



## The Root Causes of Myanmar's Coup Go Deeper

By Ye Myo Hein

**I**n the early morning of February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021, the world was shocked to witness Myanmar's military rapidly depose its civilian government. The Myanmar military, known as the Tatmadaw, launched a predawn operation to seize state power by arresting civilian government leaders along with dozens of cabinet ministers, members of the ruling party and Parliament, and some activists and party supporters.<sup>1</sup>

Several hours after the raids, military-appointed vice president Myint Swe assumed the position of acting president, proclaimed a year-long emergency and declared that power had been transferred to the commander-in-chief of the Tatmadaw, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, as the military-run Myawaddy TV announced.<sup>2</sup> This seizure of power took place before

a new session of parliament was set to open.<sup>3</sup> The Tatmadaw cited alleged voter fraud in the 2020 elections to justify this grab for power.<sup>4</sup>

In the elections held in November 2020, the ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) won a majority of 396 out of 476 seats while the pro-military Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) acquired only 33 seats in Union-level parliaments.<sup>5</sup> Although the military said in its first statement that the election had been carried out successfully,<sup>6</sup> it later disputed the results by repeatedly alleging the existence of erroneous voter lists and electoral fraud.<sup>7</sup> Within three months after the election, the Tatmadaw increasingly amplified its allegations, eventually culminating in the coup d'état.

Examining and understanding the deeper root causes, both domestic and international, of the coup in Myanmar is crucial for determining a path back to democracy. While the catalyst for the military's takeover was the November 2020 elections, the structural issues within the 2008 constitution, the NLD itself, and Myanmar's regional neighborhood all played key roles in undermining the democratic transition. Only by addressing the domestic and international causes simultaneously can democracy in Myanmar stand a chance at resurrection.

## The Democracy-Killing Coup

After the coup, the Tatmadaw wasted no time in dismantling the nascent democratic rights and institutions that emerged during the liberalization honeymoon period. Following the playbook of dictators around the world, the military has arbitrarily arrested and detained political leaders, civil society actors, democracy activists, journalists, businessmen, innocent civilians, and even foreigners.<sup>8</sup> Torture and murder in custody are widespread as a means to create a climate of fear among dissidents.<sup>9</sup> It has no compunctions about deploying barbaric violence and "brute force terror campaigns" against peaceful protestors in broad daylight.<sup>10</sup>

The coup effectively nullified the 2008 constitution despite the junta's reiteration of a "constitutional justification for the state of emergency."<sup>11</sup> In order to suppress the anti-coup movement, the junta "armed itself with repressive new laws"<sup>12</sup> by "systematically and illegitimately dismantling the people of Myanmar's legal protections" and "installing new laws that removed basic protections of freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association, and privacy."<sup>13</sup>

The temporary shuttering of internet services during its coup operations was followed by the frequent disruption of access, the blocking of social media platforms and online-news outlets, assertion of control over telecommunication operators, and the application of "extraction and interception technology to surveil" the people.<sup>14</sup> The junta also immediately crushed the country's burgeoning free press, and according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Myanmar has become "the world's worst jailer of journalists."<sup>15</sup>

However, the junta's brutal and lethal crackdown on the peaceful protests and resistance has unleashed a revolutionary energy among the young people who came to the determination that only armed struggle can restore democracy.<sup>16</sup> The whole country is increasingly overwhelmed with violence and armed conflict. In the present situation, Myanmar has become trapped in an ever-increasing cycle of conflict, as neither the military nor the opposition appear likely to prevail completely.

Together with the death of democracy, the country has rapidly become a failing state, with the resurgence of a long-simmering civil war, a widening security vacuum, an irreversible economic catastrophe, and even the risk of territorial fragmentation. Myanmar, a country that U.S. President Obama once hailed as on "a remarkable journey" to democracy that "cannot be reversed,"<sup>17</sup> has now descended into a political dark age with stunning rapidity.

Adopting a long view, the coup d'état in Myanmar resulted from a variety of interlocking and converging causes. From the structural weaknesses of its hybrid regime and the NLD's leadership shortcomings to Beijing's influence



and ASEAN's democratic backsliding, Myanmar's democratic transition had little hope in retrospect.

