detention campaigning against military rule. Though internationally she has been condemned for her treatment of the Rohingya, at home she is considered by many to be a symbol of democracy. At protests they raise their hands in a three-finger salute, an anti-military gesture used by pro-democracy demonstrators in neighbouring Thailand.

"I don't want to look back some day and think that things did not change because I didn't help bring change," said a student in Taunggyi, the capital of Shan state. The people had been robbed by the military, he said.

Aung San Suu Kyi aide arrested as Myanmar military seeks to quash unrest

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The authorities have attempted to halt any dissent, and fear of a violent response has deterred people from gathering for mass street protests. In Mandalay, the city's police chief said protesters would be shot with rubber bullets, teargas would be used, and medical staff protesting outside hospitals would be arrested, according to police documents. About 30 people were reportedly arrested for taking part in pot-banging protests over recent evenings.

Internet service providers were also ordered to block Facebook, the main mode of communication in Myanmar. To get around the restrictions, residents rushed to download virtual private networks - which the junta later said it also would ban - and turned to Twitter to share information.

"People are more educated now and more willing to speak out against the military," said Tun, 19. "We lived in fear, but we have had some years without it. We know our rights and we aren't brainwashed any more."

[Myanmar rings with pots and pans against military coup - video]

The army has justified its takeover by accusing Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) of widespread fraud in November's election, but has not provided credible evidence to prove this. The NLD won by a huge margin, taking 396 out of 476 seats, an even stronger performance than in 2015 when the country held its first free vote in decades. The military-backed Union Solidarity and Development party suffered a humiliating defeat, taking just 33 seats.

The military was already hugely powerful before the coup, prompting some to question why Min Aung Hlaing decided to seize power. Under the constitution it maintains control of key ministries and is guaranteed a quarter of parliamentary seats.

"This is clearly not in the long-term interests of the country or the Tatmadaw [armed forces]," said Richard Horsey, an independent political analyst based in Myanmar.

However, Min Aung Hlaing has made no secret of his desire to one day be president, and within the military there has long been resentment over the power-sharing arrangement. The recent election brought such grievances to a head, said Horsey. "I think there's a lot of people in officer corps who genuinely believe the election was not free and fair," he said. While the election process was not without flaws, there is no evidence to suggest the large-scale fraud that has been alleged.

Speculation over Min Aung Hlaing's ambitions matters little to Myae, 60, who wants anything but a return to power exercised through threats and violence.

Roads, transport and electricity had improved in the last nine years, she said, unlike before 2011 when power was provided to different parts of Yangon on a rotary system. "The buses were cramped, run-down and made me feel like livestock en route to the slaughterhouse," she said.

The tilt towards democracy had helped her feel valued, she said, because the elected government “treats us more like human beings ... without the need for stealth and suspicion”.

Minority groups are especially fearful. Yasmin Ullah, a Rohingya rights activist, said her community would be even more vulnerable to abuses. Hundreds of thousands remain stuck in camps in Rakhine, where they are denied freedom of movement and access to education or healthcare.

“It’s much easier now for the military to squeeze people a lot harder than they have in the past because there is not even a perception of democracy any more,” she said, calling for the international community to support human rights defenders in the country, who are especially exposed.

So far 147 people have been arrested, mostly activists and politicians.

Despite such crackdowns, the nightly ritual of the clanging of pots and pans has been getting louder and more drawn out. A revolutionary song that was an anthem for the millions of people who opposed the military in 1988 is also being sung by many. For Tun, 56, who remembers the violence that was used by the military at that time, the peaceful protest is a sign of hope. “These moments in the nights make me believe there are so many more like me who want to be free from military rule,” he said.

Guardian reporter in Yangon and Rebecca Ratcliffe

• The Guardian. Fri 5 Feb 2021 17.05 GMT. Last modified on Fri 5 Feb 2021 18.53 GMT:
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/05/myanmar-protests-week-of-turmoil-aung-san-suu-kyi>
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The nights of pots and pans are back, on Myanmar’s fearful streets

Activists are urging a traditional show of solidarity amid wary anger over the military’s coup.

