

## Myanmar's political crisis should be viewed in an objective and impartial way

By Kin Phea, PhD  
Director General,  
International Relations Institute of Cambodia  
Royal Academy of Cambodia



*Demonstrators hold placards and a cutout with the image of Aung San Suu Kyi during a protest against the military coup in Yangon, Myanmar, Feb. 15. (Reuters photo)*

Myanmar has been in a very sharp political crisis since February this year stemming from the discontent of the military-backed opposition Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) over the November 2020 election results which the ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) party led by Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi secured a landslide victory. The Western world including EU, Britain as well as the US expressed their criticism and concerns over disenfranchisement of some voters, cancellation of voting in parts of several states and regions, disqualification of candidates, and large number of seats reserved for the military, and the military-backed USDP had accused NLD of election fraud and demanded a re-run of the election.

The controversy of the election results became a major justification for Myanmar's powerful military to stage a coup. The military refused to accept the results of the vote, which was widely seen as a referendum on the popularity of Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi. As head of the NLD, she had been the de facto civilian leader since her election in 2015. The military coup has been condemned by many governments and UN secretary general while ASEAN and some of its member states have expressed their deep concerns over the country's ongoing situation. ASEAN leaders held the first physical and much-anticipated meeting since the pandemic to help address the crisis. Rhetorically, China has been accused of supporting the military to do so and failing to take a strong stand against the coup. However, China has repeatedly clarified that it has nothing to do with the military coup in Myanmar, stressing that it's a politically-motivated accusation and unacceptable.

This article seeks to examine Myanmar’s November 2020 parliamentary elections, how military coup happened, Myanmar’s domestic political backgrounds, how China has been viewed in military coup involvements and how Myanmar’s political crisis should be addressed.

In November 2020, Myanmar held the parliamentary election with participation of 97 political parties among which tend to be divided into two groups: the first centres around notions of nationalism – such as pro-democracy groups and parties that support the military; the second is based on ethnicity and sees smaller parties representing the interests of non-Bama/Burmese groups. Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi’s NLD is the first most influential and the biggest party in Myanmar’s pro-democracy movement and the military-backed USDP is the second biggest one. USDP is run by former officials of the Tatmadaw and closely affiliated with current members of the military. Other remarkable parties include Arakan National Party (NAP) also known as the Rakhine National Party (RNP) and Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) among other small parties.

Myanmar’s Union Election Commission (UEC) published the official results of the election on 15 November 2020. The NLD secured a landslide victory, winning 396 seats across both houses (138 in the upper house and 258 in the lower house). This was well above the 322 required for a parliamentary majority. The military-backed USDP was second, winning a total of 33 seats across both houses. The remaining seats were shared between smaller regional parties while 25% of the seats in Parliament were reserved for the military by the country’s 2008 constitution. The constitution also gives the military control of three key ministries - home affairs, defence, and border affairs.



*Officials of the Union Election Commission count votes during the multi-party general elections at a polling station in Yangon, Myanmar, Nov. 8, 2020. U Aung—Xinhua via Getty*

But the military since shortly after the elections claimed there were millions of irregularities in voter lists in 314 townships that could have let voters cast multiple ballots or commit other voting malpractice. In the run up to the elections, the army had also said early voting showed errors of neglect in voter lists and a widespread violation of laws and procedures. The USDP said it did not recognise the results of the election and called on authorities to re-run an election that is free, fair, unbiased and free from unfair campaigning. However, the country's UEC said the election was done fairly and free, adding it could not have been more transparent, and announced the result was final, there would not be an election re-run.

While many nations including ASEAN member-states, Japan, India and China and so on congratulated Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi on her NLD's landslide victory, some observers had questioned the credibility of the election because of the disenfranchisement of virtually all the Rohingya. The Western world including the European Union and Britain commended Myanmar for the vote but criticized the disenfranchisement of more than a million voters, including hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine state. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the polls marked an important step in Myanmar's democratic transition, though Washington had concerns about the large number of seats reserved for the military and the disfranchisement of groups including the Rohingya. In a statement, he also expressed concern about the cancellation of voting in parts of several states and regions, and the disqualification of candidates based on arbitrary application of citizenship and residency requirements, and called for tabulation of votes and resolution of complaints to be undertaken in a transparent and credible manner.

The USDP and military maintained their claims of fraud, going so far as filing a writ application at the Supreme Court and calling a lame duck session of the outgoing parliament. The new Parliament was scheduled to convene on 1 February 2021, for a planned session to confirm the new government. In the days leading to this event, speculation grew of a potential coup and, on 27 January, Myanmar's military chief Min Aung Hlaing warned that "the constitution shall be abolished, if not followed" and cited examples of previous military coups in 1962 and 1988.



