



Language

Context of the Coup

The immediate background to the 2021 coup by the Burmese military is the period of partial, strictly controlled, liberalization and civilian government introduced by the previous military regime. This period began with the new constitution of 2008 and gained momentum in 2011, symbolized by the freeing of Aung San Suu Kyi from detention. This phase allowed the party, the National League for Democracy, which she led, to win parliamentary seats in by-elections in 2012 and to form a civilian government after a landslide victory at the polls in 2015. But this period also included the brutal military assault on the Rohingya Muslims in 2017 (the military had retained control over 'security' issues), and Suu Kyi's public (if uneasy) endorsement of this violation of basic human rights. (See [1.a](#) [1] and [1.b](#) [2] for more detail on the earlier popular resistance to military rule in 1988 and 2007, and the role of Suu Kyi and of the military up to 2017.)

Since 2015 the NLD and Suu Kyi herself had been trying to undermine gradually the military grip on the political process (through their reserved seats in parliament and appointment of key ministers) and over the bureaucracy. The avowed NLD strategy was to consolidate civilian control over the government before addressing issues relating to human rights and ethnic minorities. Critics pointed, however, to the lack of democracy within the NLD where loyalty to Suu Kyi has been paramount, and to the civilian government's assault on press freedom and the increasing numbers of political prisoners. Moreover, although before 2015 the NLD had cooperated with some of the numerous ethnic minority groups, during and after the 2015 election the NLD gave priority to its strong base among the ethnic Burmese majority. Moreover, when the generals were indicted for genocide and ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya, Suu Kyi appeared in person at the International Court of Justice in 2019 to defend them.

The next parliamentary election was held in November 2020. The civilian government ruled, however, that some parts of the country were too conflict-ridden for voting to take place, so preventing many ethnic minorities (less likely to support the NLD) from voting. Some of the electorate had become disillusioned with Suu Kyi and her party, especially as the government had failed (despite the lifting of international economic sanctions) to improve conditions for the poor. Nevertheless, most Burmese were loyal to Suu Kyi, and the NLD won a resounding victory with 396 seats out of the 476 available. Although the military-backed Union and Solidarity Development Party did come second, its results were disappointing for the generals, and the party immediately challenged the results. When parliament was due to convene on 1 Feb 2021, the generals seized power in a military coup and detained Aung San Suu Kyi, President U Win Myint and other leading NLD ministers on grounds of electoral fraud.

A key figure behind the coup appeared to be General Min Aung Hlang, who had been personally responsible for the assault on the Rohingya, and was officially due to retire as chief of staff in 2021. He headed the new military junta. But there were several reasons for the military elite as a group to prevent the NLD becoming the government. Suu Kyi had become less willing to conciliate the generals, and the NLD victory suggested the party might make a more determined effort to decrease the military control over the political process. Moreover, the generals were concerned that the extensive and profitable network of businesses that they had built up and controlled over the previous years might be threatened by civilian scrutiny. The 2020 election may also have convinced the generals that their political party could not win a majority at the polls unless the electoral system was changed from first past the post to some form of proportional representation. A week after the coup Min Aung Hlang promised on TV that there would be an election in a year's time, presumably hoping to dampen down protest.

Increasing Resistance to the Coup

Public defiance of the generals began immediately after the coup on Monday 1 February, as round the country people banged pots and pans at 8pm each night. In the next few days street protests also began. Students were prominent and initially there was a carnival atmosphere, with some wearing elaborate costumes and the release of red balloons symbolizing the red of the NLD. Drivers flung denunciatory leaflets about Aung Min Hlang out of car windows, and pictures of Min Aung Hlang and other generals were stuck on pavements for people to walk over. A major demonstration in Yangon (the main city in Mandalay) on Sunday 7 February was supported by Buddhist monks and was the largest protest since 2007. By the second week curfews were imposed in Yangon and the



purpose built capital Naypayidan, and police began to use rubber bullets and water cannons, but major demonstrations continued, especially by young people who had grown up under semi-civilian rule and were outraged by the military action. Monday 22 February saw the largest demonstration yet in Yangon to mark the third week after the coup. As police and military tactics became more ruthless, protesters started wearing hard hats and goggles, and to emulate Hong Kong protesters by carrying umbrellas to deflect pepper spray. Older activists and union leaders played a role in coordinating rallies and marches, but the young using social media were at the forefront. They took inspiration from the Thai student movement against military and royal rule (adopting their three finger salute) as well as from Hong Kong.

As the military started shooting at demonstrators and the death toll rose in March, numbers on the streets declined and those who still demonstrated open defiance by the end of March often built ad hoc barricades. and began to carry molotov cocktails. By the beginning of April 570 protesters (and bystanders) were known to have been killed and around 2,730 had been detained. The generals had by now brought in troops hardened in battles with ethnic minorities, and some who had assaulted the Rohingya. By the end of June the number of deaths had risen to 800 and those detained to about 5,000.