[Video not reproduced here.]

In Myanmar, if you want to drive evil from your home, you bang pots and pans. Yangon’s streets were filled with the din of clashing metal in 2007, [when monks](#) called for an end to military rule, and before that, in 1988 when the former president Sein Lwin, or the “butcher of Rangoon”, ordered troops to shoot pro-democracy protesters. On Tuesday night, pots and pans were back again.

Evil has returned, they say; Gen Min Aung Hlaing has led a military coup against the democratically elected government and its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, whose immense popularity within the country helped her National League for Democracy (NLD) [win a landslide victory in 2020](#). The military’s electoral proxy secured fewer than 7% of available seats, leading it, and the military, to claim widespread electoral “fraud” without evidence.

But now Aung San Suu Kyi is [reportedly under house arrest](#) in the capital, Naypyidaw, and the elected lawmakers who were to start a new parliamentary term and tackle the impact of Covid-19,

poverty and ethnic conflict in the beleaguered country have been confined inside their government housing, surrounded by soldiers.

“People are feeling anger, fear and loss,” said a 24-year-old activist who asked for anonymity. “Now the international community’s involvement is key. The military must be pressured and made to feel alone.

“Japan, Korea and China should withdraw their development plans in [Myanmar](#). We have seen that sanctions don’t have that much effect - I will leave it at that.”

At 8pm, the first rattles and shakes echoed down the streets of Yangon, rumbling into a chorus of cheers and spoons clashing against pans. Cars hit their horns, cyclists rang their bells and passersby smacked their hands against signs and stone.

This first public rejection of the coup went on for 10 minutes across the city in a massive show of solidarity.

Central Yangon had been quieter than usual on Tuesday morning, but people soon ventured out into a new, uneasy world. Queues that snaked from ATMs and supermarkets the previous day had dwindled, while telephone lines and mobile internet services that had been patchy since the first hours of the coup began to return. A form of normality was restored, though one fraught with anxiety over the next move either from the military or from the public, many of whom are not willing to accept another military dictatorship.

Kyaw, 80, a retired hotel manager, has lived through several coups and new constitutions in Myanmar, but he fainted twice after hearing that the military had seized power.

“It’s the youngsters who will be most affected,” he said. “It’s a very sad day for the country and our future. No good will come from this. As for those who have done this, I hope they burn.”

While military trucks remained outside City Hall in downtown Yangon and pro-military protesters gathered at a local park on Tuesday, the first stirrings of resistance emerged. A teachers’ federation called for the release of detained politicians and student leaders, Yangon Youth Network announced a civil disobedience campaign and doctors in Mandalay refused to work under the military junta.

Yoon, 18, a student, was jumpy, but hoped everything would go back to normal. “Everything has been disturbed and people are trying to adapt but it feels impossible,” he said.

Memories of the electricity and food shortages after the 1988 pro-democracy protests are still vivid for many - but even more the brutal onslaught brought by the military against protesters.

“In a country like Myanmar, there’s no such thing as feeling safe,” said Khin, a 29-year-old teacher. “This is one of the most bitter days I have experienced in my life.”

In the streets, some residents have quietly removed posters of the NLD to avoid the scrutiny of the military and its supporters, but to a larger extent profile templates of [Aung San Suu Kyi](#) and her party have sprung up on Facebook - Myanmar’s dominant mode of online communication.

“I’m disgusted about the people who have taken over our country,” said Tun, 19, who had returned from a US university to Myanmar during the pandemic. “The country is turning to garbage.”