Finally, a military coup began on the morning of 1 February 2021, Myanmar military, the Tatmadaw proclaimed a year-long state of emergency and declared power had been transferred to Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Min Aung Hlaing. It declared the results of the November 2020 general election invalid and stated its intent to hold a new election at the end of the state of emergency. The coup

*Myanmar Army armored vehicles drive along a street after they seized power in a coup in Mandalay, February 2, 2021 Photo by Stringer/Reuters*

occurred the day before the Parliament of Myanmar was due to swear in the members elected at the 2020 election, thereby preventing this from occurring. The military detained the leaders of the NLD and other civilian officials, including Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi and President U Win Myint, cabinet ministers, the chief ministers of several regions, opposition politicians, writers and activists.

The possibility of the coup emerged after the military, which had tried in the country's Supreme Court to argue that the election results were fraudulent, threatened to "take action" and surrounded the houses of Parliament with soldiers. The coup returned the country to full military rule after a short span of quasi-democracy that began in 2011, when the military, which had been in power since 1962, implemented parliamentary elections and other reforms.

Several major world leaders quickly condemned the coup, demanding that Myanmar's military immediately free Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi and the other detained government officials and honor the November election results. But it was not immediately clear what sort of concrete actions, if any, other nations might take.

The United States and many other countries condemned the coup and called for the restoration of Myanmar's democracy. UN Secretary-General António Guterres' called on the military leadership to respect the will of the people of Myanmar and adhere to democratic norms, with any differences to be resolved through peaceful dialogue. The UN Human Rights Council passed a resolution by unanimous consent that calls on Myanmar to refrain from violence and fully respect human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law.

Brunei as current chair of ASEAN called on for dialogue among parties, reconciliation and the return to normalcy amid the ongoing developments in Myanmar. ASEAN member-states shared different views on Myanmar situation, some expressed their concerns while other considered it's Myanmar's internal affairs and made no comments. Cambodia was also silent on that event. Cambodia's stance is consistent with the Kingdom's foreign policy of non-interference in other country's internal affairs directly or indirectly, as well as the ASEAN's charter. Shortly after the coup, China as a friendly neighbour of Myanmar called on all parties in Myanmar to properly handle their differences under the constitutional and legal framework and maintain political and social stability. Beijing's position on the coup in Myanmar is consistent with its long-established "non-interference principle" in foreign policy.

The protests over the coup in Myanmar have been the largest since the so-called Saffron Revolution in 2007, when thousands of monks rose up against the military regime. Protesters include teachers, lawyers, students, bank officers and government workers. The military has imposed restrictions, including curfews and limits to gatherings. Security forces have used water cannon, rubber bullets and live ammunition to try to disperse protesters. Hundreds of people have been killed while thousands have been injured, arrested, detained and disappeared. Ms Aung San Suu Kyi has been held at an unknown location since the coup. She is facing various charges, including violating the country's official secrets act, possessing illegal walkie-talkies and publishing information that may cause fear or alarm.



*A protester holds up a sign denouncing Myanmar military chief General Min Aung Hlaing during a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon on February 6, 2021. (AFP)*

The outlook for democracy in Myanmar also is bleak. Mr. Min Aung Hlaing claims that the electoral roll was compromised and the election commission was not taking seriously complaints of voter fraud and other irregularities. He has sought to make out that his actions were constitutional and has said fresh elections will be held after a yearlong state of emergency. Few people in Myanmar share his assessment or support his actions.

The current political development in Myanmar has put China's involvement in questions. Rampant rumors circulating on social media continue to pinpoint Beijing as the culprit supporting the coup, and interpret anything related to China or the Chinese people as signs of China's interference. Protesters in Yangon have gathered near the imposing red doors of the Chinese embassy in the city, denouncing China for what they say is its support of the military coup. In addition, the protesters testified China's failure to take a strong stand against the coup. Anti-Chinese sentiment has risen rapidly in Myanmar over Beijing's stand at the U.N. Security Council (UNSC). Pro-democracy activists in the country have called for opposition to all Chinese projects in Myanmar. Some have even called for China's twin oil



*Protesters call for Beijing to stop supporting the military junta during a demonstration outside the Chinese embassy in Yangon last week. Photo: Kyodo*

and gas pipelines in the country to be blown up in response to Beijing's stance at the UN. China has repeatedly denied its support of the military coup and considered it's a politically-motivated accusation and unacceptable. However, it isn't clear that the Chinese government was directly or indirectly involved. After all, China had built a healthy working relationship with the government that was overthrown. It's important to view in an objective way on what has been going on in Myanmar and what China has done.

