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Asia in 2021: In the grip of global and local crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

viella



CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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MYANMAR 2021: REPRESSION AND RESISTANCE
IN A MULTI-CORNERED CONFLICT

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The parliamentary elections of November 2020 which were won – once again – in a landslide by the National League for Democracy (NLD) were followed by three months of mounting tensions between the winning party and the Tatmadaw (the armed forces) and its party affiliate. On 1 February 2021, Myanmar’s military deposed and arrested the sitting President and the State Counsellor, installing a junta which was quickly renamed the State Administration Council. This was Myanmar’s fourth coup in its post-independence history. Demonstrations and protests erupted across the country’s cities and villages in a nation-wide mass-opposition to the military intervention and its contempt for popular will as expressed in the elections. What followed was a combination of repression and resistance. An anti-coup movement initially dominated by NLD figures gradually turned into a more diverse social coalition, a more accurate expression of the country’s diversity and plural identities and interests. The military cracked down with increasing brutality. After a year of clashes, neither the Tatmadaw nor the National Unity Government had full control over either the people or the territory; neither could deliver services. A deadly stalemate emerged, with neither side willing to compromise, and with hardly any space for dialogue, each side denying the legitimacy of the other. The events of 2021 serve as stark and painful reminders that earlier characterisations of Myanmar along binaries (democracy versus authoritarianism, centre versus periphery) were misguided. This is a multi-cornered conflict. International response was split between Russia, which was supportive of the generals, China, which had good working relations with Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD government, and a western response framed around condemnations and sanctions, which, however, were largely ineffective.

KEYWORDS – Myanmar; sanctions; junta; military; coup; resistance; protests; repression; State Administration Council; National Unity Government.

1. Introduction

The decade from 2011 to 2021 was characterised by an unexpected, uneven and unequal – and ultimately short-lived – political liberalisation in Myanmar. References from western policymakers, the media and some academics to the country’s alleged democracy and democratic transition were entirely out of place in a context in which the 2008 Constitution

reserved key veto powers to the military. Indeed, what was genuine was an uneasy cohabitation between the civilian administration and the military. The events in that decade can best be understood as an instance of authoritarian resilience, defined here as «the ability of an authoritarian regime to adapt to liberalising shocks without having to suffer an authoritarian breakdown».¹

Either out of miscalculation or a belief in its own impunity, on 1 February 2021 the military decided to intervene by removing president Myint Win and State Counsellor and Minister of Foreign Affairs Aung San Suu Kyi from office, detaining and charging them with various criminal offences, widely regarded as entirely preposterous.² The move was accompanied by the introduction of emergency measures which led to the installation of a State Administration Council (SAC), consisting of military and civilian appointees, as the caretaker authority.

What followed was a wave of mass protests and strikes involving hundreds of thousands of citizens and the emergence of a nationwide civil disobedience movement. In a striking departure from earlier waves of political contention, the 2021 disobedience movement crossed ethnic and religious divides.

At the risk of oversimplification, the anti-coup movement relied on three key pillars/prongs: (a) mass protests and the civil disobedience movement; (b) the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, namely the national parliament (CRPH,); and (c) the National Unity Government (NUG). Taken together, they formed a coalition of social forces in the pursuit of a «revolution», initially framed as a return to the status quo ante, and later, increasingly the removal of the military regime and the establishment of an actual democracy. Compared to previous anti-coup movements, the opposition was bolstered by a greater degree of inclusion of minority groups.³

Despite the early optimism that the military would treat protesters less violently, the demonstrators and the wider public were confronted with the sheer brutality of the military crackdown. Repression involved the use of live ammunition against protesters, random overnight killings and visits to people's homes. The National Unity Government announced on 7 September 2021 that it would start a «people's defensive war» against the junta.

The political stalemate continued for the rest of the year. Militarily, neither side seemed to be able to gain the upper hand. The military did not

1. Stefano Ruzza, Giuseppe Gabusi & Davide Pellegrino, 'Authoritarian resilience through top-down transformation: making sense of Myanmar's incomplete transition,' *Italian Political Science Review*, 49, 2019, p. 194.

