

Tens of thousands - 'We cannot accept the coup': Myanmar protests despite internet blackout

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Demonstrators gather amid demands for release of elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

[Thousands march in protest against Myanmar military coup - video]

Tens of thousands of people have taken to the streets of Myanmar for a second consecutive day to protest against the country's military seizing power, despite a nationwide internet blackout imposed to stifle dissent.

In the main city Yangon, large crowds gathered on both Saturday and Sunday in support of ousted leaders Aung San Suu Kyi and Win Myint, whose National League for Democracy party won a landslide election in November. The military detained both in raids early on Monday morning and they have not been seen in public since.

Reuters reported that people from across Yangon converged on Hledan township on Sunday, some walking through stalled traffic, and marched under bright sunshine in the middle of the road, chanting: "We don't want military dictatorship! We want democracy!"

They waved NLD flags and gestured with the three-finger salute that has become a symbol of protest against the coup. Drivers honked their horns and passengers held up photos of Nobel peace prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

Myanmar: Australian adviser to Aung San Suu Kyi, Sean Turnell, 'being detained'

The scenes broadcast on Facebook were some of the few that have come out of the country since the junta shut down the internet and restricted phone lines on Saturday.

"We cannot accept the coup," said a 22-year-old who came with 10 friends, who asked not to be named for fear of retribution. "This is for our future. We have to come out."

A woman in her early 30s who brought her family said they had not joined Saturday's protests but refused to be afraid.

"We have to join the people, we want democracy," she told Reuters.

Thousands of people gathered in Yangon for a second straight day of demonstrations against the country's military.

By mid-morning Sunday about 100 people had taken to the streets on motorbikes in the coastal town of Mawlamyine in the south-east, and students and doctors were gathering in the city of Mandalay in central Myanmar.

Another crowd of hundreds spent the night outside a police station in the town of Payathonzu in Karen state in the southeast, where local NLD lawmakers were believed to have been arrested.

With the internet cut off and official information scarce, rumours swirled about the fate of Aung San Suu Kyi and her cabinet. A story that she had been released, which drew huge crowds on to the streets to celebrate overnight on Saturday, was quickly quashed by her lawyer.

The military had shut down the internet across the country in an attempt to stop the protests. The NetBlocks Internet Observatory reported that connectivity had fallen to 16% of ordinary levels by early afternoon on Saturday. The military had already blocked Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

More than 160 people have been arrested since the military seized power in the early hours of Monday, said Thomas Andrews, the United Nations special rapporteur on Myanmar.

“The generals are now attempting to paralyse the citizen movement of resistance - and keep the outside world in the dark - by cutting virtually all internet access,” Andrews said on Sunday.

“We must all stand with the people of Myanmar in their hour of danger and need. They deserve nothing less.”

Myanmar’s military had shown that it believed it could “shut the world out and do whatever it wants”, said Phil Robertson, the deputy director of Human Rights Watch’s Asia division.

“They’re going to pull down the shutters and intimidate, arrest and abuse everybody who is daring to speak up. The question is how long people are able to do this and whether there will be any splits in ranks within the police or the military.”

The state-run broadcaster MRTV played scenes praising the military all day on Saturday, according to Reuters. Despite the internet blackout, several thousand demonstrators gathered near Yangon University.

“I always disliked the military but now I’m absolutely disgusted by them,” Maea, 30, said.

There was a heavy police presence during the demonstrations, including riot police and water cannon trucks, but according to agency reports there had been no clashes as of Sunday afternoon.

The protests were the biggest since the military seized power last week, prompting fury in the country and a flood of international condemnation. Myanmar spent about five decades under repressive military regimes before making the transition to a more democratic system in 2011.

A civil disobedience campaign has grown in recent days, with many doctors and teachers refusing to work. Every evening at about 8pm the sound of clanging metal rings out across Yangon as residents bang pots and pans in solidarity.

The army has justified its takeover by accusing the NLD of widespread fraud in November’s election, but has not provided credible evidence. The NLD won 396 of 476 seats, an even stronger performance than in the historic 2015 election, 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.

Aung San Suu Kyi, who previously spent 15 years in detention campaigning against military rule and remains hugely popular in the country, has been charged with illegally importing six walkie-talkies.

President Win Myint is accused of flouting Covid-19 restrictions. Sean Turnell, an Australian economic adviser to Aung San Suu Kyi, said in a message to Reuters on Saturday morning that he was also being detained.

The UN security council released a statement last week that expressed deep concern at the arbitrary detentions, and the US has threatened sanctions.

The US introduced targeted sanctions against the commander-in-chief, Min Aung Hlaing, who now leads the country, in 2019 in response to the army's brutal crackdown against the Rohingya people. UN investigators said the military operation included mass killings, gang rapes and widespread arson, and was executed with "genocidal intent".

Moe Thuzar, the co-coordinator of the Myanmar Studies Programme at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, said more general sanctions risked hitting the public. "Past experience has shown all of us that sanctions didn't hurt the people against whom they were intended primarily, but really set back the country's development and just created even more socio-economic disparities," she said.

It was possible that countries with economic ties to Myanmar, such as Japan, could negotiate with the military, focusing on protecting the immediate needs of the people, such as the Covid-19 vaccination programme, Thuzar added.

Myanmar civil society organisations urged internet providers and mobile networks not to comply with the junta's orders to restrict the internet, accusing them of "legitimising the military's authority".

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P.S.

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