

A Myanmar Commentary

Reflections on military coups in Myanmar: and why political actors in Arakan chose a different path

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The 1 February coup by the military State Administration Council has caused protest and confusion in Myanmar and around the world. In this commentary, Kyaw Lynn puts in context the complexity of factors, personal as much as institutional, that preceded the military takeover during a difficult time for democratic progress on the international stage. He then looks at the critical situation in Rakhine State, examining why political trends have been different to other ethnic states and regions in the country.

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I had planned to travel to the Sagaing Region on 1 February. But, at about 3 a.m. that night, one of my closest friends phoned me and said: “The military has staged a coup and detained the State Counsellor and the President”. I was shocked and the trip was immediately cancelled. The military coup took place three weeks ago, and the protests in urban areas are still continuing. Across the country, people are struggling to understand what has happened and why.



Demonstration by the General Strike Committee Nationalities, Yangon, 24 February

Some analysts have searched for the reasons for the military coup based on personal and institutional perspectives. For personal reasons, some said the current Commander-in-Chief has to take retirement this year, and he is afraid of taking a pension without power because he has committed a massive crime against the Rohingya community. Others said that, in terms of institutions, the military might think that they cannot compete in elections with the charismatic Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) under the “First Past The Post” electoral system. They therefore think that military leaders want to redraw the rules of the game to something like a “Proportional Representation” system in order to reduce the electoral strength of

the NLD.

Apart from these institutional perspectives, there are analysts who look at more general trends and political phenomena that might have had impact on military thinking preceding the coup. One issue is that of democratic transition. As such scholars as Larry Diamond have pointed out, the number of democracies around the world has fallen since 2005. Equally pertinent, the first steps towards democratization in Myanmar took place in 2010 under the conditions of what the political scientist Samuel Huntington calls “transformative transition” in which the regime elites decide and initiate the form of political transition. Certainly, democratic transition in Myanmar is still at a fragile stage.

Reflecting these instabilities, the military coup in Myanmar is mirrored by some critical changes that have been taking place in the international environment during the past few years. According to the political scientist Francis Fukuyama, the international landscape has experienced two distinctive changes during the second decade of the 21st century: the upsurge of populism and illiberalism in many liberal countries; and the resurgence of authoritarian powers in different parts of the world. The first trend was highlighted by nationalist resurgence and the electoral victories of populist leaders in such countries as the USA, the UK, India and Brazil, while the second phenomenon is demonstrated by the increase in power projection by China and Russia on the international stage.

Such trends in world politics also have impact on Myanmar. Russia and China are the two most effective veto shields preventing criticisms of the military State Administration Council (SAC) in the UN Security Council and in other international bodies. At the same time, the authoritarian nature of Chinese politics represents a significant challenge for the processes of democratization in our country. Being a dependent neighbour on China, the consequences could be far-reaching. First, China is a non-democratic state with no obvious potential of changing into an electoral democracy during the next two decades. And second, Chinese officials present their country as an alternative model in socio-political development by which economic capitalism is combined with one-party rule in a centralised political system under state leadership.

In the face of these trends, Myanmar is not alone in the international community in feeling the political pressures. Looking around neighbouring countries at the moment, less hope can be seen for democratic transition than a few years ago. Another small neighbour, Laos, is still under the rule of a one-party dictatorship after several decades. Similarly, Thailand has a lot of examples that can inspire Myanmar’s military leaders to imitate, showing how generals can maintain power without turning down a democratic process in its entirety.

A reverse process in democratization has also been evident in the two neighbouring democracies on Myanmar’s northern and western borders: Bangladesh and India. The 2018 general election in Bangladesh was boycotted by the main opposition party, the Bangladesh National Party, and proved difficult to ratify as “free and fair”. Meanwhile the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party under Prime Minister Narendra Modi in India is generally regarded as a right-wing populist government, reflecting Hindu nationalism rather than democratic norms and values. India remains the world’s largest democracy, with some recognizable freedoms and multi-party elections, but anti-democratic populism is also on the rise in many parts of the country.

In short, the past decade has been a time of challenge in democratic progress in many countries around the world.

