

## Myanmar Update – 15 February 2021

### Summary

- The Myanmar coup will likely lead to escalating civil resistance and a consequent heavy-handed military response.
- The military will continue to expand control over the internet – leading to frequent “blackouts”
- Monitoring the human rights situation as well as providing aid and development support will become increasingly difficult in the months ahead.

### Background to the November 2020 Elections

Myanmar experienced five years of relative political stability after the Tatmadaw (Myanmar Armed Forces) handed power to State Counsellor (a position roughly analogous to Prime Minister) Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD) following the November 2015 elections – which ended almost 50 years of military rule. Even then, however, the Tatmadaw retained substantial power, including the right to appoint a quarter of parliamentarians and control of key ministries.

Elections to both Myanmar’s upper house - Amyotha Hluttaw - and lower house - Pyithu Hluttaw – took place on 8 November 2020. Suu Kyi’s NLD won a popular landslide, taking 161 (of the 224) seats in the Amyotha Hluttaw and 315 (of the 440) in the Pyithu Hluttaw, an even larger margin than in 2015. This equated to 83% of the available seats, while the Tatmadaw’s proxy, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), won a total of just 33 seats. The USDP immediately began making accusations of fraud after the vote although the Union Election Commission said there was no proof to support these claims and there has been little or no independent evidence either.

The Tatmadaw also disputed the results, claiming that the vote was fraudulent, perhaps fearing that the NLD, with its majority, would amend the constitution to reduce the Tatmadaw’s political influence – a longstanding NLD campaign pledge. However, the NLD would have been unlikely in practice to do so as it would have required the support of 75% of the parliament – i.e., **all** the non-military parliamentarians.

There is also evidence that the Tatmadaw feared greater opening-up of the country and viewed the timing – with the country’s Rohingya Muslim minority either expelled or disenfranchised and the COVID-19 pandemic limiting global action on other issues – as opportune. Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing may also have feared that his lack of a clear role as a political leader could have exposed him to potential prosecution and accountability for alleged war crimes during the Rohingya conflict.

### Aftermath of the November 2020 Elections

On 1 February 2021, after several days of rumours over an impending coup d'état the Tatmadaw finally declared the results to be illegitimate and deposed Suu Kyi and President Win Myint. 400 elected members of parliament were placed under house arrest at a government housing complex in the capital city, Naypyidaw. This move took place on the day before Parliament was due to swear in the members elected at the November polls, preventing this from occurring. The Tatmadaw has since declared a year-long state of emergency and declared that power has been vested in Min Aung Hlaing.

Aung San Suu Kyi was detained on the morning of 01 February and has since been charged with possession of illegally imported hand-held two-way radios – a ‘crime’ that potentially carries a two-year prison sentence. She has not been seen publicly since her arrest. Win Htein, another senior LTD figure, was detained at his Yangon home early on 05 February. Their whereabouts are currently unknown although Win Htein managed to call the BBC before he was removed from his home, telling them that he was being taken to Naypyidaw and accused of sedition – a charge which carries a life sentence. Social media has been used to coordinate a campaign of civil disobedience that saw health workers walk out of hospitals on 03 February in protest at the army’s actions. Some civil servants have also refused to work. There have also been coordinated evening protests. The following day, the army began blocking access to Facebook (a popular means of communication, used by half of Myanmar’s 53 million people), Instagram and WhatsApp for 96 hours as the extent of civil disobedience continued to grow. Indeed, 04 February saw the first street protests against the military in the city of Mandalay.

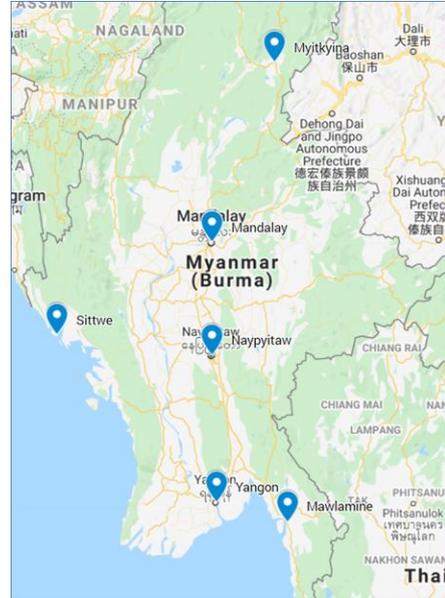


Figure 1 Sites of significant protests

Since then, protests have escalated further especially focused round the capital city, Naypyidaw, and Yangon – the largest city in Myanmar. The security forces are generally so far holding back from direct clashes with the crowds, although occasional sporadic

violence is occurring. In Yangon, the main area for protests is downtown around Sule Pagoda and Hledan junction, with several thousand protestors in each location in recent days. These areas have not, however, so far seen any notable violence although police have fired live ammunition over protestors' heads in Naypyidaw – where one woman was killed as a consequence on 09 February - and Myawadday. There have been no reported attacks on journalists so far.



Figure 2 Protests in Yangon

Despite an internet outage (0100hrs – 0800hrs local time) between 14 – 15 February, protests are continuing in Yangon and Mandalay – with reports of security forces using live fire to control crowds in Mandalay and reinforcing their presence in main cities including Yangon. Aung San Suu Kyi has now been remanded in custody until Wednesday 17 February, whilst the security forces are continuing to focus on nightly country wide raids against NLD and other opposition group leaders – with currently around 400 in custody. The Tatmadaw are also reported to have reinforced key infrastructure points throughout the country, including power plants – leading to a clash with demonstrators in Myitkyina, Kachin state.

