

Myanmar Junta: Old Faces Reappear, Coup Leader Declares Himself Buddhism's Savior

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Myint Swe and T Khun Myat continue to serve regime

Acting President Myint Swe and former Lower House Speaker T Khun Myat appeared at a meeting of the National Defense and Security Council (NDSC) on Jan. 31. The duo has barely been seen in public since last year's coup. Former vice president Henry Van Thio was reportedly on medical leave.

Lieutenant General Myint Swe served as the vice-president 1 in the National League for Democracy (NLD) government, appointed by the military under the army-drafted 2008 Constitution. When the military seized power from the democratically elected government in a coup on Feb. 1 last year, Myint Swe was appointed by the military as the acting president, transferring administrative, judicial and legislative power to Min Aung Hlaing.

He has not been seen in public since then except when a report of him receiving a COVID-19 jab was published in junta-controlled media.

At the NDSC meeting on the eve of the first anniversary of the military coup, Min Aung Hlaing proposed extending military rule for another six months. As the nominal head of government, Myint Swe approved the proposal and said the country has achieved progress in development thanks to the systematic efforts of the regime despite various obstacles.

Since the time of former military dictator Than Shwe, Myint Swe has made relentless efforts to maintain the military dictatorship in Myanmar, serving various roles including Division 11 commander, military spy chief, vice-president and currently acting president.

T Khun Myat, who served as the parliamentary speaker under the NLD government, still continues to work at his parliamentary office in Naypyitaw, one year after State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, President U Win Myint and many other NLD government leaders were detained.

The ethnic Kachin man used to be a people's militia leader in Shan State's Kutkai and is also a former member of the military's proxy Union Solidarity and Development Party. Trained as a lawyer, he served in the Union Attorney General's Office and on the commission for drafting the 2008 Constitution. He remains at the residence for the Lower House Speaker in Naypyitaw not because of the legal provision that the Lower House speaker shall remain in office until the newly elected parliament is sworn in, but because he is liked by Min Aung Hlaing.

Coup leader uses protection of Buddhism as an excuse for his coup

In his message on the anniversary of the coup on Tuesday, Min Aung Hlaing argued that Buddhism significantly declined under the NLD government in Myanmar.

He slammed the NLD for banning the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion, which he praised as a religious and charity organization promoting Buddhism in Myanmar.

The group, better known by its Burmese acronym Ma Ba Tha, was born in 2012 out of the 969 movement, a nationalist campaign that called for a boycott of Muslim-owned businesses, and was rebranded as Ma Ba Tha the following year. The group is notorious internationally for its hate speech against non-Buddhists.

Min Aung Hlaing made donations to the association even after the group was banned in 2017 under the NLD government and changed its name to the Buddha Dhamma Charity Foundation.

Recently, Min Aung Hlaing visited former Ma Ba Tha chair Ashin Tilawkar Biwonsa at his monastery in Yangon's Insein and even conferred a religious title on him.

The NLD government also prohibited paying homage to pagodas and saying prayers in religious buildings, Min Aung Hlaing claimed in his speech marking one year since the coup. But he did not mention that the ban was part of COVID-19 restrictions to prevent crowds. Blowing his own trumpet, he even gave himself credit for re-opening religious buildings and pagodas.

Apparently, by portraying himself as the defender and promoter of Buddhism, he expects to win some applause in the Buddhist-majority country. In other words, he is abusing religion to score cheap political points.

Min Aung Hlaing accuses PDF of war crimes

In his speech, Min Aung Hlaing also alleged that the parallel National Unity Government, its parliamentary body the CRPH and armed wing the People's Defense Force committed war crimes.

"The CRPH, NUG and PDF terrorist groups committed war crimes in Thantlang and Mindat of Chin State, some parts of Sagaing Region, Kinma Village in Magwe Region, Loikaw and Demoso townships in Kayah State and Pekhon and Moe Bye in Shan State.

Earlier on Jan. 12, the regime said it would take action against the Karenni National Progressive Party and PDF groups for their war crimes, as defined in the Geneva Conventions and international laws, in Kayah State's Loikaw. This time, the coup leader also talked about Kayah and Chin states as well as Magwe Region.

He said the military uses the least possible amount of force to control insurrections. We should consider ourselves lucky. Had he used more force, those townships might have been wiped off the map. For example, junta aerial strikes have devastated much of Thantlang.

Thanks to his use of the least possible force, dozens of civilians have been killed and thousands displaced by air raids involving helicopters and jet fighters. Besides air raids and artillery strikes that cause casualties and damage property, junta troops have been deliberately torching houses, besides looting and torturing civilians in areas where resistance is strong.

While committing such a magnitude of violence against his own people, Min Aung Hlaing's accusation is nothing more than the thief crying "Thief!"

Silent strike successful despite junta threats

In spite of threats of harsh punishment from the regime, people from many parts of the country joined the silent strike on Tuesday to mark one year since the military coup, demonstrating their

resistance to the regime.

Many towns shut down between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. on Feb. 1. But as usual, junta-controlled media made a false report of normal hustle and bustle in towns across the country.

To create the impression of busy traffic on streets, the regime organized more than 170 pro-military rallies between Jan. 26 and Feb. 1 in 140 towns across Myanmar except in Kayah State, according to junta media reports.

To counter the strike, the regime organized sports events, told government employees to go to the office only after 10.00 a.m., forced shops to open and also required people to receive COVID-19 jabs on Feb. 1, in order to force people out onto streets.

A week before the planned strike, the regime warned that anyone who closed their business or shop on the day could face charges carrying sentences of up to life imprisonment, including confiscation of their properties.

In an attempt to discourage the protest, the regime arrested over a dozen shop owners who notified customers that they would close their businesses on Feb. 1. At local and wholesale markets, including the busiest ones across the country, there were no customers, despite those markets and shops being forced to open by the junta.

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