## Myanmar's Hybrid Regime

In fact, the origins of military takeover are deeper than just the aftermath of the November 2020 elections. Myanmar's political opening had serious birth defects, and its death in the graveyard of military coup thus come as no surprise.

Since its start in 2011, the democratic transition in Myanmar struggled with several intrinsic and extrinsic problems. Five key shortcomings and structural flaws in Myanmar's transition can be identified as follows.

- 1) Political reforms, initiated by former generals who doffed their uniforms for civilian attire, were not originally designed to stride towards a full-fledged democracy but rather a military-dominated hybrid-regime. The 2008 constitution laid the foundations for a power-sharing arrangement between the elected civilian authority and military guardians. In effect, Myanmar's transition was structurally constrained within a "hybrid-regime" combining both authoritarian and democratic elements.<sup>18</sup>
- 2) The 2008 constitution contained several provisions that ensure "reserved domains of power" for the military due to its control over three key security related ministries – the Ministry of Defense, Home Affairs and Border Affairs, and the National Defense and Security Council, "a powerful institution responsible for state security," and a reserved 25 percent of all seats in national and local parliaments for military appointees. Crucially, "the military has the veto power over any constitutional change
- and the right to administer their own affairs independently; the Commander-in-Chief is the highest arbiter of military justice and can assume control of the state in case of an emergency."<sup>19</sup>
- 3) Many scholars argue that "state and nation" are prerequisites for democratization.<sup>20</sup> Without a functioning state and a consensus about national identity, successful democratic consolidation is highly unlikely. Since its independence in 1948, Myanmar has experienced a series of bloody civil wars, and the state's monopoly over violence and capacity to project centralized power in its entire territory have always been contested. Likewise, as a multi-ethnic country, the people of Myanmar do not share a sense of common national identity.<sup>21</sup> "Incomplete state-ness and nation-ness" and its consequential conflicts have had a negative impact on the democratic political development of the country.
- 4) Political liberalization has created a political space for "the rise of an aggressive Buddhist-nationalist movement," led by hardline monks. The military and its proxy political parties orchestrated this movement to sustain their political domination,<sup>22</sup> and Myanmar's political transition has been marred by ethno-religious conflicts across the country. This eventually culminated in the Rohingya genocide and the exodus of nearly 700,000 Rohingya refugees to Bangladesh.<sup>23</sup>
- 5) The sky-high expectations placed on Aung San Suu Kyi's civilian government when it was sworn into office following its landslide victory in the 2015 elections



were misplaced.<sup>24</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi and her party failed to promote and consolidate democracy while in power. In fact, they even veered in an opposite populist and illiberal trend. “The authoritarian turn of civilian politicians and civilian-led government” paved the way for the military to finish off the nascent political transition in Myanmar.

## Civilian Government Failures

The civilian government’s failures are worth exploring in further detail. According to Freedom House, Myanmar’s status declined from “Partly Free” to “Not Free” within the 2016-2020 period despite early improvement following the peaceful transfer of power to the NLD-led government in 2016.<sup>25</sup> Myanmar’s transition from military dictatorship to democracy faltered under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi-led civilian government. During its reign in power, the civilian government experienced “four key failures” to step up the political transition toward democracy.

