

Aftershocks - Myanmar's Coup: The regional implications of Myanmar's coup

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The coup in Myanmar in early February, the country's first in more than three decades, has reshaped Myanmar's political landscape. The country had been on a shaky path toward some kind of democracy, following the 2015 election landslide for Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), and its repeat victory in the November 2020 national elections. Now, the coup has taken Myanmar back to some of its darkest days.

Military units block roads, NLD members, civil society leaders and other activists have been jailed, multiple types of communications have been cut off, and Suu Kyi is back under house arrest on typically bizarre charges - this time, of having illegally imported walkie-talkies. In the past, when Suu Kyi was held under house arrest, she was often detained on similarly bizarre and spurious charges.

The junta leader and now head of government, Min Aung Hlaing, has announced martial law in portions of the country, a curfew from 8pm until 4am, and a ban on gatherings of more than five people and on processions of cars or motorcycles - a response to days of pro-democracy demonstrations that have been building in Myanmar's towns and cities following the coup. Although protests have been springing up across the country, the military has issued ominous warnings about how it might respond to them and called for an end to protests.

Moreover, the armed forces' takeover will likely do further damage to the country's already suffering economy. Junta rule will discourage any new foreign investment, and leading multinationals that already invested in Myanmar may reconsider, fearing for their corporate reputations. Already, for instance, Japanese giant Kirin has ended its deal with a leading Myanmar conglomerate linked to the military, after the coup. Other investors also are pulling out.

The armed forces will not shy away from enforcing these rules with brutal force. Already, the military stands accused of perpetrating crimes against humanity and genocide in recent years in the western Myanmar state of Rakhine. During prior eras of junta rule - Myanmar was essentially run by the military from 1962 until the early 2010s - the army beat and murdered protestors who demonstrated in 1988, in 2007, and on multiple other occasions. In 2007, the military even brutalized protestors led by monks, normally revered in Myanmar society.

Besides impacting foreign investment in Myanmar, and setting back Myanmar's political progress, the coup also will have regional implications. While the United States, Canada and the European Union are likely to impose some penalties on the junta for its coup, Southeast Asian states, Japan, China and India will probably do nothing in response, other than issue some statements encouraging Myanmar to return to political negotiations and a democratic path.

Western democracies are unlikely to impose the type of broad-based economic sanctions utilized against Myanmar (then called Burma by many countries) in the 1990s and 2000s. There is little

appetite in Washington, or anywhere else, for such broad sanctions, which have wide effects on the economy, and would likely hurt poor Myanmar citizens, at a time when the coup, the global economic downturn, and the pandemic all have already damaged the country's economy. After all, one study found about 70% of people in Myanmar had stopped working due to the pandemic, and hunger is widespread. Broad sanctions would impose more misery and might actually lead more Myanmar citizens to flee the country (mostly to Thailand and possibly China), potentially spreading COVID-19 and causing more challenges for Myanmar's neighbors.

Instead, the Biden administration, and the governments of Canada and European states will likely try to impose targeted sanctions on more top Myanmar military leaders and on Myanmar's large military conglomerates, such as Myanma Economic Holdings Limited. They will also possibly put back into place sanctions on some exports of gems, like jade, from Myanmar. The United States and other democracies may also try to push a resolution at the United Nations Security Council that freezes the assets of top military leaders and imposes travel bans on them, although any measure is unlikely to pass, given that permanent members China and Russia can veto. Already, the Biden administration has frozen some Myanmar military assets in the United States and put targeted sanctions on a wider range of military leaders; Britain and European countries are considering measures.

Even those limited sanctions may not gain support from democracies in Asia like Japan and India, which believe Myanmar is important to their strategic interests, and do not want to run the risk of China making further strategic gains in the country. Therefore, any sanctions that are passed, even limited ones, will probably be backed only by Western governments, even though Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in a call with Biden, said that the democratic process and the rule of law must be upheld in Myanmar. The Japanese government has called for a restoration of democracy as well, but it is unlikely to sign onto any tough measures that might pressure Naypyidaw.

And while some Southeast Asian countries, such as Singapore, have issued relatively strong statements about Myanmar's political situation, the regional organization, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), adheres to a policy of noninterference in member states' affairs. Indonesia and Malaysia have called for ASEAN to hold a special session dealing with the Myanmar coup, but even such a session is unlikely to yield much more than some statements. Meanwhile, Southeast Asian countries like Thailand, themselves essentially run by militaries, are loath to criticize the Myanmar armed forces.

Ultimately, Myanmar's coup is likely to have multiple regional impacts. It will further push the region toward democratic regression, at a time when other Southeast Asian states like the Philippines, Cambodia, Indonesia and Thailand are suffering democratic backsliding as well. It will add to regional instability: beside outward migration flows, armed ethnic insurgencies in Myanmar might take advantage of the putsch to step up their military campaigns and end ceasefire deals.