Myanmar is state born as a military occupation. The military has been the most powerful institution in the country since its independence from Britain in 1948. The military enjoyed unchecked control over the country's political scene from the very beginning. Later in 2008, the military single-handedly drafted a new constitution which preserved the military's control over the government by reserving 25 percent of all seats in national and local parliaments for serving military officials. This arrangement also gave the Tatmadaw the de facto power to veto any constitutional reforms put forward by civilian legislators.



*General Min Aung Hlaing, Photo: AFP*

Under the new constitution, which is still in force today, the military also maintained its control over the country's mining, oil and gas industries, thus ensuring a continuous flow of resources. This arrangement gave the Tatmadaw complete financial independence, and allowed it to easily resist any international and domestic calls for reform for years. The military's sustained repression

of ethnic minority groups fighting for basic citizenship rights and tendency to imprison any activist, journalist or politician resisting its authority led to it losing significant public support over the years. Nevertheless, the Tatmadaw still enjoys some appeal in Myanmar as "the defender of national sovereignty" against perceived external and domestic threats. For these reasons, it is difficult to link Tatmadaw's actions with external intervention.

Myanmar has been a Western democracy promotion project for decades and had been a symbol of some success. But over the past several years, there have been growing concerns about its backsliding into authoritarianism. Disappointment with Ms Aung San Suu Kyi, the former opposition leader, has run high, especially over her resistance to reining in repression of Rohingya Muslims. Widely celebrated by the international community, mostly the Western world, for her pro-democracy campaigning, Ms Aung San Suu Kyi has received numerous awards including the Nobel Peace Prize in October 1991. Her former international supporters accused her of doing nothing to stop rape, murder and possible genocide by refusing to condemn the still powerful military or acknowledge accounts of atrocities. The Westerners seemed not to know her real power in Myanmar since the three key ministries - home affairs, defence, and border affairs were under the control of the military.

As elaborated by the Philippines' foreign affairs secretary, the Western world destroyed Ms Aung San Suu Kyi and made her a victim of the military. The West's contentious role in the Middle East affairs and the effects of colonialism in present day Myanmar should not be overlooked. The West institutions have weakened Ms Aung San Suu Kyi's position with the military, they have torn her down. Now the military saw this woman has



*Myanmar's Nobel Peace Prize winner Ms Aung San Suu Kyi Photo: Soe Zeya Tun / Reuters*

nothing. She has no name, she has no reputation, it's time to get her out of the way, that's what happened. They tore her to pieces and so where is she now? And where is Myanmar's democracy? Ten steps forward – just for the liberals in the United States to feel good tearing down a woman, they have gone 20 steps back for Myanmar's democracy.”



*Aung San Suu Kyi and Myanmar's Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. Photo: EPA*

As for China, it is in a difficult position. Its refusal to explicitly condemn the military coup has made China the target of public anger in Myanmar, but exerting more pressure might look as though China is abandoning its traditional policy of non-interference in other countries' governments, and throwing its weight around. China has to be very cautious in its statements. However, after the coup, China supported a UNSC statement calling for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and demanding respect for human rights and the democratic transition in the country.

The Chinese ambassador to Myanmar also clarified that “the current development in Myanmar is absolutely not what China wants to see,” and called for a peaceful resolution of the problems in Myanmar. He also dismissed rumors that China had aided the military, saying he hoped people could “distinguish right from wrong and guard against political manipulation, so as to avoid undermining the friendship between the two peoples.”

It’s worthy noting that on November 16, 2020, General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee Xi Jinping sent a message to Aung San Suu Kyi to congratulate her on the NLD’s victory. Xi Jinping pointed out in his message that China and Myanmar are good neighbors linked by mountains and rivers and sharing a profound pauk-phaw (fraternal) friendship. Xi Jinping recalled that during his successful state visit to Myanmar early this year, the two sides agreed to jointly build a China-Myanmar community with a shared future, ushering in a new era of bilateral relations. Xi stressed that the close and friendly exchanges between the CPC and the NLD have played an important part in the healthy and steady development of China-Myanmar relations, and that China attaches great importance to developing relations between the two parties and between the two countries.