Protesting on the streets was, however, only one aspect of the widespread resistance to the coup. Many Burmese, encouraged by trade unions, began early on to challenge the regime by going on strike and staying at home. This form of mass resistance rapidly extended to teachers and health workers, fire fighters, bus drivers and rail workers. Women garment workers were prominent among the strikers. There was also a mass walkout of civil servants from some ministries and almost all bank employees also went on strike. This widespread withdrawal of support from the administration and the economy continued into April and May. Staying at home was safer than protesting openly - though some strikers did take to the streets - and was also effective in undermining the administrative capacity of the military regime and weakening the economy, including foreign trade. By the end of June most banks, universities, schools and hospitals had closed and almost the entire administration had come to a standstill. Some resisters tried to increase the economic dislocation by blocking roads. Civil society groups organized to try to provide practical support strikers and their families. The regime retaliated by issuing arrest warrants against some of the key professionals going on strike; many doctors for example were trying to treat patients whilst in hiding.

There was also a specifically political response to the military coup, when 289 elected NLD MPs came together on 5 February to form the Committee Representing the Union Parliament. They formally joined with leaders of other parties and resistance organizations to announce a National Unity Government (NUG) on 1st April, and released Myanmar's Federal Democracy Charter, including a new constitution. The National Unity Government reflected a new willingness by Burmese activists to cooperate with the ethnic minorities, who were well represented in the cabinet. Some minorities had joined in the Civil Disobedience Movement, and several minority regions that had earlier signed peace deals with the military withdrew from them. Suu Kyi, now again a prisoner of the military, was designated State Counsellor (the title she had held since 2015 because she was excluded under the 2008 constitution by her British family ties from officially being 'President'). But the resistance no longer reflected her policies. The involvement of ethnic minorities provided the provisional government with a potential army. Indeed, some activists had already moved into the ethnic border regions to escape repression or to ally themselves as fighters with the minorities. Activists inside Burma were also suggesting the need to move towards a liberation war, and to unite all the nationalities of Myanmar, with the goal of a new federal state.

The military junta defined its own policy towards Suu Kyi as the head of the previous civilian government and as a figurehead of the Burmese resistance in the charges it brought against her in court. Initially she was accused of owning a walkie talkie illegally and of violating Covid-19 restrictions, which each carried a maximum of three years imprisonment. But when she and senior NLD colleagues were put on trial in June 2014 on these charges, the junta had made further serious accusations to be tried in the future. Suu Kyi was charged with violating the official secrets act and of corruption (receiving £450,000 pounds in cash and 11 bags of gold), charges with a maximum penalty of 14 and 15 years in prison respectively.

The success of an unarmed resistance movement often depends on whether some sections of the police and the armed forces, both among the rank and file and at senior levels, go over to the resistance. In the very early stages of the resistance to the coup there were reports of police (under military control) defecting. The Burmese Armed Forces, the Tatmadaw, are less likely than many armed services to break ranks, and are largely separated from the wider population. The rank and file live in isolated barracks, are bullied by their officers, and many of them have been engaged in war with ethnic minorities in which atrocities by the military were commonplace. The generals and senior ranks enjoy (as already noted) immense privileges of both political power and economic wealth. Nevertheless, a few soldiers publicly defected on social media soon after the coup, despite desertion carrying a



death sentence.

The resistance did receive high-level support from Myanmar's diplomats abroad, many of whom declared loyalty to the Committee Representing the Union Parliament in February. Most notably Myanmar's ambassador to the United Nations called for international action to help restore democracy in late February. He was dismissed from his post by the generals, but the junta was not officially recognized by the UN. The ambassador to the UK, who also claimed to represent the legitimate civilian government, was locked out of the London embassy by military staff there.

International intervention on the side of the resistance can bring significant pressure to bear on a repressive regime, as it did on the post-1990 military rulers. The 2021 coup was denounced by G7 countries, and the EU and many western governments, including the US, Canada, and the UK, have adopted targeted sanctions against members of the junta and key companies linked to them, such as the Myanmar Economic Corporation. They have also imposed a ban on sale of arms or other equipment that could be used for repression. But countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have called for 'constructive engagement'. Australia allied itself with this regional approach. Both China and Russia are ready to block resolutions in the UN Security Council and any general imposition of economic sanctions. However, the UN Human Rights Council met in February and March to condemn human rights violations, and the UN General Assembly voted in June 2021 to condemn the coup and for an end to arms sales to the generals.

The Chinese government did not in fact immediately fully support the February coup. Its economic relations with Suu Kyi had been good, leading to many infrastructure projects, and Beijing did not offer very explicit support to the junta until June, when General Min Aung Hlang was officially named as head of state and a military representative was invited to a Chinese meeting with ASEAN foreign ministers. The Chinese government may also be concerned about unrest in Myanmar areas bordering on China; refugees had already entered India and Thailand. A number of ethnic groups had also resumed fighting with the military. Indeed, by mid-2021 commentators began to note the possibility of Myanmar disintegrating.

The drama of the coup and of the extensive resistance to it led to widespread coverage by major newspapers and broadcasters. *The Guardian* for example reported frequently on the developing movement and the responses by the junta in February and March 2021, and it also raised the persecution of the Rohingya in this context: Kenan Malik, 'Where were the Protesters when the Rohingya were being Murdered?', 21 February 2021. But mainstream media articles and reports are not included in the list of references below, which are from less obvious sources.