- 1) Firstly, Aung San Suu Kyi and her government failed to lead the country with a democratic moral compass. Michal Lubina once wrote that Suu Kyi presented democracy as “a moral value” and “a moral vision” instead of a political system and institutional framework.<sup>26</sup> However, she ultimately did not stand up even for a “moral democracy.” This failure is best exemplified in her tacit alignment with the military’s brutal genocide campaign against the Rohingya people.<sup>27</sup> While failing to protect the people in conflict-prone ethnic areas, the NLD government took blatant steps to endorse the genocide-committing military as it launched intensified offensives against ethnic armed groups.<sup>28</sup>
- 2) Secondly, during her rise to power, she burnt bridge with the natural allies of democracy and the federal forces who firmly stood by her during her uphill battle into government. In the run-up to the 2015 election, the NLD shunned bids by the members of the “88 generation,” largely made up of leaders of a massive pro-democracy uprising of 1988, to join its ranks and contest the election.<sup>29</sup> It also sidelined its erstwhile allies among the ethnic political parties, student activists and civil society.<sup>30</sup> In doing so, the NLD surrounded itself with uninspiring party loyalists, military-era diplomats, and the former military generals themselves.<sup>31</sup>
- 3) Thirdly, the inexperienced civilian government struggled to demonstrate performance in a variety of sectors ranging from the peace-process to the economy.<sup>32</sup> The NLD government repeatedly offered the underwhelming excuse that its lackluster performance in office was primarily attributable to power-sharing arrangements with the military. However, it ultimately achieved little even in the sectors under its full control. The civilian government instead attempted to manipulate polarized politics to sustain popular support instead of asserting true democratic leadership.
- 4) Finally, the NLD government adopted similar types of repression to the previous regime. In 2018, the International Crisis Group (ICG) pointed out that the civilian government “has clearly undermined civil liberties and taken an authoritarian turn in both word and deed.”<sup>33</sup> Contrary to the expectations of the local and international communities, Suu Kyi’s government retained the repressive laws of the previous



autocratic rules, narrowed down the political space, curtailed civil liberties and rights, and silenced and intimidated the media and critics.<sup>34</sup> The worst were the NLD's missteps in imposing its political hegemony through Burmanization and centralization projects and resorting to violent suppression, as the previous dictators had done, against protests in ethnic areas.<sup>35</sup>

## Beijing's Pragmatism

The rise of China also likely impacted Myanmar's struggling democratic transition. Crucially, the NLD largely lost the democratic world's favor when the Rohingya crisis unfolded, which pushed the civilian government into Beijing's open arms.<sup>36</sup> China offered diplomatic protection to Myanmar in the United Nations, and, in order to avoid the internationalization of the Rohingya crisis, China actively facilitated negotiations between the governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh.<sup>37</sup> To survive the sanctions and condemnation by Western countries, democratic reforms slid down the ranking of priorities for Suu Kyi's government.

In its stride towards regional hegemony, China is ultimately pragmatic towards the forms of government and domestic problems in its regional neighbors. It cares fundamentally about advancing its own interests. However, Beijing appears more favorable to the autocratic regimes in the region because of a shared opposition to U.S.-sponsored democracy promotion and human rights advocacy, and the greater likelihood of easier and quicker implementation of its problematic economic projects without checks and balances.<sup>38</sup> China's support for authoritarianism is thus more out of pragmatism than ideology.

Despite its close tie with Suu Kyi's government, Beijing has no compunction about protecting and

dealing with the military junta after the February 1<sup>st</sup> coup. China followed its standard playbook in blocking UN Security Council Statements condemning the coup.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, Beijing flagrantly practiced its pragmatic diplomacy, by calling the junta the "government"<sup>40</sup>, referring to coup-leader General Min Aung Hlaing as "the leader of Myanmar"<sup>41</sup>, and normalizing trade and diplomatic ties in the face of domestic opposition in Myanmar and international condemnations.<sup>42</sup> Amidst the escalating violence perpetrated by the military on its own people, China is now seeking to tip the scales in junta's favor, increasingly easing its path to international legitimacy.<sup>43</sup>

Although it is hard to say that China is ideologically motivated to spread authoritarianism intentionally to its neighboring country, Beijing's interest-based pragmatic approach serves to exert certain influences on the political calculations and agenda-setting of Myanmar's leaders, both civilian and military. It was not by chance that the halting of democratic reforms in Myanmar coincided with the civilian government's move closer to China. Besides, China would surely reside in the military's top list of "few friends" when the coup-leaders assuredly announced that "we have to learn to walk with only few friends."<sup>44</sup>

Thomas Carothers, a prominent democratization theorist, wrote that countries in non-democratic neighborhoods "usually struggled more with democratization than do countries in more democratic neighborhoods."<sup>45</sup> Myanmar is not fortunate enough to live in a democratic neighborhood but instead one dominated by the autocratic superpower China, which has been pursuing a very active interventionist approach.<sup>46</sup> In fact, China's growing hegemonic position and its interest-based pragmatic approach has had an impact not only on the political development of Myanmar but on the whole region of Southeast



Asia. Living in a non-democratic neighborhood under the shadow of China, which can step in to offset Western diplomatic pressure, ASEAN countries have a greater tendency to slide towards autocracy.