2. The trials of Aung San Suu Kyi, from heroine to villain to convict', *Reuters*, 6 December 2021.

3. Kai Ostwald & Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 'Myanmar's pro-democracy movement', *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, 30, 2021.

signal any intention to enter into dialogue with the NUG, instead declaring it a terrorist organisation and intensifying repression.

This article is structured as follows. First, it briefly revisits the events of February 2021 with a focus on the coup, its drivers and its aftermath. After mapping the diversity of the opposition movements, it turns to the economic fallout of the crisis, before finally delving into its international dimensions.

2. *Domestic politics*

On 1 February 2021, just hours before the inauguration of the new parliament,⁴ where NLD deputies were expected to constitute the majority, Myint Swe, one of the country's two vice-presidents, appointed by the military, announced that Myanmar's president U Win Myint and State Counselor and Foreign Minister Aung San Suu Kyi had been detained and deposed. A series of charges that were widely perceived as politically-motivated (possessing walkie-talkies, campaigning during the pandemic, instilling fear in the population) were made in the ensuing weeks. Emergency measures were introduced whereby Myint Swe himself would become acting president and the armed forces would take over the legislative, executive and judicial powers. A State Administration Council (SAC) comprised of eight military officers and nine civilians was announced on 2 February 2021.⁵ On 1 August 2021, the management committee of the SAC was renamed as a «care-taker government» – and the use of the term «junta» was banned – with Senior General and junta leader Min Aung Hlaing appointed prime minister.

Protests against the military takeover began in the immediate aftermath of the coup in Yangon, Myanmar's main commercial and cultural city, and then spread across the country. The demonstrations – initially raucous but also rather hopeful as a result of the belief that the military would retreat to the barracks – met instead a tragic fate. The Tatmadaw's initial restraint (relatively speaking, as it still used water cannons and rubber bullets) was short lived. From 20 February onwards, it began a crackdown which, in the intervening months, became increasingly violent. By means of live ammu-

4. Parliamentary elections were held on 8 November. On the results, see Matteo Fumagalli, 'Myanmar 2020: Elections in a pandemic', *Asia Maior*, XXXI/2020, pp. 259-274.

5. The SAC was later expanded to include more technocrats. For a profile and background of the members of the SAC, see Htet Myet Min Tue, Moe Thuzar & Michael Montesano, 'Min Aung Hlaing and His Generals: Data on the Military Members of the Myanmar State Administration Council Junta,' *ISEAS Perspectives*, Vol. 97, 2021; Htet Myet Min Tun, Moe Thuzar & Michael Montesano, 'An Attempt to lead Myanmar back to the future? Data on the State Administration Council Regime's Union Ministers,' *ISEAS Perspectives*, Vol. 137, 2021.

nitition and random killings, the armed forces started to brutalise and terrorise the population, the protestors and the wider public alike.⁶ A committee representing the national parliament (CRPH), consisting of seventeen representatives of the lower and upper houses, was formed to ostensibly carry out the duties of the ousted legislature and ensure some continuity in government.

After a few months of protests and the mounting crackdown, a National Unity Government (NUG) was established on 16 April as a shadow government to provide more coordination and leadership. The NUG brought together NLD members as well as representative of other ethnic minority groups, such as the Kachin State People's Party, the Ta'ang National Party and the Kayah State Democratic Party.⁷ With many of its members in hiding and others abroad, the NUG operated de facto as a government in exile. The NUG was soon declared illegal by the SAC, which later branded it a «terrorist organisation».⁸ On 5 May, the NUG announced the formation of the People's Defense Forces, which was in practice an attempt to coordinate what had been uncoordinated attacks against military personnel and property across the country as the conflict moved rapidly from the political arena to the battlefield. The announcement of a «defensive war» (in practical terms, an insurgency, departing from decades of non-violent resistance to military rule) by NUG vice-president and de facto leader Duwa Lashi La on 7 September further escalated tensions,⁹ suggesting the country was about to descend into an all-out civil war.

