

AFTER THE COUP: ON POLITICAL CRISIS IN MYANMAR

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

Three weeks after they took control of Myanmar by toppling its democratically elected government, the country's Generals are struggling to retain their grip on power in the face of growing pro-democracy mass protests. The military, which had shared power with Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) for five years, orchestrated the coup on February 1, hours before the country's newly elected Parliament, in which the NLD had a huge majority, was set to convene. The military, which controlled Myanmar through direct rule for almost 50 years since independence from Britain in 1948, has now deployed the familiar repressive tactics to quell opposition to the latest coup: It has detained Ms. Suu Kyi, President Win Myint and several of the NLD's other top leaders, suspended the Internet, blocked social networks and warned the public of repercussions if they joined protests. But protests have only grown by the day. On Saturday, two unarmed protesters were killed by security forces in Mandalay. Even police violence and the deployment of security personnel, including snipers, across the main cities did not stop millions from joining a general strike on Monday. They demand the Generals free the detained elected leaders and restore democracy.

Myanmar's military has been one of the most consistent enemies of democracy. In the past, challenges to its powers were met with brutal crackdowns. Still, the junta has continued to face popular resistance. The crackdown on the protests of August 8, 1988 did not prevent the 'saffron revolution' of 2007 — protests led by Buddhist monks. Than Shwe, the then leader of the country, suppressed them but had to offer a new Constitution in 2008 as a compromise. This Constitution was the basis of the partial transition to democracy in 2015 when the NLD came to power. But even that experiment would not last more than five years, thanks to the power-hungry generals of Tatmadaw. But they were wrong to expect the Myanmar people, who experienced at least limited liberties and democracy for five years after decades of the repressive dictatorship, to allow them to consolidate power easily. The protesters have called for civil disobedience, stoppage of work, sit-ins and mass demonstrations. The strike has already paralysed the banking system at a time when the economy, hit hard by COVID-19, is struggling to stand on its feet. The military is also facing international sanctions and condemnation. There is no easy way out for Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, the commander-in-chief and the coup's main architect, from the crisis he has put himself in. The Generals should realise that years of repression have not killed Myanmar's aspirations for democracy. They should not repeat 1988 or 2007. They should stand down, respect the election results, release the leaders and hand power back to the elected government.

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