## Regional Political Development

As Joshua Kurlantzick wrote, “Myanmar’s coup is a disaster for Myanmar, but it also is a signifier of the continuing regression of democracy region-wide in Southeast Asia.”<sup>47</sup> Despite growing optimism of the future of democracy in Southeast Asia as recently as five years ago, democracy has been rolling back across the whole region since. According to Freedom House’s 2022 report, all countries from the mainland Southeast Asian rank as “Unfree” and only Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia are categorized as “Partly Free” democracies.<sup>48</sup>

As a matter of fact, even in “Partly Free” countries, already-fragile democratic norms and institutions increasingly erode.

Among the “Partly Free” countries, Singapore and Malaysia are identified as “competitive authoritarianism regimes.”<sup>49</sup> The former has been ruled by one party, the People’s Action Party since 1959.<sup>50</sup> The PAP managed to hold on power by using a “calibrated array of strategies involving co-optation and repression.” Following the 2011 General Elections in which it received the lowest share of valid votes, the PAP pledged to expand political space, and Singapore seemed destined for greater democratization. However, after obtaining a much higher share of votes in the 2015 elections, it reverted to its familiar authoritarianism, restricting freedom and rights, and criminalizing and silencing the critics and activists.<sup>51</sup> The emerging democratic space rapidly dissipated and it returned to its former variant form of authoritarianism.

In Malaysia, there was considerable optimism for democratization in 2018 when the opposition coalition, the Alliance of Hope (Pakatan Harappan) expelled the long-serving Barisan Nasional from power – the first regime change in the country since independence in 1957.<sup>52</sup> However, less than two years later, with the collapse of Pakatan Harappan, the old guards – first Muhyiddin Yassin and then Ismail Sabrina Yakkob from the old establishment, the United Malaysia National Organization (UMNO) – are back in power.<sup>53</sup> The current ruling elites have been primarily concerned with political machinations and maintaining power, and the hope for democratization that the Alliance of Hope brought has disappeared.

The Philippines had been a thriving democracy in Southeast Asia until President Rodrigo Duterte was elected in 2016. Immediately upon taking power, Duterte launched a notorious “war on drugs” which has been subject to widespread condemnation for human rights violations and extrajudicial killings.<sup>54</sup> As a president with populist and authoritarian leanings, Duterte eroded democratic norms and institutions by concentrating his executive power, weakening the check-and-balance institutions and undertaking systematic and aggressive attacks against the political opposition, the judiciary, the media and civil society.<sup>55</sup> Despite ranking as “Partly Free” in Freedom House rankings, the situation of democratic regression in the Philippines is alarming.

Indonesia, the bright spot of democracy in the region, has not been spared by the democratic regression. Saliful Mujani and William Liddle succinctly wrote about democratic backsliding in Indonesia that “President Joko Widodo has sidelined democracy for the sake of economic development, his avowed main priority. Under his tenure, free elections have been threatened,



civil liberties have declined, corruption fighters and legislative checks weakened, and the armed forces' role in civilian affairs has grown."<sup>56</sup> The decline of hard-won democracy has been conspicuously steady in the world third largest democracy, and it has negative implications for the global retreat of the democracy.

In the other "unfree countries" the autocratic regime types range from a brutal military junta (Myanmar) and monarchy-military dominated electoral authoritarianism (Thailand) to hegemonic authoritarianism (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia) and absolute monarchy (Brunei). In a nutshell, the whole political landscape of Southeast Asia is increasingly dominated by sophisticated authoritarianism, to quote Lee Morgenbesser,<sup>57</sup> and old school outright authoritarianism.