Young or old, however, those who oppose the military understand what its soldiers are capable of. Instead of giving them a reason to shoot into a crowd, on Tuesday night they showed their solidarity

with pots and pans

Guardian reporter

• The Guardian. Tue 2 Feb 2021 12.11 GMT:

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/02/the-nights-of-pots-and-pans-are-back-on-myanmar-fearful-streets>

Myanmar coup: civil disobedience campaign begins amid calls for Aung San Suu Kyi's release

National League for Democracy urges military to acknowledge 2020 election result.

The party of [Aung San Suu Kyi](#) has called for her immediate release and for Myanmar's 2020 election results to be acknowledged by the military, which took power in a coup on Monday.

The country's elected leader, who was among dozens of political figures picked up by the army, reportedly remains under house arrest.

The coup has provoked widespread outrage around the world, but China and Russia blocked British-led efforts at the UN security council to deliver a consensus statement condemning the military takeover.

The streets of Myanmar's main city, Yangon, were calm on Tuesday, but online many people turned their social media pictures red to signal their support for Aung San Suu Kyi, who won a landslide victory in November's elections. In the evening, residents banged metal pots, a symbolic protest against the military, which previously ran [Myanmar](#) for some five decades. Some lit candles on their balconies.

A growing civil disobedience campaign has also emerged among doctors, with health workers from dozens of hospitals across Myanmar stating they will not work under the military, starting from Wednesday.

A statement on the Facebook page of May Win Myint, an official with her National League for Democracy, said the party's executive committee urged the military to acknowledge the results of November's election and called for the parliamentary session due to start this week to go ahead. It also called for Aung San Suu Kyi's immediate release.

Later on Tuesday, an official from the National League for Democracy said in a message on Facebook that Aung San Suu Kyi was in good health and that there was no plan to move her. It is not possible to verify such posts.

The UN special envoy on Myanmar, Christine Schraner Burgener, briefed the UN security council in closed session on Tuesday.

"She didn't hold back at all," a diplomat who was in the chamber said. "She really called for a clear signal of council support for democracy in Myanmar."

China and Russia however blocked a British-drafted statement condemning the coup and calling for its reversal, while India and Vietnam also voiced reservations.

“China, weren’t actively supportive of the military vocally, but they talked about stability and internal affairs and tried not to say anything at all,” a diplomat said. “Russia supported China, and then India and Vietnam were just a bit more nuanced [...] and said it was important to consider regional efforts.”

Louis Charbonneau, UN director for Human Rights Watch, condemned the security council’s silence.

“The abject failure of the security council, thanks to the likes of China and Russia, to hold Myanmar’s military leaders accountable for their crimes helps them feel they can engage in horrific abuses and pay little or no cost,” Charbonneau said.

A spokesperson for the Chinese UN mission said: “It’s also our hope that any move of the council would be conducive to the stability of Myanmar rather than making the situation more complicated.”

Beijing has invested billions of dollars in projects in Myanmar. The state-backed Xinhua news agency described the military take over with the euphemism: “major cabinet reshuffle”.

The US president, Joe Biden, [threatened sanctions](#) and called for governments to press for the military to release detainees. The UN security council will meet on Tuesday to discuss the matter.

A US state department official said the US had officially designated the events in Myanmar as a coup, triggering an immediate review of sanctions, aimed at the generals and military-related companies. The official pointed out that some of the country’s military leaders were already under sanction, and the intent of the review was to make sure humanitarian relief was not affected.

“We’ll take action against those responsible, including through careful review of our current sanctions posture, as it relates to Burma’s military leaders and companies associated with them”, the official said. “The coup restrictions apply to US foreign assistance for the government of Burma, and we will continue programmes for the people of Burma that benefit them directly including humanitarian assistance to the Rohingya and other populations in need.”

Almost all US aid to the country, budgeted as \$109m for this year, goes through civil society institutions, and not directly through the government. The US is also talking to regional partners with closer ties with Myanmar, like Japan and India, to discuss coordinated action, the official said.

One possible area where new sanctions are possible is in the field of communications. The advocacy group, Justice for Myanmar, published a [report in December](#) outlining an array of satellite networks dominated by the Myanmar and Vietnamese military, which use western supplied technology.