The legacy of military coups in Myanmar

Quite how international developments will influence events in Myanmar is, for the moment, difficult

to assess. But history warns that regional and international factors have caused generals in Myanmar to take power from popularly-elected governments in the past, strongly influencing the political system that they will seek to initiate. Such military interdictions against elected parliaments have occurred three times before: in 1958, 1962 and 1990.

The most striking example was in 1962, when the leader of the military coup, Gen. Ne Win, chose to install a “socialist” system based on Burmese nationalism. As Samuel Huntington pointed out, 1962 marked the starting point of a reverse wave against democratization that had begun globally in 1945 following the end of the Second World War. Socialist ideology proved especially popular during the 1960s and 1970s in many post-colonial and developing countries, a trend that halted in Myanmar (then Burma) and most of its neighbours in the late 1980s, signified by the ending of the Cold War.

In theory, the collapse of Gen. Ne Win’s “Burmese Way to Socialism” in 1988 opened the door to the beginning of democratic transition in our country. As today, pro-democracy protests swept the country, signalling the desire for political change. The military leaders of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), however, refused to transfer state power to the NLD party after the 1990 general election. Nevertheless they did initiate a long-term plan for transition to democracy by beginning a National Convention in 1993 to draw up a new constitution which, they said, would be based upon democratic principles.

The 2008 constitution that was eventually produced is at the heart of the present political crisis. Whether it is objectively democratic or not is the subject of much argument. Nevertheless it is worth recalling that the long years when the constitution was in preparation (1993-2008) was also the time when such ideas as Francis Fukuyama’s “The End of History” had maximum influence on the global idea that a political model of market economies, combined with electoral democracy, should become the default political system for all countries in the world.

The stage is therefore delicately set. The actions of Myanmar’s military leaders appear to be focused on internal political trends. But, at the same, their choices are continuing to be shaped by changes in the regional and international environment. On this basis, precedent strongly suggests that, whatever the military State Administration Council currently proposes about being an interim government, it is very doubtful that the leading generals will be willing to give back power to elected civilian representatives under previous political conditions and terms. In 2021, as in much of the international community, the political landscape looks very uncertain.

A different justification for the military coup

The present military coup is different to the previous times that this happened in 1958, 1962 and during 1988-90. On these earlier occasions, Myanmar also experienced “caretaker” regimes in circumstances that scholars today still cannot exactly agree upon. In essence, were they simply military coups or constitutional power transfers to the armed forces that happened when there were elected civilian politicians who should have been in control of government?

Ambiguities about the nature of the 2021 coup also exist today. In many respects, the parallels are most striking with the 1958 “military caretaker” administration. Different actors provide different perspectives. The deposed Prime Minister U Nu later wrote that he transferred power to Gen. Ne Win because he did not want a military coup to happen in the country. In contrast, pro-military sources claimed that the military takeover was a constitutionally-based power transfer by U Nu to Ne Win to allow the establishment of “law and order”. If Ne Win’s takeover was in line with U Nu’s claim, the “military caretaker” administration represents the first post-independence coup in the country.

Fatefully, this was not the end of military involvement in politics during the following years. Government was returned to Prime Minister U Nu following parliamentary elections in February 1960. But on 2 March 1962, just a day before the parliament was scheduled to discuss a “federal proposal” put forward by nationality leaders, Gen. Ne Win seized power in a military coup, arresting U Nu and other senior government and ethnic politicians. This time, unlike in 1958, Ne Win’s justification for the military taking power was an alleged threat to the “unity and stability” of the Union, with the main villains characterised as ethnic nationality movements, especially Karen, Karenni, Mon and Shan. For the next quarter century, the country remained under a system of military “socialist” rule.

A drawn-out period of “regime change” similarly occurred during the next refashioning of military government that began in 1988. In September that year, the State Law and Order Restoration Council returned to the justification of restoring “law and order” when military leaders took power following the collapse of Ne Win’s “Burmese Way to Socialism”. This time democracy supporters and political activists were depicted as the key villains, accused of committing violence against each other. The SLORC generals thus claimed that they had the responsibility to take control of the political situation in line with their security duties.