The coup might also push Myanmar closer to China, by necessity, if many democracies downgrade links to the country and apply more pressure. Even so, Beijing is not necessarily thrilled by the military takeover. Chinese leaders had built close links with Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD government, and China prefers stability in neighboring states, which the military coup - and possible protests, bloodshed, and renewed insurgencies - hardly guarantees. What is more, the Myanmar military's top brass is notoriously anti-China, working with Beijing only when they have to - but with no love for close ties.

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Myanmar's Coup: The Aftershocks

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On Monday morning Myanmar time, the Myanmar military staged a coup, its first coup since 1988, but hardly unique in Myanmar's modern history. This coup bore all the hallmarks of previous military takeovers, even in an era in which telecommunications technology is far different from 1988, and information about Myanmar cannot be hermetically sealed off from the world. The armed forces detained most senior civilian politicians, and went beyond just detaining political figures to detain a wide range of critics of the armed forces. The army also instituted many roadblocks, throttled internet traffic, cut phone lines and other types of communication, closed banks, and took control of regional governments and the central government, with power now clearly residing with the army's top commander, Min Aung Hlaing.

Although the army has declared a state of emergency for a year, past history in Myanmar with such declarations could easily suggest that the state of emergency could go on for many years. After all, the Myanmar military still see themselves as the protectors of the country, despite several years of shaky democracy, and they wrote the current constitution, which has a clause that essentially allows for a coup and still gave the military significant powers. The army may have become afraid that Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) would be able to consolidate more power after last November's elections and cut back the army's power, that if the army commander retired he could become vulnerable to international prosecution for the army's actions and might not be able to protect his family's positions and wealth, and that at some point in the future Suu Kyi and the NLD might be able to change the constitution and diminish the power of the armed forces. Since November, the armed forces have been disputing the election results and claiming they were fraudulent.

They also may have believed—possibly correctly—that the global pandemic, Myanmar's close relationship with China, the democratic regression in other states in South and Southeast Asia, and the general U.S. disinterest in democracy issues in recent years would make it easier for them to launch a coup with little international pushback. And indeed, most South and Southeast Asian states said little about the coup, or simply referred to it as Myanmar's internal problem. (Singapore did push back and called for Suu Kyi's release and India expressed significant concern about the coup.)

Aung San Suu Kyi had, as de facto civilian leader of Myanmar, done little to marginalize the military or push forward real democratic reform. Instead, she had created a party in which she wielded enormous power, disdained important institutions like a free media, and continually defended the military's often brutal actions, minimizing the armed forces' massive abuses against the Rohingya. So, she failed to strengthen democracy in recent years and create democratic bulwarks.

Still, her party won victory in last year's national elections—the fraud that the military claims occurred as a reason for stepping in has not been proven, and observers said that the election had minor irregularities but was relatively free and fair. Now, the coup has numerous potentially

dangerous aftershocks.

For one, the shift in governance could create even worse management of the COVID-19 crisis, as people may try to flee the country or migrate to other parts of the country, as they did after prior coups, potentially spreading the virus. The army's closure of banks and the uncertainty could cause even more damage to an already-suffering economy, in the midst of the pandemic.

Second, the coup could lead to an unwinding of deals with ethnic minority insurgencies, who could go back to war, further splintering Myanmar and leading to a massive spike in violence in what is already a conflict-ridden country. The insurgencies may now have the incentive to step up their battles, end cease-fire deals, and try to stake more gains in territory.

There is also the prospect that, as the NLD and its allies try to rally Myanmar citizens, who now have lived through a decade of some degree of freedom—Suu Kyi has released a statement calling on Myanmar people to oppose the coup—that the army could crack down harder if the NLD, or other groups of Myanmar citizens, try to hold protests or rallies. In the past, during periods of absolute military rule—which has now returned—the military regularly used brutal force against any peaceful protests.

Some leading democracies have made strong statements in response to the coup. Australia, Canada, countries in Europe, and the United States condemned the coup and now are considering further actions, despite the weakening of the United States' image on democracy issues globally, after the United States' 2020 election. According to NBC News:

"President Joe Biden said Monday that the military's actions were a "direct assault" on the country's transition to democracy and rule of law and said the U.S. would work with its partners to hold to account those responsible for overturning the country's democratic transition.

"For almost a decade, the people of Burma have been steadily working to establish elections, civilian governance, and the peaceful transfer of power," he said in a statement, using the country's name until it was changed by the ruling military junta in 1989. "That progress should be respected." "

But the Biden administration's policy cupboard, though not bare, is fairly limited, given modest U.S. leverage over Myanmar and the fact that Myanmar's neighbors mostly seem willing to live with the coup. Still, the United States and its partners do have some options, and I will go into these in the next post.

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