Army chief General Min Aung Hlaing said on Tuesday that the military takeover was “inevitable” after the government failed to respond to its grievances over alleged electoral fraud. But the military has offered little response to the flood of foreign criticism.

On Tuesday, hundreds of members of Myanmar’s parliament remained confined inside their government housing in the capital. One unnamed lawmaker told Associated Press that he and about 400 others could speak to one another inside the compound and communicate with their constituencies by phone, but were not allowed to leave the complex in Naypyitaw. Police were inside the complex and soldiers were outside, he added.

On the streets of Yangon, life seemed, on the surface, to be continuing as normal, and there did not

appear to be a greater security presence.

Many residents, however, were angry. “The military has already ruled us for five decades. It took so much effort for us to gain democracy and it’s gone, just like that, overnight. We no longer expect anything good from this country,” said Khin, a teacher.

“As for the military, they don’t have an ounce of empathy. They are willing to kill civilians for their own selfish benefit.” She used to merely dislike the military, she said. “Now I am utterly disgusted by them. They’re a bunch of monsters.”

Myae, 69, an exports trader who fled to Thailand during the 1988 pro-democracy uprisings, said he was in a state of denial. “I want our government back. It’s either that, or interference from other countries.

“I really look down on these people [the military]. They are illegitimate and illiterate. They don’t have the ability, or the right, to rule us. They have no respect for the people,” he said.

He feared that the country’s development, as well as his own work and income, would suffer. “But we’re watching and we are hoping. This is not the end. History will repeat itself over and over again.”

While some health workers have said they will refuse to work under the military, the Yangon Youth Network activist group, one of the biggest in the country, said it had also launched a civil disobedience campaign, one of the first signs of organised protest action against the military coup. The All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU) also urged government workers to stop working for the new cabinet.

Some in Yangon called for the international community to put pressure on the military. The UN security council has been criticised for its failure to respond to previous abuses by the military, such as the violent crackdown in Rakhine state in 2017, which forced 700,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh. They remain stranded in squalid and cramped refugee camps over the border.

Rebecca Ratcliffe South-east Asia correspondent, a **Guardian reporter** in Yangon and **Julian Borger** in Washington

• The Guardian. Tue 2 Feb 2021 21.56 GMT:

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/02/myanmar-coup-military-tightens-grip-amid-calls-for-suu-kyi-to-be-freed>

Threat of Myanmar coup was never far away

Analysis: Despite her popularity Aung San Suu Kyi never had leverage to curb military’s power

Since her election as Myanmar’s de facto leader in 2015, Aung San Suu Kyi’s position has always been a precarious one. For all the international celebration of Myanmar’s transition to democracy after half a century of military rule, in reality the power of the military barely diminished at all. The

threat of a coup, the fallback position of the military for decades, had always lingered.

For the past five years, Aung San Suu Kyi has governed Myanmar on the basis of a 2008 constitution drawn up by the military themselves. It enshrined military power, allowing them to appoint 25% of seats in parliament, and preserve their interests while curbing some of the crucial powers of the democratically elected leader of the government.

It was the same constitution that prevented Aung San Suu Kyi being allowed to rule Myanmar as president, due to a clause - aimed specifically at her - which did not allow anyone with foreign relatives to hold presidential office (her children have British citizenship). In the end, she was given the title of state counsellor; a constant reminder that she was never ultimately in charge.

Yet the international community, in particular the EU and US, also holds some responsibility for the events that led up to Monday's coup. In 2013, blinded by the promise of "political progress" and Aung San Suu Kyi's release from house arrest, it was the EU that rushed to lift decades of debilitating economic sanctions in Myanmar, without securing any significant concessions from the military and no binding assurance the 2008 constitution would be rewritten.

The US then followed suit in 2016, with Barack Obama keen to have a democratic Myanmar at the heart of his "pivot to Asia" policy.