Two years later, a general election went ahead – the first in thirty years – which the NLD won by a landslide. The NLD, however, was never allowed to take government office. Instead, the SLORC and successor State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) set up a new constitutional reform process, based around a hand-picked National Convention that SLORC-SPDC officers tightly controlled. In the meantime, military government continued for a further two decades, and it was not until 2010 that another general election was held. This time, polling was held under the terms of the 2008 constitution, heralding the introduction of the present quasi-civilian system of “disciplined democracy” by President Thein Sein in March 2011. As a sign of military continuity, Thein Sein – an ex-general – was also prime minister of the outgoing SPDC.

For these reasons, the grounds for the latest military takeover remain hotly disputed. The coup would appear to be against a political system that the military had itself put in place. To defend its actions, the military State Administration Council claimed that it took power in line with Section 417 of the 2008 constitution, arguing that this action was necessary due to the NLD’s attempt to establish a new government by wrongful means that could disintegrate national solidarity. The conduct of the 2020 general election, which the NLD won by a landslide, was put at the centre of the SAC’s accusations. This time, the main villains have been depicted as the Union Election Commission, NLD leaders and other political actors. These allegations were also followed up by charges, and President U Win Myint, State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and increasing numbers of pro-democracy leaders and supporters have been arrested.

The present outcome is therefore one of confusion and protest. The military spokesperson Gen. Zaw Min Tun has stated that this was not a military coup but a constitutional transfer of power. The Commander-in-Chief Snr-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing also claimed that the armed forces will transfer power to an elected civilian government following new elections after one year. Despite these protestations, pro-democracy movements and many actors in the international community, especially in the United Nations and Western countries, have continued to define the power seizure by the armed forces as a military coup.

On present trends, however, no consensus seems likely to emerge that will resolve the widening political divisions. For Myanmar’s peoples the implications are profound. As in 1958 and 1988, a long-running power struggle between military and civilian leaders could just be getting underway.

Domestic responses to the coup and why Arakan political actors are different

In the days following the coup, domestic political forces in the country responded in different ways to the military takeover. The coup was opposed by all pro-democracy groups, but the reaction differed to some extent among non-Bamar (Burman) peoples. To date, the repercussions for ethnic politics in the country have received less attention. But, in determining the likely course of events, the ethnic fall-out – as in all political eras – will be significant. The pressures on ethnic nationality movements are presently intense, reflecting the different histories and experiences in different parts of the country.

Among the ethnic armed organisations (EAOs), the response could initially be defined by whether they had joined the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) which 10 EAOs have so far signed. In the days following the coup, prominent NCA signatory groups opposed the military coup, including the Karen National Union, Restoration Council of Shan State and Chin National Front. Subsequently, on 20 February, the Peace Process Steering Team of signatory EAOs issued a public statement supporting the Civil Disobedience Movement. In contrast, most of the NCA non-signatory EAOs, some of which do not have ceasefires with the government, remained neutral or silent, although warning the SAC not to use force against civilians. As during times of previous coups, all EAOs are continuing to watch developments very closely.

A similar division has been apparent among ethnic political parties that had won seats in the 2020 general election. A majority abstained from making public statements following the military takeover, and it was only the largest party – the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy – that immediately came out against the coup. On the surface, this might seem surprising. Popular sentiment against the coup has been apparent in all the ethnic states and regions. But ethnic political parties also feel that they are caught in the middle of a deep struggle between military and NLD leaders over the formation of a new government in which there are no easy ways for other parties to move. After decades under military rule, ethnic leaders know that any decisions they make are likely to have lasting consequences for their peoples in a divided political landscape.

During the past few years, this instability has especially been the case in Arakan (Rakhine State). Here the majority winning party in the 2020 elections, the Arakan National Party (ANP), abstained from taking a position on the military coup, but the membership of an ANP representative on the State Administration Council was questioned by many Rakhine people. Meanwhile the main EAO, the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA), which does not have a formal ceasefire with the government, also refrained from making official comment. In the following weeks, while civil society organisations have continued to oppose the coup, most political movements representing the Arakan cause have taken similarly neutral or isolationist standpoints. [1]

This apparently different trend in political developments in Arakan has caused comment in opposition circles in the country since the coup. Following the 1784 overthrow of the Mrauk-U kingdom, Arakanese politicians became increasingly engaged in the politics of what became known as Burma Proper (Ministerial Burma). Although nationality movements continued, many leaders in Arakan participated in the social-political organisations and bureaucracy of mainstream politics, continuing from the British colonial era until the 2011 political opening that was introduced by President Thein Sein.