[The Big Story: Myanmar](#) [3], New Internationalist, 2021, pp. 15-36

This very informative supplement on the aftermath of the coup on 1 February 2021 carries several articles on the resistance, the repression by the generals, and assessment of future possibilities inside Myanmar. It also includes discussion of the scope for international action, a summary of key statistics, a list of relevant organizations and initiatives, and a bibliography.

Aguilar, Macarena ; Quadrini, Maggi, "[We're Unstoppable': Meet the Women leading Myanmar's Protests](#) [4], OpenDemocracy, 24/02/2021,

Provides profiles of some of the women who have taken to the streets to protest against the military coup and demand a return to democracy.

Cherney, Michael, [Myanmar's Coup: How the Military has Held onto Power for 60 years](#) [5], The Conversation, 03/02/2021,

Provides background to the 2021 military coup in Myanmar.

Combs, Daniel, [Until the World Shatters](#) [6], New York and London, Melville Press, 2021, pp. 400



Combs, a US researcher, travelled throughout Myanmar after 2011 when people were becoming more willing to talk, and interviewed a wide range of people from a punk rocker to a monk. He also observed the role of Buddhism in society and politics, including the fear and hostility towards Muslim minorities.

Dr, Sasa ; Aung, U ; Thuzar, Ma, [Workers Are Still Launching Nationwide Strikes against Myanmar's Military Rulers \[7\]](#), Jacobin, 2021

The interviews with Dr Sasa, minister for international cooperation in the National Unity Government (NUG) representing the resistance, and with two railway workers involved in the Civil Disobedience Movement, are prefaced by a brief summary of the policy of the NUG. The article stresses the ethnic diversity of the NUG and its call for the abolition of the 2008 constitution and the 1982 citizenship law used to exclude the Rohingya.

Kijpgen, Nehginpao, [The 2020 Myanmar Election and the 2021 Coup: Deepening Democracy or Widening Division? \[8\]](#), Asian Affairs, Vol. 51, issue 1, 2021, pp. 1-17

Examines the background to the major protests that erupted after the military coup.

Kyaw, Lynn, [Reflections on Military Coups in Myanmar: and why Political Actors in Arakan Chose a Different Path \[9\]](#), Amsterdam, The Netherlands, Transnational Institute, 2021

The article starts with an analysis of the personal as well as the institutional factors leading to the 2021 coup. It then assesses the special situation in Rakhine State (previously the kingdom of Arakan), home to Muslim minorities including the Rohingya, and to Arakan Buddhists, who are hostile to both Muslims and to the Burmese (Buddhist) government.

Myint-U, Thant, [The Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism and the Crisis of Democracy \[10\]](#), New York, W. W. Norton , 2019, pp. 320 pb

This well-received book by a Burmese historian (and grandson of UN Secretary General U Thant) explores the complexities of the ethnic and religious composition of Burma/Myanmar, which has never fully cohered as a country since it acquired independence from the British Empire after the Second World War. The book focuses particularly on the period since the cyclone of 2008, which killed almost 400,000 people and exposed the ineffectiveness of the military regime when constructive action was needed.

Myint-U, Thant, [Myanmar's Coming Revolution: What Will Emerge from Collapse? \[11\]](#), Foreign Affairs, 2021

An analysis of likely future developments by the respected Burmese historian and expert on Myanmar's recent past.

Than, Tharaphi, [Resistance to Military Regime in Myanmar Mounts as Nurses, Bankers Join Protests - Despite Bloody Crackdown \[12\]](#), The Conversation, 15/03/2021,

A report on the resistance movement six weeks after the coup. This is one of a number of relevant articles carried by *The Conversation* (an independent international source of news and analysis run by academics) on the coup and resistance to it and on the wider context in Myanmar.



13:16):<https://civilresistance.info/section/e-resisting-oppressive-dictatorial-military-or-authoritarian-rule/e-ii-asia-and-22>

Links

[1] <https://civilresistance.info/section/e-resisting-oppressive-dictatorial-military-or-authoritarian-rule/e-ii-asia-and-1>
[2] <https://civilresistance.info/section/e-resisting-oppressive-dictatorial-military-or-authoritarian-rule/e-ii-asia-and-2>
[3] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2021/big-story-myanmar> [4] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2021/were-unstoppable-meet-women-leading-myanmars-protests> [5] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2021/myanmars-coup-how-military-has-held-power-60-years> [6] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2021/until-world-shatters> [7] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2021/workers-are-still-launching-nationwide-strikes-against-myanmars-military-rulers> [8] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2021/2020-myanmar-election-and-2021-coup-deepening-democracy-or-widening-division> [9] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2021/reflections-military-coups-myanmar-and-why-political-actors-arakan-chose-different> [10] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2019/hidden-history-burma-race-capitalism-and-crisis-democracy> [11] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2021/myanmars-coming-revolution-what-will-emerge-collapse> [12] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2021/resistance-military-regime-myanmar-mounts-nurses-bankers-join-protests-despite>