

Military Coup: The Myanmar-China Nexus

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*Myanmar has reverted to military rule. Claiming allegations of election fraud as basis for a coup the military has detained top civilian leaders of the former government, including the **State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi** who was head of government and the President, **Win Myint**. And many others including the student protesters that had brought Suu Kyi's National League of Democracy (NLD) to share power with the military in a transition to democracy. On 1st February 2021 this ended and the military regime has announced a one year long national emergency before holding another election.*

Meanwhile, while in power, the Nobel Peace Laureate, Suu Kyi, walked a tightrope of appeasement. She appeared in defence of her government before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against charges of genocide of the Rohingyas, an ethnic group robbed of its citizenship, denied its human rights and subject to ethnic cleansing by the Myanmar military. While some accuse her of racist prejudices towards the Rohingyas for her inactions, as head of government she was in no position to admit to the world that she had little control of the army, very much a part of her government.

Today that is a proven fact despite her best efforts. And to make matters worse the military government has charged her with crimes to legally silence her. The November elections demonstrated her continued popularity among the people, her waning international support notwithstanding. Suu Kyi held fast to her struggle for democracy in Myanmar but the compromises forced on her did much to damage her reputation but helped little in democratising the military.

There is an outcry against the coup in Myanmar, which some of them prefer to call Burma despite the now widely received name encompassing the country's sovereignty. It is this hegemonic tendency by certain western nations that many find offensive.

In this regard, therefore, the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs of sovereign nations by Beijing is much appreciated, while yet bringing shared prosperity. Myanmar especially has had relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) for 70 years, most of it years of military rule in Myanmar. China's support had kept successive military regimes in power. Only very recently have there been any problems between Myanmar and China when the civil war in Myanmar spilled over into the Chinese province of Yunnan, which shares a border with Myanmar. But even this is under control.

So when China refused to interfere with the recent Myanmarese reversion to military rule in the UN Security Council, it was no surprise. Inasmuch as relations were good with the NLD government the indications are that nothing will change. China is heavily invested in Myanmar as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Myanmar will provide it with a port that

can overcome the risks of Strait of Melaka congestions, imposed and otherwise.

As such, Myanmar has strategic value to China. Supporting Myanmarese sovereignty is also important to its security. The shared border is of immeasurable importance to China given the presence of the surrounding US bases intended to encircle her as part of the US's Asian pivot policy. Maybe its plausible to believe that an army on standby is more attractive to Beijing than a civilian government propped up by the West on its borders.

Losing Myanmar as part of the Indo-Chinese buffer zone, too, is surely not a palatable option. Vietnam is already an illogical development for China where the US is being welcomed back even before the pervasive damage of the Vietnam War has yet to be fully repaired. Granted a thousand years of Chinese colonialism is not easily forgiven by the Vietnamese but the US damage caused by intensive bombing and harrowing Agent Orange deformities still persisting many decades after the war is even more horrifying. Hence China's wariness of its borders.

Myanmar is showing risks of prolonged instability. Just over a week since the military coup the protests are escalating in the country's two main cities Yangon and Mandalay. The police are using water cannons and protesters are being detained. It is claimed by the international media there is more demonstration of concern about the loss of democracy in Myanmar worldwide. But one wonders why a general can rule in Egypt and not in Myanmar?

Meanwhile, reports from Bangladesh suggests that the Rohingya refugees are happy to see the end of Aung San Suu Kyi's rule. While the Dhaka Tribune piece cautions the Rohingyas, thus far, however, history has shown that repatriation in the past happened during military rule. The military has, in fact, immediately after the coup, reached out to the Rohingyas in Rakhine state. China is the only power to have offered a substantive contribution to the resolution of the Rohingya problem. It has offered to play an overseeing role in a tripartite arrangement to repatriate the Rohingyas where China can hold to account both sides. Such a move indicates the special relationship between China and Myanmar irrespective of who governs.

Of course, now that China is heavily invested in Myanmar vis-a-vis its BRI policy, debilitating political instability in its neighbour is something China will give its all to prevent. Its refusal to act against Myanmar in the UN Security Council is a strong signal that China still has Myanmar's back. That Russia has stood by China in this respect suggests an unwavering strategic alliance between these two super powers.

Myanmar as a member nation of ASEAN is unlikely to be under pressure from the other members. Like China the organisation holds dear the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of its members. Rather, this regional organisation exercises constructive engagement as the means to resolve any and all contradictions. This has been the position it has always held regarding Myanmar. There was no aversion to the military junta of old and, in all likelihood, the stance will remain unchanged.

Which time has shown that China is comfortable with. While there maybe protests that are escalating at the moment its further escalation will most likely be too reminiscent of Hong Kong and Thailand.

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