The continuing regression of democracy in ASEAN has a strong impact on the bloc's ineffective response to Myanmar's coup. The autocratic and semi-autocratic regimes in the region eschewed pressing the Myanmar's junta to restore democracy, as they all were aware that advocating democracy could unnecessarily welcome a backlash in their undemocratic grip on power. The ASEAN countries initially reacted to the coup in Myanmar with indifference, with some labelling it as "internal affairs."<sup>58</sup> The junta's persistent brutal and lethal crackdown on the peaceful protesters eventually led the unmoved ASEAN to hold its April 2021 summit that resulted in the five-point consensus.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, ASEAN leaders failed to include a restoration of democracy in its consensus. Moreover, autocrats in ASEAN abstained from upsetting each other due to an elaborate network of mutual dependence,<sup>60</sup> which means that favors and recognition are usually exchanged amongst themselves, and in doing so, they help one another to support their illegitimate rule. Cambodian strongman Hun Sen's

first head-of-state visit to Myanmar after the coup signified the offer of favors and recognition to the pariah junta. In this way, autocratic alliance has become well-built and aggravated the democratic backsliding in region.

## Democratic Backsliding in the Past Decade

Democratic backsliding in Southeast Asia occurs concurrently with a global retreat of freedom. The titles of recent Freedom House annual reports clearly demonstrated the regression of democracy and freedom in the world: "Democracy in Crisis" in 2018, "Democracy in Retreat" in 2019, "Democracy under Siege" in 2021 and "The Global Expansion of Authoritarianism" in 2022. In the recent years, it has become obvious that "liberal democracies are becoming illiberal or only electoral while electoral democracies are sliding toward autocracy and autocracies are deepening."<sup>61</sup> The decline of democracy and the rise of authoritarianism are contagious.

The Freedom House report said that, as India declined to the "partly free" status due to serious democratic backsliding under the Modi's government, the percent of the world's population that lives in a free country decreased to less than 20%, the smallest proportion since 1995.<sup>62</sup> Undoubtedly, the global retreat of democracy has been exacerbated by the "hands-off approach" of the United State to the democracy promotion. U.S. neglect of democracy and human rights has been impactful not only on the global political landscape but also on the regional landscape of Southeast Asia. It did not prioritize democracy as a core component of U.S. foreign policy, and it has been largely quiet on the global regression of democracy, let alone on initiating policies to correct it.<sup>63</sup>



Along with global and regional democratic retreat, the lack of political will amongst both supposedly pro-democracy domestic and international to strengthen democratic norms and institutions accelerated a speedy demise of democracy in Myanmar. After taking office, the civilian leaders of Myanmar failed to step up the democratic reforms and often involved themselves in the dirty business of eroding democracy as they became more fixated on power politics. It allowed the undemocratic forces – primarily the military – to rise up and consolidate their power in the undemocratic spaces that the civilian leaders created. For instance, a charge against the media by the civilian government was followed by several arrests and charges of journalists by the military which continued without any restraints. In this way, the civilian leaders unknowingly dug their own graves, and the military became more assertive and powerful enough to kill off the nascent democracy. Similar scenarios have been observed in some other Southeast Asian countries too, and the unintended consequences of creating undemocratic space should not be underestimated by the civilian leaders. Meanwhile, few in the international community had the appetite to apply genuine pressure on Myanmar, and Beijing's protection and largesse provided a shield against any pushback that occurred.

## Addressing the Causes of Democratic Crisis

The future of democracy in the Southeast Asia is bleak, and the current trend of democratic backsliding is unlikely to be reversed in the near future. Based on Myanmar's experience, the return of authoritarianism has plunged the country into a political quagmire, and Myanmar is currently running the risk of state collapse and even territorial fragmentation. The rise of

authoritarianism does not bode well for the long-term stability and prosperity of the region. Even now, the spillover effect of Myanmar's autocratic return has been felt in region, while it is posing a serious threat to the security and interests of both neighboring countries and the strategic importance of the whole region.