Sentiments, however, begin to change during the political disaster that hit Arakan under the former NLD-led government, causing political leaders and organisations to seek neutrality and political isolation since this time. As in other ethnic states, the people in Arakan had expected a great blessing following the NLD victory in the 2015 general election. But the result turned out to be in

reverse due to the rise in conflict and displacement under the NLD-led government: first, during the Rohingya crisis and exodus into Bangladesh in 2017; and, second, in the spread of Tatmadaw operations following the 2018 exclusion of the territory from government ceasefires.

As these events unfolded, many communities believed that Arakan was being treated differently to other parts of the country. Compounding local resentment, the political stand of the NLD in the conflict struggle was perceived to be pro-military, causing the fighting to be more identity-based as “Bamar versus Rakhine” rather than “State versus non-State”. As a result, most Rakhine people see the current military coup as an internal power struggle between the “military Bamar” and “demo Bamar”, who were both responsible for the suppression of Arakan’s people during preceding years.

These perceptions then impact on the question of organisational relationships between the NLD and Arakan political organisations. The ANP is a successor to the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party that participated in the 2010 election, which the NLD and other pro-democracy groups boycotted. From this inception, the ANP is different from the Arakan League for Democracy, which boycotted the 2010 polls, and hostile relations developed between the ANP and NLD-led government after the 2015 election due to the lack of power sharing by the latter. The ANP had won the largest number of seats in the state in the 2015 elections.

Irreconcilable relations also appear to have developed between the ULA/AA and NLD during the past few years. In part, this is due to the expansion of armed struggle by the ULA/AA in the state after the NLD took office. Their poor inter-relationship is reflected in the ULA/AA’s cautious political stand on the coup. But, at the same time, the ULA/AA has different political visions for the future of Rakhine State which are similar to the demands for the right of self-determination and autonomy by the Wa nationality movement in Shan State.

Here it is noted that the United Wa State Party (UWSP), the largest EAO in the country, has been able to build up substantial political momentum during the past 30 years. Two special factors appear to have contributed to this rise: first, due to their geopolitical location on the China border, Wa officials were able to maintain good relations with their influential neighbour; and, second, following a 1989 ceasefire, the UWSP leadership developed stable understandings and inter-relationships with military leaders in the Myanmar government. To date, these agreements have endured.

For the present, the China factor in the Arakan conflict is unclear. In the coming years, China is likely to be the dominant international influence in many parts of the country, with Arakan intended as a central element in President Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road Initiative. For all these reasons, ULA/AA leaders might well think that, amidst the present crisis, building up their authority and strength while keeping good relations with the military leadership in Myanmar is the way to produce maximum profit for the Arakan movement with minimum risks.

In short, a combination of three factors have encouraged political actors in Arakan to take a different path in considering the transitional future: political relationships, organisational structures and visionary goals. It is still early days. But, as in other parts of the country, the 1 February coup has triggered political fallout that is likely to produce unpredictable but long-term consequences. These are very insecure times for all of Myanmar’s peoples, and many challenges remain ahead.

Kyaw Lynn

P.S.

- Transnational Institute. Myanmar in Focus. 01 March 2021:
<https://www.tni.org/en/article/reflections-on-military-coups-in-myanmar>
- Kyaw Lynn is a post-graduate student mastering in Political Science at the University of Yangon. He is also a freelance political analyst in Yangon as well as one of the founders of the Amnesty Arakan Team.

Footnotes

[1] In a still changing landscape, generalisations can be difficult. Of the leading parties, the electoral ANP has appeared neutral in its language but ready to participate in the new SAC. Although it does not have a formal ceasefire with the government, the ULA/AA has taken neutral or isolationist positions. Among smaller parties, the electoral Arakan League for Democracy is against the coup while the Arakan Front Party, which has been bolstered by the release from prison of Dr Aye Maung, has stayed neutral. Meanwhile, the smaller EAO of the Arakan Liberation Party, an NCA signatory, has taken a neutral position in public but joined the statement of the Peace Process Steering Team condemning the coup.