Aung San Suu Kyi and Win Myint were both charged with several criminal offences in the weeks and months following the coup. The accusations often looked preposterous, ranging from the alleged illegal importation of walkie-talkies to the violation of COVID-19 rules – which the NLD government had itself introduced – during the electoral campaign. The sham trials continued throughout the year, with Suu Kyi facing a possible sentence of over one hundred years in prison if found guilty. The first verdicts were announced in December, when she was sentenced to four years, which was immediately reduced to two owing to a pardon by the junta leader.¹⁰

6. International Crisis Group, *The cost of the coup: Myanmar edges towards state collapse*, Briefing 167, Yangon/Brussels, 1 April 2021.

7. 'Who's who in Myanmar's National Unity Government,' *The Irrawaddy*, 16 April 2021.

8. 'Myanmar junta brands rival government «terrorist group»,' *Reuters*, 8 May 2021.

9. 'Myanmar shadow government calls for uprising against military,' *Al Jazeera*, 7 September 2021. David Scott Mathieson, 'Myanmar's shadow government formally declares war,' *Asia Times*, 7 September 2021. Anthony Davis, 'Loading up for a wider war in Myanmar,' *Asia Times*, 7 September 2021.

10. 'Ousted Suu Kyi, President to serve sentences under house arrest: Myanmar junta,' *The Irrawaddy*, 7 December 2021.

Myanmar was in a political stalemate for the remainder of 2021.¹¹ As Richard Horsey correctly noted, the Myanmar military was strong enough to deploy violence and brutalise its population but not strong enough to control all territory (or the people) and to impose law and order, let alone a veneer of stability.¹² The anti-coup resistance movement was itself fractured, if perhaps less so than in previous iterations of the anti-military opposition, and sought to mobilise international support against what it regarded as an illegitimate regime. Yet it was also unable to control territory, and while it could in some cases inflict havoc and losses on the military, its chances of overthrowing the coup appeared to be remote.

2.1. *The drivers and timing of military intervention*

Tensions between the civilian authorities and the military in Myanmar were nothing new. In fact, they were epitomised, even exacerbated, by the clash of personalities between Aung San Suu Kyi and the Tatmadaw's Commander in Chief, senior general Min Aung Hlaing. Their personal relationship had deteriorated steadily after the NLD assumed office in 2016.

A turning point was the clash over a series of constitutional amendments, proposed by Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD in March 2020, which would have reduced the military's share of seats in the parliament.¹³ Other significant changes included the lowering of the two-thirds majority needed to amend the charter; and a proposal to require a civilian majority to choose the commander in chief. The opposition in the parliament from military appointees and the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which was closely aligned to the Tatmadaw, blocked all these initiatives.

As examined elsewhere in greater detail,¹⁴ the November 2020 elections returned another landslide victory for the NLD.¹⁵ The party won every seat in the Bamar-majority heartland of the country and even managed to gain more seats in the minority areas compared to 2015.¹⁶ The November elections confirmed Aung San Suu Kyi's undiminished star status in Myanmar at the end of a long and difficult year dominated by the pandemic and

11. International Crisis Group (ICG) 2021. *The deadline stalemate in post-coup Myanmar*, Asia Briefing 170, Yangon/Bangkok/ Brussels, 20 October 2021.

12. 'Richard Horsey on Myanmar seven months after the coup', *The Diplomat*, 1 September 2021.

13. 'Suu Kyi's party picks pre-election fight with Myanmar military', *Nikkei Asia*, 9 March 2020. Fumagalli, 'Elections in a pandemic.'