Therefore, ASEAN should not hesitate to inhibit the institutionalization of the military regime and to improve the deteriorating situation in Myanmar. As a consensus-driven association primarily dominated by autocratic elites, the political will and stance of ASEAN is not encouraging. However, in dealing with Myanmar's crisis, ASEAN's approach has dramatically shifted. In its statements at the 38<sup>th</sup> and 39<sup>th</sup> ASEAN summits, it said that "while respecting the principle of non-interference, we affirmed our adherence to the rule of law, good governance and the principles of democracy and constitutional government."<sup>64</sup> As the junta repeatedly failed to implement the ASEAN's five-point consensus, ASEAN remains committed to its unprecedented decision to exclude the junta's political representation in meetings of the bloc. All ASEAN member states should continue to stand firmly on the current position not to legitimize Myanmar's military junta so as to promote its international credibility and its crucial role as a regional bloc.

Southeast Asia is a "linchpin" of Indo-Pacific region, and its stability is vital to the Indo-Pacific strategy. Although the Biden administration places democracy and human rights at the core of its foreign policy, it still maintains relations with geostrategic authoritarian countries. So far, the Biden administration seems to intentionally avoid the use of strong language on democracy and human rights in its engagements with Southeast Asia countries. In his meetings with ASEAN leaders, President Joe Biden primarily focused



on shared security, free and open Indo-Pacific, and the rule-based regional order.<sup>65</sup> Although its cautious approach is intended not to alienate its geo-strategic partners and allies in the region, the United States will likely run into trouble with the autocratic regimes of the region in the long run. Moreover, an authoritarianism-inundated region and its subsequent problem of chronic instability will not be supportive of the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy long-term. Therefore, U.S. policy-makers should work to reverse the declining status of democracy in the region. As the role of the United States is crucial for democratic revival in the region, so too is democracy for the long-term interests of Washington. As a first step, the Biden administration should take all possible measures to end military rule and restore democracy in Myanmar.

In the current gloomy domestic situation in Myanmar, the young generation of digital natives are playing an encouraging role for the revival of democracy in the region and in Myanmar. In Myanmar, pro-democratic youths have been making themselves bulwarks of democracy against the rise of authoritarianism. They set their lives on the line to fight relentlessly for a democratic renaissance. Not only in Myanmar but also elsewhere in Southeast Asia, such as Thailand, young people are struggling for their political future. The youth's zeal for democracy is best reflected in the "Milk Tea Alliance," a democratic movement amongst the youth across Asia that have been resisting the common threat of the authoritarianism.<sup>66</sup> This young generation is not fighting for political power but for their freedom, their rights, and their future. In Myanmar, they are the political future of the country as well as the key architects of democracy and a new nation.

The current Myanmar crisis has witnessed the rise of a new politics, primarily driven by this younger generation. This new politics is being animated by the dreams of the future and motivated by the creation of a new nation that inclusively represents all diverse groups of the country and completely liberated from the yoke of military domination. During the protests that have followed the coup, the protestors have always chanted that "we are young people, we have a future." They are enthusiastically attached to "the dreams of the future better than the history of the past," and those dreams have been increasingly catalyzing a new politics in the current struggle.<sup>67</sup>

The resistance movement has also moved to implement this better future. For instance, they formally scrapped the military drafted 2008 constitution, which firmly enshrined the military's prerogatives and imposed structural constraints on the political development of the country.<sup>68</sup> On the other hand, the National Unity Consultative Council, the most inclusive political dialogue platform in history of Myanmar,<sup>69</sup> including a wide range of actors from activist networks to ethnic armed groups, has been deliberating over a new constitution so as to build up a democratic federal union. Likewise, contrary to the old discriminatory and exclusionary politics, the National Unity Government (NUG), along with the ethnic political forces and the younger generation of democratic activists, has been trying to build up an inclusive collective leadership, appointing members of ethnic minorities to top positions and expanding the participation of women and the youth. Despite the uncertainty of its full configuration, a new politics is progressively taking shape and gaining momentum in Myanmar. In the current gloomy regional and local context, this new politics is a beacon of hope for the political future of Myanmar.



In fact, Myanmar's current democratic struggle is not just a local issue but one with wider political significance to the region. The end of democratic struggle implies an end of hope for the revival of democracy in the whole region. Therefore, the democratic countries of the world must firmly stand with Myanmar's new politics and support the younger generation of democratic activists in Myanmar. A successful democratic movement in Myanmar could inspire a new age of democratic renaissance in Southeast Asia..

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