

# One year since the military coup in Myanmar

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Today marks one year since the military seized power in Myanmar, imposed a state of emergency and arrested top leaders of the National League for Democracy (NLD), including Aung San Suu Kyi. The military coup provoked widespread protests and opposition, which the military brutally suppressed—with almost 1,500 killed, either shot on the streets, tortured and murdered in custody, or simply disappeared. Thousands more were injured and at least 11,800 have been arrested.

In justifying its takeover, the military took a leaf out of Donald Trump's playbook. Coming less than a month after Trump's failed January 6 coup at the Capitol in Washington, the Myanmar military claimed the NLD had "stolen" the country's national election in November 2020. Its claims were if anything more farcical than those of Trump—the NLD won 396 of the 476 seats in the combined lower and upper houses while the military's Union Solidarity and Development party gained just 33 seats. The new parliament was due to convene on the day of the coup.

In reality, the façade of democracy established under the 2008 constitution drawn up by the military was always paper-thin. A quarter of the seats in the parliament were reserved for military appointees, ensuring they could block any constitutional amendment. Moreover, the military retained control over key ministries, including defence and home affairs.

The "democratic" shift by the military was bound up with a deepening economic crisis. The military, which had been closely tied to Beijing, turned to Washington as a means of ending a crippling international sanctions regime. The Obama administration, which had launched its "pivot to Asia" to isolate and encircle China, embraced the military with open arms, ignoring the cosmetic character of the constitutional changes.

Suu Kyi and the NLD went along with the charade. Indeed, Suu Kyi formed a de facto partnership with the military that only became closer after the NLD won the 2016 elections and formed a government. The "democracy icon" toured the world touting investment in

Myanmar and notoriously became the apologist for the military's murderous operations against the country's Muslim Rohingya minority that drove hundreds of thousands to flee for their lives.

However, the ending of sanctions failed to result in a flood of foreign investment and any significant economic boost. As it did internationally, the COVID-19 pandemic only intensified the economic and social crisis in Myanmar, leading to sharpening political tensions in ruling circles. The first wave of infections peaked at the time of the November elections in 2020, which revealed the lack of any significant popular support for the military.

Feeling the political ground moving from under their feet, the generals decided to dispense with the trappings of democracy and openly take power into their own hands. The coup, however, has resolved nothing. On every front, the junta confronts a worsening impasse, which cannot be overcome through its methods of brute force.

A second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic hit Myanmar, peaking at over 5,000 daily infections in July 2021—far higher than the 2020 wave. The country's limited health system virtually collapsed under the impact, exacerbated by protests by doctors and medical staff, who treated patients in the community rather than state-run hospitals.

The overall number of infections since the start of the pandemic is more than half a million and the death toll is over 19,000. These official figures, however, are grossly understated due to the inadequacy of testing and treatment. While figures are currently substantially lower, the first cases of the highly infectious Omicron variant have emerged, and this is likely to lead to another huge surge in infections.

The pandemic and the nation-wide opposition to the coup have had a profound impact on the economy. According to the World Bank, it shrank by 18 percent in the financial year to September 2021 and is expected to grow by just 1 percent this financial year. The

International Labour Organisation estimated that the country lost about 1.6 million jobs in 2021 and hours worked dropped by 18 percent compared to 2020. Hardest hit were agriculture, construction, garment, tourism and hospitality.

By a UN estimate, almost half the population now lives in poverty. The World Food Program estimates that by October 2021, the cost of a basic food basket was almost a third higher than in the month prior to the coup. Fuel prices have jumped by more than 70 percent. UNICEF estimated recently that 25 percent of the population needed humanitarian aid, including five million children.

The junta's vindictive treatment of its erstwhile political ally and apologist, Suu Kyi, is just a small indication of the far more brutal methods meted out more broadly. She has been convicted on trumped-up charges of incitement, breaking COVID-19 rules and illegally importing walkie-talkies, and sentenced to six years' jail. She faces further charges of corruption, electoral fraud and violating the state secrets act, which carry far higher jail terms.

The junta's chief target has been the civil disobedience movement, which initially encompassed significant layers of doctors, nurses, teachers, engineers and other public servants who refused to work under military rule. This movement also began to draw in layers of the working class, including garment workers, dockworkers and others.

The political orientation of the NLD, however, was not to this incipient movement of the working class. The National Unity Government (NUG)—in effect a government-in-exile—formed by NLD ministers and parliamentarians who evaded arrest, along with leaders of various ethnic separatist organisations, turned to the major powers to pressure the junta to make concessions.

At the same time, the NUG encouraged young protesters to flee the cities and take up an “armed struggle” with training provided by ethnic militias that have been engaged in a war with the military for decades. It announced the formation of a Peoples Defence Force last May and its armed militia have engaged in various attacks on the military.

Significantly, the major powers, including the US, the EU and Australia, have been somewhat equivocal in their support for the NUG. Its offices have been established in some countries, including the US, UK, Australia and France, and high-level discussions have been held with its representatives, such as by Biden's National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan last October. However, the US and

its allies have not reimposed blanket sanctions on Myanmar but rather on individual junta representatives—an indication that Washington is seeking to pressure the military into a new accommodation.

China similarly has not thrown its full support behind the junta, but rather held out its hand to the NUG, holding talks with its representatives. In September, Beijing chose not to support the junta's appointee to the UN, but did a deal with the US to maintain the seat for Kyaw Moe Tun, the ambassador pointed by the NLD government in 2018. In part, Beijing's manoeuvring is aimed at neutralising the anti-Chinese chauvinism that has been whipped up by elements of the opposition in Myanmar, resulting in attacks on Chinese businesses.

A comment published last February on the *World Socialist Web Site*, titled “How to fight for democracy in Myanmar,” warned that the working class should place no faith in Suu Kyi and the NLD to defend democratic rights.

“They represent a faction of the bourgeoisie in Myanmar whose political ambitions and economic interests have been trampled on by the military, which controls substantial sections of the economy. While the NLD wants to end or at least limit the military's power, it is just as fearful as the generals of a mass movement of the working class that threatens the very basis of capitalist rule.”

It is to the working class that those who want to fight for democracy have to turn to in the political struggle, not just for democratic rights but basic social rights as well. Such a fight cannot succeed within the framework of capitalism which, as the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated, places profits ahead of all else, including health and lives, but requires the turn to a socialist perspective.



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