

FROM MYANMAR TO PAKISTAN, LOTS OF WORDS BUT NO ACTION

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

Demonstrators turn on their mobile phone torches as they protest against Myanmar military coup in Tokyo on February 11, 2021. | Photo Credit: [REUTERS](#)

First speeches after coups are important. When a man in uniform takes over and deposes a civilian government, he goes on television to announce the contours of his mission. He usually promises order, stability and growth — a renewal of the nation after the disorder — and elections in a bit.

Two days after the [February 1 coup](#) ousting Aung San Suu Kyi and other National League for Democracy (NLD) leaders from power in Myanmar, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing found fault with the November 2020 general elections that returned the NLD to power with an increased majority.

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“After emergency provisions tasks are finished, free and fair multiparty elections will be held according to the Constitution. The winning party will be transferred state duty according to democratic standards,” he promised.

On October 12, 1999, I was in Islamabad and had the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to report how General Pervez Musharraf ousted Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif from power in a bloodless coup.

At 2.50 a.m. on the morning of October 13, Gen. Musharraf went on State-run Pakistan Television (there were no private channels then) and announced that he had moved in as a “last resort” to prevent “any further destabilisation”. Addressing “his countrymen”, Gen. Musharraf stated, “I request you all to remain calm and support your armed forces in the re-establishment of order to pave the way for a prosperous future for Pakistan.”

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The olive greens and khaki leaders always promised order and stability. In Myanmar, the Senior General seems to suggest that his actions are in accordance with the Constitution and “proper” elections will lead to the restoration of “democracy”.

Even in the pre-social media world, Gen. Musharraf took the title of ‘Chief Executive’ and not Chief Martial Law Administrator (CMLA) like his predecessors Zia-ul-Haq, Yahya Khan and Ayub Khan. He was anxious not to give the impression that he was a full-fledged military dictator. There was a fourth, albeit civilian, CMLA – Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who took over a Pakistan that was reeling from the loss of its eastern wing.

Like in Pakistan, coups and decades of military rule in Myanmar have been institutional. There has been little room for a cabal of officers to take over (though attempts have been made); coup leaders have survived (and thrived) only because they had institutional support from their officers and men.

The international context is key for the survival of the generals — Ayub in Pakistan was much loved by the West, especially the Americans. Zia, from being shunned, turned out to be a 'saviour' for the Americans after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan.

Gen. Musharraf, correctly accused of presiding over a military establishment that promoted terror groups, gave up Al-Qaeda leaders in instalments and placated an angry U.S. President George W. Bush. In contrast, the West never engaged with isolationist Burmese generals.

In the end, while first words matter, actions speak louder. Military rulers have contributed little to improving the lot of common people — in Myanmar or in Pakistan. They simply ended up perpetuating uniformed establishments.

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