14. *Ibid.*

15. Moe Thuzar, 'Unpacking Myanmar's 2020 vote', *ADRN Research*, 7 December 2020.

16. Richard Horsey, 'Another landslide victory of Aung san Suu Kyi's party in Myanmar: but at what cost?', *International Crisis Group*, Q&A Asia, 12 November 2020.

the attempts to contain it. Above all, as Min Zin noted,¹⁷ the NLD's victory in 2020 was owed less to what the NLD stood for and more to what the party, and its leader in particular, «stood against», namely the military and a return to a direct military rule.¹⁸

During the electoral campaign, the army made it clear that it was unhappy with the status quo. The weeks following the elections were marked by ever-growing tensions, punctuated by recurrent, if unsubstantiated, allegations of widespread electoral fraud.¹⁹ The Union Elections Commission (UEC)'s decision to dismiss the army and its political wing's concerns (the USPD, which fared poorly in the elections) did not help maintain that apparent semblance of stability. The situation rapidly precipitated in late January 2021, when the army's leadership hinted at its return to power, first by raising the prospect of suspending the Constitution and then by weaponizing it to legitimate the removal of the civilian authorities and the introduction of emergency measures to preserve the union.

The drivers of the military intervention were manifold²⁰ but can – in brief – be summarised as follows. At its core, the military's sense of impunity (also to international prosecution) had been boosted in 2017 because the army's interests, individuals and entities were not touched by the measures taken by the international community in the aftermath of the anti-Rohingya ethnic cleansing operations in Rakhine state. Prior rounds of western sanctions had not prevented the enrichment of top military officials.²¹ The Tatmadaw also appeared to have misread the public mood. There may be several reasons for this, but an important and consequential one was the purge of the domestic intelligence services in 2004 during the Than Shwe era.²² Designed to prevent splits in the armed forces and possible challenges to the leadership, this move prevented the armed forces from grasping how hostile Myanmar's population was to the military and its protracted role in politics. Thus, the Tatmadaw may have considered the 2020 landslide for the NLD and crushing defeat for the USP as one public humiliation too many, followed by an uncompromising – if justified from a substantive point of view – stance by the Union Elections Commission which brushed aside any allegation of fraud raised by the military before and after the 2020 elections. The combative, at times conflictual and majoritarian approach of the ND deputies in the previous parliament appeared to bode ill for the

17. Min Zin, 'Myanmar still loves Aung San Suu Kyi, but not for the reasons you think,' *New York Times*, 23 November 2020.

18. Fumagalli, 'Myanmar 2020'.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Zoltan Barany, 'Burma: the generals strike back,' *Journal of Democracy*, 32, 2, 2001, pp. 22-36.

21. Lee Jones, *Societies under siege: exploring how international economic sanctions (do not) work*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

22. Wei Yang Aung, 'The day Myanmar's military intelligence chief was sacked,' *The Irrawaddy*, 19 October 2020.

military's interests. Last, but not least, were the personal ambitions of the Commander in Chief Min Aung Hlaing.²³ Rising to the higher levels of the Tatmadaw from a fairly humble background and without family links in the military, he was initially supposed to retire at the age of sixty in 2014, but this was postponed.²⁴ The year of his eventual retirement should have been 2021, but he had presidential ambitions (and presidential elections would have been held in the spring of 2021). Not keen on leaving the scene, Min Aung Hlaing had other, more ambitious plans for himself.

In essence, the cohabitation with the NLD government just did not work. Clearly, the lives of many in Myanmar had improved over the last decade. Yet the interests of the military were left untouched,²⁵ and Burmese-style «khaki capitalism» was not challenged by Suu Kyi's government.²⁶ Constitutional reform remained a remote prospect precisely because of the veto power the military had assigned itself in the 2008 Constitution.

2.2. *The domestic landscape: Beyond binaries*

The events of 2021 served as stark reminders that earlier characterisations of Myanmar along binaries (democracy vs authoritarianism, centre versus periphery), often prevalent in the media, were misguided. Myanmar's is a multi-cornered conflict, which lends itself neither to an easy understanding nor a quick resolution.

