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MYANMAR'S GENERALS RECOUP

THE RECURRENCE OF MILITARY-DEFINED "DISCIPLINED DEMOCRACY"

Myanmar's generals cited election fraud as the motive behind their coup. However, as the country's transition during the past decade has been rooted in military-orchestrated "disciplined democracy", the real drivers behind the coup are likely different.

On 1 February, just before the first scheduled parliamentary session since last autumn's election, Myanmar's military, known as the Tatmadaw, staged a coup. The takeover reversed a cautious process of democratization that started in 2011, when former military officers put in place a nominally civilian government.

As part of the coup, the Tatmadaw, led by Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing, detained Aung San Suu Kyi. State Counsellor since 2016, she was widely considered to be the de facto leader of the civilian government. After the coup, the Tatmadaw appointed a senior general as acting president, declared a year-long state of emergency, and promised future elections in order

to establish a "genuine and discipline-flourishing multiparty democratic system".

Why did the Myanmar military step in, undoing a decade-long process of seemingly opening up towards more democracy? As the official motive behind the coup, the military contended that the 8 November election, which ended in a landslide victory for Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) with over 80% of the votes, was rife with fraud. But it is likely that the key drivers behind the coup were different.

First and foremost, it needs to be kept in mind that the reforms during the past decade never aimed to set the country on a path towards Western-style liberal democracy.

Myanmar's political system remained based on a military-created "disciplined democracy", with a strong emphasis on the former of these two concepts. The military has always seen itself as custodian of the state, and the only possible guarantor of unity and stability in this extremely diverse country.

One key aim of the military's "Road map to disciplined democracy", launched in 2003, was to entrench the role of the Tatmadaw in the state structure, which materialized with the 2008 constitution. The charter determined a guaranteed 25% of parliamentary seats for the military and an ensuing veto right over constitutional amendments, and guaranteed power over the three key ministerial posts of

Defence, Home Affairs, and Border Affairs. For the Tatmadaw, reconsolidating control over the entire state apparatus was also “legal”, citing the military’s threefold duty to safeguard national integration, solidarity, and sovereignty.

One key reason for the coup was the uneasy cohabitation between the Tatmadaw and the NLD in general, and between Min Aung Hlaing and Aung San Suu Kyi in particular. November’s humiliating electoral defeat was greater than the military and its proxy party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), had expected, and the NLD’s overwhelming popularity may have led to perceptions of dwindling control.

In addition, the NLD’s bold attempts in 2019–2020 to rewrite the constitution and demilitarize state institutions likely aggravated the military’s distrust. Furthermore, the coup gave Min Aung Hlaing, the protégé of Myanmar’s former dictator Than Shwe, the chance to cling to power and possibly even realize his self-proclaimed ambition to become president, as he was destined to retire this year.

Reconsolidating control over relations with China and, relatedly, the economy, was ostensibly another factor behind the coup. China is Myanmar’s largest trade

partner, accounting for one-third of the total volume. As recently as 2020, the NLD government under Aung San Suu Kyi signed 33 agreements with Beijing on investment and trade. China has financed oil and gas pipelines from Kyaukpyu on Myanmar’s Indian Ocean coast to Yunnan in China, as part of the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor, itself part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The development of the Kyaukpyu deep-water port gives Beijing vital access to the Indian Ocean.

While growing economically and diplomatically closer to Beijing, Myanmar has historically been committed to an independent foreign policy. This has been fuelled by feelings of distrust and lingering negative images of China, in addition to the fallout of environmental damage and the displacement of local populations as a result of China-funded projects. The coup may therefore also be aimed at taking back control as regards relations with Beijing. This would entail preserving close ties in terms of trade, investment, infrastructure, and diplomatic support while striving for maximum profit for Myanmar’s military-owned corporate conglomerates, but maintaining a balanced course with regard to China’s influence in Myanmar.

As a result of the coup, it seems likely that the US and the EU will impose sanctions. Overall, sanctions, including targeted or smart sanctions such as those affecting separate individuals, specific sectors of the economy, or diplomatic sanctions such as visa bans, are likely to have little effect in reversing the coup. As the decades in the run-up to 2011 showed, EU smart sanctions imposed on Myanmar did not harm the leadership significantly, but brought about a “bunker mentality” and strengthened military unity. More importantly, China was happy to continue business as usual, further increasing Beijing’s clout over neighbouring Myanmar.

Nevertheless, sanctions perform an important signal function, stigmatizing Myanmar and reducing the country’s international legitimacy, and are also a clear sign of moral support for the opposition and pro-democracy groups. Furthermore, smart sanctions would need to be complemented by inducements and promises of rewards. At any rate, and particularly in light of the US–China rivalry, dialogue and pragmatic engagement with Myanmar’s military regime may need to be part of the strategic bargaining in order for the West to have an impact on future developments in Myanmar. /