

Mass protests against the military coup in Myanmar continue to grow

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Protests against the February 1 military coup in Myanmar have continued with some of the largest taking place yesterday—a national holiday known as Union Day, which marks the country’s formal independence from British colonial rule in 1947. Along with students, professionals and civil servants, there are earlier reports of sections of workers, including railway workers, garment workers and copper miners, taking action against the junta.

The military ousted Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD), which overwhelmingly won the national election held last November, notwithstanding the military’s allegations of widespread irregularities. Military commander-in-chief, senior General Min Aung Hlaing, has been installed as the country’s leader, a state of emergency declared and top NLD figures detained.

According to Reuters, hundreds of thousands took part in demonstrations on Friday in cities and towns throughout Myanmar. As well as the country’s biggest city of Yangon, demonstrations took place in the capital, Naypyitaw, which is an artificial creation of the military, the coastal town of Dawei, and Myitkyina, the state capital of Kachin in the north.

The *Guardian* cited witnesses who reported that hundreds of separate marches, each with about 2,000 participants, took place in Yangon, converging on focal points such as Hledan, the Sule Pagoda and the Russian and Chinese embassies. It reported “rallies in many other towns and cities including a boat protest at the tourist hotspot of Inle Lake in Shan state, and a march through the famous ancient temples of Bagan.”

Student unions from 18 universities across the country have targeted China, calling on President Xi Jinping not to recognise the new military regime. They said support for the military, which has had

longstanding ties with Beijing, would do “serious damage” to China’s reputation. Anti-coup protesters have gathered daily outside the Chinese embassy in Yangon, with thousands taking part yesterday.

Amid threats that the regime could again cut access to the internet, nearly 2,000 social media users shared a notice threatening to destroy a segment of the China-Myanmar twin oil-and-gas pipeline in retaliation. The *Irrawaddy* reported that the pipeline was under heavy police guard in Thaungtha Township in the city of Mandalay on Friday morning.

The *Irrawaddy* said copper miners at mines run by Chinese companies in collaboration with the military had ceased work as a part of a civil disobedience movement against the coup. By Monday, more than 2,000 miners from the Kyisintaung copper mines in Monwya District went on strike. The Letpadaung Taung copper mine, estimated to be the biggest in Southeast Asia, also stopped operations after thousands of workers had joined the disobedience movement by February 8.

The military certainly has ties with China. But Suu Kyi and the NLD, which formed government in 2016, also turned toward Beijing amid growing international opposition to Suu Kyi’s defence of the military’s atrocities against the Muslim Rohingya minority. Now the NLD and its supporters are appealing to Washington and the West for support and sanctions on the military in a bid to force it to make concessions.

Like every other country within the region, Myanmar is caught up in the aggressive US confrontation with China that began under Obama and accelerated under Trump. The military, facing a growing economic and social crisis at home, sought to mend ties with Washington by releasing Suu Kyi from house arrest in 2010 and holding limited elections. Obama visited the

country in 2012.

On Wednesday, President Biden, who was vice-president under Obama, announced sanctions on the military regime, blocking access to \$1 billion in funds kept in the US, and he has threatened further penalties against military leaders and their families. Like other “human rights” campaigns, US opposition to the coup is not about defending democracy, but advancing US economic and geo-strategic aims.

China is attempting to strengthen relations with Myanmar, which until 2010 was one of Beijing’s few close supporters, as well as being a source of raw materials and host to strategic pipeline and transit routes between the Indian Ocean and southern China. Beijing has refused to condemn the coup and, along with Russia, is opposing any significant action by the UN Security Council against the military regime.

Other sections of workers have taken action against the junta. According to the *New York Times*, a stoppage of rail employees earlier in the week closed the Myanmar Railway, which under COVID-19 restrictions was being used by just a few thousand people near Yangon. There was no indication when it would reopen.

Reuters yesterday spoke to Moe Sandar Myint, an organiser with the Federation of Garment Workers Myanmar, who pointed to the active involvement of garment workers in the protests and strikes. She noted that the COVID-19 pandemic had been used as an excuse to suppress the demands of workers, who had “flooded the streets” to join the civil disobedience movement. “Workers are ready for this fight. We know that the situation will only deteriorate under military dictatorship, so we will fight as one, united, until the end,” she said.

The junta is increasingly resorting to repression, with arrests taking part on a daily basis. According to the UN human rights office, more than 350 people have been arrested since the February 1 coup.

A list published by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners includes more than 100 NLD leaders and senior members, student protesters and student union leaders, along with civil servants, doctors and teachers who joined the civil disobedience movement. On Wednesday and Thursday nights, 23 chairs of township and district election sub-commissions were arrested. Several police have been arrested for posting

anti-coup messages on Facebook, and in one case making an anti-coup speech at a demonstration.

Yesterday, the military announced the release of more than 23,000 prisoners under an amnesty to mark Union Day. The move, however, was part of ritual amnesties designed to boost the image of the regime. In April, the NLD government amnestied nearly 25,000 prisoners.

Police are using more violent methods to try to break up demonstrations. Three people were wounded yesterday when police fired rubber bullets into a demonstration of tens of thousands in the southeastern city of Mawlamyine. “Three got shot—one woman in the womb, one man on his cheek and one man on his arm,” Myanmar Red Cross official Kyaw Myint, who witnessed the clash, told Reuters.

The UN rights investigator for Myanmar Thomas Andrews told a special session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva that there were “growing reports, photographic evidence” that security forces have used live ammunition against protesters. On Tuesday, a 19-year-old woman, Mya Thwate Thwate Khing, was shot in the head and critically injured during a protest in Naypyitaw. She was not expected to survive.



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