Cries from activists and human rights organisations that it was rushed, "premature and regrettable" went ignored. It was something of a betrayal of Aung San Suu Kyi, who in 2011 had said she would never rule Myanmar under the military's 2008 constitution.

Left without leverage over the military after the EU lifted sanctions and the US prepared to do the same, Aung San Suu Kyi evidently felt she had no choice but to take power under the 2008 constitution.

Myanmar army takes power in coup as Aung San Suu Kyi detained
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The relationship between the military and Aung San Suu Kyi was therefore never smooth, but it was a marriage of necessity. By co-operating with the military, and turning a blind eye to their human rights atrocities, Aung San Suu Kyi could retain the office she had waited decades to hold, with many of those years confined under military house arrest, and remain the strongest hope for Myanmar's democratic transition, as fragile and lacklustre as it was.

For the military, whose members have reluctantly realised they will never win any elections democratically due to their unpopularity, Aung San Suu Kyi in power meant the lucrative lifting of international sanctions, and the flow of aid and investment into Myanmar, all while their power remained intact. In fact, though they resented the civilian government, it became increasingly clear that the military had successfully engineered Myanmar's democratic transition to serve their interests.

Their budget rose by up to \$100m a year, and their business interests in hotels and mobile phone networks boomed. They continued their military operations against ethnic minorities across Myanmar unencumbered while Aung San Suu Kyi's pledge to oversee a peace process to end these long-running and brutal conflicts came to nothing.

Indeed, Aung San Suu Kyi's legacy in the west will forever be that of the Nobel peace prize winner who defended a genocidal campaign against the Rohingya Muslim minority, which, though not carried out on her orders, still happened under her watch.

The military's designated 25% of parliament seats meant that Aung San Suu Kyi's government would never have the 75% of votes needed to amend the constitution.

Aung San Suu Kyi and the military's style of governing has not always proved so different. Under her governance, there was an authoritarian crackdown on freedom of speech and dissent similar to the years under military rule. Human rights deteriorated and the number of political prisoners detained in Myanmar had soared over the past two years.

The army chief, Gen Min Aung Hlaing, who was the initiator of the coup in the early hours of Monday, had always been famously uncooperative with the civilian government but the relationship had reportedly been worsening in recent months.

Aung San Suu Kyi's controversial defence of the military's genocidal actions against the Rohingya at the international court of justice in December 2019 had cost her what remained of her international reputation as an icon of peace but earned her little extra favour among the military.

Aung San Suu Kyi had reportedly stopped meeting with the military, particularly after her triumphant re-election in November, where her National League Democracy (NLD) party won 80% of seats and the military had failed to make any parliamentary gains, much to their surprise and anger.

Gen Min Aung Hlaing's tenure as army chief will also be up in July, when he reaches the mandatory retirement age. The general who oversaw the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya has shown no desire to step down from power, which has allowed him and his family to amass considerable wealth, but authorisation to extend his leadership has to come from Aung San Suu Kyi.

Some have therefore speculated that the coup was initiated by Gen Min Aung Hlaing more as a means to protect his own personal power and position, rather than because the military had lost patience with not being solely in charge or because of real alleged "concerns" over rigging of November's election.

Despite her fall from grace in the international community, Aung San Suu Kyi is still widely revered and loved in Myanmar, and her detention marks a return to sadly familiar scenes of over a decade ago.

Yet, unlike in previous coups, when political prisoners were taken away in the dead of night and tortured, this time security services allowed the detained politicians and activists to bring clothes, food and medicines with them. As one Myanmar expert darkly put it "you could almost call it progress".

Hannah Ellis-Petersen South Asia correspondent

• The Guardian. Mon 1 Feb 2021 17.30 GMT. Last modified on Tue 2 Feb 2021 05.10 GMT:
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/01/threat-of-myanmar-coup-was-never-far-away>

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