**Predictions**

- **Coordinated action in the name of the UN is all but impossible:** United Nations Secretary General António Guterres has vowed to increase international pressure to ensure the

outcome of the vote is respected, describing the coup as “absolutely unacceptable after elections – elections that I believe took place normally – and after a large period of transition.” However, on 03 February, Russia and China blocked a common statement by the UN Security Council which condemned the coup and would have demanded the military “immediately release” those detained. Neighbours including Cambodia, Thailand and the Philippines, also called the coup an “internal matter”. The new US administration, however, described the situation as “a priority” and has said it is reviewing possible sanctions in response. The European Union is weighing similar actions. This suggests that coordinated action in the name of the UN is all but impossible and any political or economic moves will take time and come as a result of piecemeal discussions between Western powers and blocs.

- **Targeted sanctions suggested as renewed separatist action becomes all but certain:** Sanctions from the late 1990s onwards devastated an already failing economy as well as deterring foreign investment, tourism and commerce. Although more targeted sanctions - aimed at military-linked enterprises – are now being suggested, the Tatmadaw is now so deeply entrenched in the economy, that the line between its own businesses and others is almost impossible to determine. In addition, Western leaders fear pushing the country closer to China, at a time when tensions with Beijing are already high and rising. Furthermore, moves by Suu Kyi to restart peace talks with ethnic separatist groups announced on 01 January now seem doomed, meaning resumption of significant separatist violence is all but certain.
- **Any international support for Suu Kyi or the NLD is likely to be far less vocal and on a far smaller scale:** Although Suu Kyi is revered by the majority Bamar ethnic group, her international reputation has been severely undermined by her decision to defend the Tatmadaw (and its Buddhist militia proxies) against allegations of genocide against the country’s Rohingya Muslim minority. Suu Kyi’s reputation was the key reason why aid and investment poured into Myanmar after 2015, so her lack of compassion for the Rohingya – and in particular her personal leadership of the country’s 2019 defence at the International Court of Justice in The Hague – combined with her autocratic approach to power, has outraged the international community. This means that any international support for her or the NLD is likely to be far less vocal and on a far smaller scale than would have been the case after the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize winner took *de facto* leadership of the country in 2016.
- **The Tatmadaw’s seizure of power is likely to provoke gradually escalating resistance:** The Tatmadaw’s seizure of power and any heavy-handed response to the immediate protests is likely to provoke escalating resistance from millions of people who placed Suu Kyi and the NLD in power for in another term. Indeed, Suu Kyi herself urged NLD supporters to “protest against the coup”. Sedition charges against key NLD figures could inflame this further. As the popular protests gain traction, the Tatmadaw is, however, likely to continue using violence and mass arrests, as well as curbing travel into the country. All this is likely to make monitoring the human rights situation - as well as providing aid and development support in even the most benign parts of Myanmar – increasingly difficult in the weeks and months ahead. It will also have a further adverse effect on the already dire decline in exports, remittances, and tourist arrivals as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Further widescale arrests of opposition figures and local NLD members will increase:** Although the security forces have so far kept violence limited (as opposed to 2007) this is likely to increase in the medium term, along with wider arrests of opposition figures, as protests

continue. Indeed, on 14 February the army gave itself extensive powers to detain and search people and private property, including a 20-year prison term for inciting hatred of the government or military or hindering the security forces engaged in preserving state stability. It is highly likely that as protests increase (Yangon saw around hundred thousand protestors on 13 February), the Tatmadaw will become increasingly oppressive in their response. Their reinforcement of key infrastructure – such as power stations in northern Kachin state, and deployment of Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs) near Yangon’s central bank – points to future suppressive tactics, especially if protestors openly antagonise or confront security forces.

- **The Tatmadaw will continue to censor the internet with escalating “blackouts”:** The authorities have continued to extend control over the last two weeks, with increasing internet “blackouts” and control of online social media. This has also included proposing a cyber bill on 11 February, allowing a significant increase in online censorship including intercepting internet data and banning particular content. The law is likely to be passed given that the Tatmadaw now has control of parliament. Wider scale moves to censor social media are to be expected, especially as there is some evidence to suggest that China has sent technical experts to advise the Myanmar authorities on how to set up such restrictions.
- **COVID-19 will see a resurgence in Myanmar, leading to a wider scale infection rate:** With large numbers of people protesting, the rates of COVID-19 infection are highly likely to increase, despite mask wearing. Many medical personnel are either joining in the protests or on strike so the death rate is likely to grow, compounded by the current travel controls into and out of Myanmar. Indeed, a delivery of the Astra-Zeneca / Oxford vaccine was refused over the weekend, indicating that a planned vaccine roll out will be delayed.

#### Scenarios:

1. **Violence and protests** will escalate within the next few weeks, leading to further oppressive moves by the security forces. This will see arrests spread to local INGO staff, and also local journalists.
2. The Tatmadaw will look to **“divide and rule”** Myanmar’s political parties, with increasing numbers of ethnic political parties - such as the Kayin People’s Party (KPP) or the Mon Unity Party (MUP) – opting to join the State Administration Council (SAC – administration of the new military government).
3. **INGOs will find it increasingly difficult** to ensure apolitical distribution of humanitarian supplies / aid as the Tatmadaw widen suppression tactics.

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