

Military seizes power in Myanmar

Peter Symonds
1 February 2021

Myanmar's military, also known as the Tatmadaw, yesterday seized control of the country in a coup and arrested the top leaders of the ruling National League for Democracy (NLD), including Aung San Suu Kyi. A state of emergency has been declared for a year, handing far-reaching powers to the armed forces. The military's commander-in-chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, has taken power.

The military took over the media and telecommunications. Reports from the commercial centre of Yangon and other cities indicated that the services of four of the country's telecom companies had been cut off, as were some internet services. TV broadcasts were restricted to the military's Myawaddy TV channel. Troops and armoured vehicles had already been on the streets.

The pretext for the coup was alleged irregularities in the November 8 national election, in which the NLD won 83 percent of the vote and took 396 out of 476 seats in the combined lower and upper houses of parliament. The military-backed Union Solidarity and Development party won only 33 seats. The new parliament was due to convene yesterday.

The military refused to recognise the result of the election and in mid-January claimed that more than 90,000 cases of election fraud had taken place. No proof was provided publicly. Last week, military spokesman General Zaw Min Tun warned of a coup if allegations were not addressed. Last Thursday, the election commission dismissed claims of irregularities, which have been largely rejected by international observers.

Last Friday, the US and its allies, including Britain, Australia and New Zealand, issued a statement warning Myanmar's military against a coup. Responding on Saturday, its commander-in-chief Min Aung Hlaing did not deny that the army was planning a coup but declared it would abide by the constitution.

A military spokesperson yesterday insisted there were "huge discrepancies" and "terrible fraud" in the election results, which the country's election commission had

"failed to settle." The military invoked article 417 of the constitution, which allows for the declaration of a state of emergency in conditions that threaten to "disintegrate the union or disintegrate national solidarity." It declared that new elections would be held but provided no timeline.

The previous military junta drew up the 2008 constitution to ensure that it continued to hold key levers of power. A quarter of seats in both parliamentary houses are reserved for military appointees, ensuring that it can block any constitutional amendment. The military also remains in control of powerful ministries, including defence and home affairs, and is thus excluded from any civilian oversight.

Suu Kyi, who was freed from house arrest in 2010, and her NLD agreed to this democratic charade, which was part of the military's shift away from China and toward the US. The NLD represents sections of the country's ruling class who regard the military's domination as a barrier to their business interests. They oriented to the West for support. For the Obama administration, Myanmar's turn toward Washington was regarded as one of the successes of its confrontational "pivot to Asia" against China. Washington ended Myanmar's pariah status, dropped economic sanctions and proclaimed it to be a "developing democracy."

The NLD won the 2016 elections and formed a government. Suu Kyi, the supposed "icon of democracy," became a roving ambassador for what in effect was a military-backed regime, seeking foreign investment and defending the military against charges of gross human rights abuse as it conducted its murderous operations against the Muslim Rohingya minority that drove hundreds of thousands to flee the country.

The military's decision to take back full control of the country is no doubt conditioned in part by the turn to authoritarian and fascist forms of rule internationally amid the deepening crisis of capitalism triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic—not least in the United States. Significantly, Myanmar's military has followed the playbook of Trump, who on the basis of lies about

electoral fraud and a “stolen election” attempted to engineer a fascist coup by storming the Capitol on January 6.

Myanmar is confronting a worsening economic and social crisis as a result of a surge in COVID-19 cases since mid-August. Between late March to early August, Myanmar recorded just 360 cases and six deaths. However, those figures have risen dramatically to the current level of 140,000 cases and more than 3,000 deaths, putting huge strains on the country’s limited health care system. Economic growth for the financial year 2019–20 (starting on October 1) is projected to be 3.2 percent, sharply down from 6.8 percent in the previous year. Growth for 2020–21 is expected to be just 0.5 percent.

Lockdowns have contributed to major job losses and a dramatic rise in poverty. A poll by the International Food Policy Research Institute last September found that 59 percent of 1,000 households surveyed in urban Yangon and 66 percent of 1,000 households surveyed in the country’s rural dry zone earned less than \$US1.90 a day—a commonly used benchmark for extreme poverty. Only 16 percent of respondents in a similar survey in January 2020 were in extreme poverty.

“That level of poverty poses huge risks for food insecurity and malnutrition,” Derek Headey, lead author of the study, commented. “Though necessary to control the virus, lockdown periods have resulted in disastrous impacts on poverty and need to be accompanied by larger and better targeted cash transfers if Myanmar is to successfully contain the economic destruction of COVID-19’s second wave.” Since that September survey, the plight of the urban and rural poor has undoubtedly worsened, fuelling sharp social tensions.

In comments to the media about the coup, Myanmar historian Thant Myint-U warned: “The doors just opened to a different, almost certainly darker future. Myanmar is a country already at war with itself, awash in weapons, with millions barely able to feed themselves, deeply divided along religious and ethnic lines... I’m not sure anyone will be able to control what comes next.”

The new Biden administration had previously signalled a hard line toward Myanmar. During his congressional confirmation hearing, incoming Secretary of State Antony Blinken said he would oversee an inter-agency review to determine whether Myanmar’s atrocities against Rohingya constituted genocide. Myanmar’s top generals, including Min Aung Hlaing, are already facing hearings in the International Court of Justice in The Hague, which

started last year, over their human rights abuses.

In response to yesterday’s coup, Biden warned of the re-imposition of sanctions on Myanmar. “The United States removed sanctions on Burma over the past decade based on progress toward democracy,” he said, invoking Myanmar’s traditional name. “The reversal of that progress will necessitate an immediate review of our sanction laws and authorities, followed by appropriate action.”

Like Obama, Biden is not motivated by any genuine interest in defending human rights. Rather the US is driven by renewed concern of growing Chinese influence. The failure of Myanmar to attract significant foreign investment, along with growing international criticism of the treatment of the Rohingya, compelled Suu Kyi, her government and the military to increasingly turn back to Beijing for financial and diplomatic assistance.

Myanmar’s dependence on Beijing deepened with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, including for a free supply of vaccines developed in China. Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi visited Myanmar last month to discuss closer collaboration on its Belt and Road Initiative, which includes strategic transport routes and pipelines through Myanmar to southern China. For Beijing, an alternative to the US-controlled searoutes through the Strait of Malacca is vital to ensure supplies of energy and raw materials as tensions with Washington continue to rise.

China’s response to the coup has been decidedly muted. Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said only: “We hope that all sides in Myanmar can appropriately handle their differences under the constitution and legal framework and safeguard political and social stability.”

The prospect of a renewed “human rights” offensive and economic sanctions by US imperialism and its allies could have been a significant factor in prompting Myanmar’s military to take power directly, rather than relying on the potentially unreliable support of Suu Kyi and the NLD. Suu Kyi has now called for protests against the coup. Despite her much tarnished image as a democracy symbol, she will undoubtedly turn to Washington for backing.



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