

THE CONTINUING STALEMENT IN MYANMAR

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Myanmar

File photo of protests against the military coup in Yangon, Myanmar, in February 2021. | Photo Credit: REUTERS

Twenty-one months after a military coup, which derailed a decade-old experiment with limited democracy, [Myanmar](#) is struggling to cope with the consequences. People are suffering, authorities and opposition forces are locked in [a cycle of violent clashes](#), the economy is deteriorating, and [ASEAN's mission to produce a solution has failed](#).

When the Tatmadaw (military), unhappy with the victory of the Aung San Suu Kyi-led [National League for Democracy](#) in the [November 2020 elections](#), chose to violate the constitution, it acted in the belief that the people would accept its diktat, as they had done in previous decades. Clearly, it underestimated public anger and their commitment to freedom and democracy. Even after killing over 2,300 people and imprisoning thousands, including Ms. Suu Kyi, the military still faces a rebellion. Its plan to hold an election next year stands jeopardised.

With two key dimensions, the opposition has prevented the military from having its way. First, the parallel National Unity Government (NUG) may not be recognised by any state, but it continues to receive political and financial support from abroad. It has effectively channelled popular indignation against military rule, while still being vulnerable due to the paucity of resources and the absence of a visible leader. Second, the about 20 ethnic armed organisations (EAOs), located in the east, north and west of Myanmar's periphery, have divergent approaches towards the post-coup conflict. Many view it as an intra-Bamar contestation, an issue of limited concern to them. Some like the Karens and Kachins support the NUG, while others, especially those controlled or supported by China, remain aloof. Those operating in the Chin and Rakhine states are engaged in a fierce armed conflict with the military and have enfeebled it. But overall, due to their divergences and relative weaknesses, the EAOs are unlikely to defeat the military.

Thus, while the opposition has performed well, it is unable to turn the tide in its favour, without a nationwide front against the Tatmadaw. National reconciliation between the military and civilian forces, and ethnic reconciliation between the majority Barmars and ethnic minorities, have been put on hold. Ms. Suu Kyi, 77, the most popular leader, has been sentenced to 26 years of imprisonment in multiple cases on apparently trumped-up charges.

Besides, 1.1 million Rohingya, driven by military oppression to seek shelter in Bangladesh in 2017, continue to languish there. Dhaka's efforts to arrange their safe return have failed. Armed clashes between the military and their ethnic opponents in the border region are having a spillover effect in Bangladesh. Dhaka continues to show restraint and a preference for diplomacy to manage the situation.

The UN has been forthright in criticising the coup. It has expressed concern over continuing violence, support for a 'democratic transition', a release of all political prisoners and dialogue among the parties concerned. However, the UN Secretary General's special envoy has had little success in promoting peace. The UN's failure lies in the sharp divisions within the international community on how to deal with this vexed issue.

The western powers have been severely critical of the military. They have put in place several restrictive measures and imposed more sanctions. They have extended support to the NUG. On the other hand, Russia has given considerable backing to the military regime, seeing in its own

isolation an opportunity to strengthen bilateral cooperation in defence and energy supplies. China is keeping a door open to democratic forces even while doing business with the regime and exploiting every opportunity to ensure progress on the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. ASEAN is divided in three ways: Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore are pro-democracy; Thailand and Laos are pro-military; and Vietnam and the Philippines are ambivalent. This disunity and the Tatmadaw's refusal to cooperate with ASEAN have led to the non-implementation of the Five-Point Consensus. The upcoming ASEAN summit may provide clues on whether the grouping can forge a united stand and devise something that works better. India is concerned as the post-coup conditions have adversely impacted its interests and hampered bilateral cooperation. Mega projects stand delayed. Some 50,000 refugees, as per unofficial estimates, have been camping in Mizoram.

Meanwhile, there is an erroneous perception that India has abandoned the Myanmar people. The reality is that India proactively advocates an early restoration of democracy, the release of prisoners, and internal dialogue. Can India do more? It can explore the possibility of a combined mediatory role with ASEAN and like-minded neighbours. Will China have a role in such a group? India-China relations preclude that possibility.

Through greater unity, external players can help Myanmar in creating a suitable environment for dialogue on a political settlement. Distant countries such as Norway and Japan can play a helpful role as catalysts. But the principal responsibility to construct a solution must rest with the Myanmar elite and leadership of both camps. Through resilience and pragmatism, they crafted a way out in 2011-21. They must recreate that spirit. 'The Golden Land', where Lord Buddha is revered, needs to be re-inspired by his teachings. Else, a prolonged, contested military rule or a failed state seems a distinct possibility.

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