*Myanmar State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi (L) and Chinese President Xi Jinping pose for the media before a meeting at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing on August 19, 2016. Photo: Reuters*

Geopolitically, China is the biggest loser from this coup, China has done to improve its image over the past five years working with the NLD has all gone to waste. China’s relations improved significantly when Myanmar’s NLD formed a government. Its de facto leader, Ms Aung San Suu Kyi, was regarded as a stable and reliable partner. Along with Singapore, China is Myanmar’s main commercial partner and a leading provider of foreign direct investment.

Ms Aung San Suu Kyi was a frequent visitor to Beijing and talked up the need to pursue friendly relations with China for Myanmar’s economic development. The NLD government signed up to China’s plans for infrastructure projects worth billions of dollars, called the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. The Y-shaped network of roads, railways and special economic zones.

The Aung San Suu Kyi-led government was keen to develop the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. A number of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects, including the New Yangon City Project and the China-Myanmar border economic cooperation zones, were signed after NLD won the 2015 election. After Xi’s visit to Myanmar in January 2020, more BRI

projects, including the strategic Kunming-Kyaukphyu high-speed railway that serves as China's shortcut to the Indian Ocean, are under negotiation. So, instability in Myanmar is bad for China's flagship project, the BRI.

The Chinese Embassy in Myanmar has for the first time spoken with members of a committee representing elected lawmakers from the ousted NLD government, amid Beijing's repeated calls for all parties in its southern neighbor to seek a political resolution to the current crisis through dialogue. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said in March that China would not change its course of promoting bilateral friendship and cooperation, no matter how the situation evolves in Myanmar. He said Beijing would however try to bring about reconciliation by engaging with all relevant parties in the country.

China also values ASEAN central role to address the political crisis in Myanmar under the "ASEAN way" featuring unity, inclusiveness and consensus through consultations, building unified ground and making a common voice, so as to further demonstrate to the international community that ASEAN has enough political wisdom and collective will to provide Myanmar with constructive assistance, and has enough political courage to safeguard regional peace and stability, as well as the bloc's solidarity and cooperation.

On 24 April 2021, ASEAN held its much-anticipated emergency summit to address the ongoing crisis in Myanmar. At the end of the meeting, leaders from the 10 ASEAN member states, including Myanmar's junta leader Sen. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, established five points of consensus about the Myanmar crisis. First, that there should be "an immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar"; second, that the parties in Myanmar should seek a peaceful solution to the crisis via "constructive dialogue"; third, that Brunei, this year's ASEAN Chair, will appoint a special envoy to mediate in the Myanmar crisis; fourth, that ASEAN will provide humanitarian assistance to the country; and fifth, that the special envoy will travel to Myanmar to meet with all parties in the crisis.



*ASEAN Leaders' Meeting in Jakarta, Indonesia 24 April 2021, Photo: SPM Page*

It is hoped that the consensus will effectively promote the de-escalation of the Myanmar situation, and ASEAN's taking the initiative in the matter as "the most proper and justifiable

body” would avert intervention by the West. Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi commented on the talks, calling them “timely and important,” during his telephone conversations with the leaders of Thailand and Brunei. According to a statement issued by China’s Foreign Ministry, Wang described Myanmar as an important member of the “ASEAN family” and said he was pleased to see and support the bloc’s efforts to maintain its “non-interference” principle while playing a positive role in promoting Myanmar’s stability of the situation in Myanmar through the “ASEAN approach.”

In this light, it’s not very logical, pragmatic and arguable to try to link Myanmar’s military coup with outside involvement without carefully examining the country’s domestic political backgrounds. Thus, to effectively address political crisis in Myanmar, one should place importance of ASEAN’s unity, centrality and good office. The ASEAN five-point consensus was an important step to peaceful resolution and paving the way to bring all parties concerned to negotiation table. ASEAN cannot force its members accept any scenarios for their crisis but call for peaceful resolution.

The options and scenarios for lasting peace, security and stability as well as transition to democracy importantly depend on Myanmar's leaders and people themselves. Everyone should have equal share in peace process and transition to democracy in the country. It’s time for Myanmar to deal with their differences based on national unity, peace, security, political stability, prosperity and people’s well-being or their country will be divided and fall under civil war and geopolitical trap.

The external powers should be objective and impartial, and stay out of the crisis but support ASEAN to constructively participate in Myanmar’s domestic reconciliation process in the ASEAN way, and push for the easing and cooling down of the Myanmar situation. The Western powers' empty rhetoric is making things worse for Myanmar's people. Westerners who have been criticising Ms Aung San Suu Kyi are partly responsible for today’s events. The Lady is not perfect and she was trying hard, but not hard enough for some Westerners who wish to apply their own standards on everybody else.