On the one side, of course, are the armed forces. The Tatmadaw has dominated the country for most of its post-1948 independence period.²⁷ It has carried out four coups, some relatively short-lived, at the end of which it returned power to civilian administrations (1958-1960), while in other cases, the armed forces stayed on for longer periods of time (1962-1974; 1988-2011). Over decades, it has created and strengthened parallel institutions to further embed its role in society and the economy. Separate healthcare and education for military personnel and their families has allowed only limited interactions with the civilian population. The Tatmadaw has controlled those aspects of society it deems essential to its own interests and the per-

23. On the origins of Min Aung Hlaing's presidential ambitions and the intra-military (factional) context see Paw Thun, 'Is Myanmar's junta leader's presidential dream about to come true?', *Irrawaddy*, 2 February 2022.

24. 'Myanmar junta scraps retirement age for its leaders', *The Irrawaddy*, 20 May 2021.

25. Fumagalli, 'Myanmar 2020.'

26. Gerard McCarthy, 'Military capitalism in Myanmar: Examining the origins, continuities and evolution of 'Khaki Capital', *ISEAS*, No. 6, 2021. Paul Chambers, 'Khaki Capital and Coups in Thailand and Myanmar,' *Current History*, Vol. 120, Issue 827, pp. 221-226. Giuseppe Gabusi, 'State, Market and Social Order: Myanmar's Political Economy Challenges,' *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2015, pp. 52-75.

27. David I. Steinberg 2021, 'On the longevity of Tatmadaw rule and influence in Burma/Myanmar,' *ISEAS Trends*, Vol 6, Singapore: ISEAS, 2021.

ceptions of state interests.²⁸ Even during the phase of political liberalisation, institutional power has been maintained by and through the 2008 Constitution. Overall, for more than half a century, it has commanded power and run the state, and it has been pivotal since the country's independence. It was dominant and in complete control over state coercion, prestige and heritage with a grip on all important aspects of society. The humiliating result of the 2020 Elections ran contrary to what the military had expected but its hegemonic position was not at risk. Infamous for their alleged cohesiveness and, of course, durability,²⁹ the armed forces have suffered some defections in the months following the coup, primarily of low-ranking officers. Tough the Tatmadaw's opacity and secrecy traditionally hinder a serious analysis of the armed forces, these defections do not appear to be on such a scale as to suggest major splits within Tatmadaw's ranks,³⁰ At the same time, despite being depicted as a monolithic organization, over the decades the armed forces have experienced splits and factionalism.³¹

At the same time, Myanmar changed significantly during the last decade. A vibrant civil society emerged. Internet access expanded considerably, facilitating the flow of information on the one hand, and the proliferation of fake news and abusive contents, as the Islamophobic slurs that were disseminated online prior to and during the Rohingya crisis clearly show. Civil service was recently taken out of military control. The Tatmadaw found itself

28. David I. Steinberg, 'History rhymes tragically in Myanmar,' *The Irrawaddy*, 26 March 2021.

29. Terence Lee, *Defect or Defend. Military responses to popular protests in Authoritarian Asia*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. Callahan, *Making Enemies*.

30. Lee and McCarthy have noted that a number of 'structural, sociological and organisational' factors at play after the coup could lead to the emergence of various new cleavages within the ranks of the Tatmadaw. Sanctions and post-coup economic restrictions are a case in point. The military-controlled conglomerates saw their partnerships and ventures with foreign investors reviewed and severed, impacting on their revenues, and also, more broadly, off-budget Tatmadaw financing and weapons acquisitions. Low and mid-rank families have also developed their own businesses in recent decades and, in light of the boycott of military-produced goods by the CDM, have found themselves unable to sell their products locally. Terence Lee and Gerard McCarthy, 'Are softliners the key to ending the crisis?', *Global Asia*, Vol. 16, Issue no. 1, March 2021, pp. 104-108.

31. Htet Myet Min Tun, 'Myanmar's State Administration Council: A Shell Entity?', *Fulcrum. Analysis on Southeast Asia*, 26 January 2022. Anders Kirstein Moeller, 'Peering under the hood: coup narratives and Tatmadaw factionalism', *Tea Circle Oxford*, 10 January 2022. Moeller in particular delves into the recurrent factional conflicts within the Tatmadaw, including the purges of 1961, Saw Maung's auto-coup in 1988, the 2004 purge of the intelligence faction led by Khin Nyunt and the fall-out between former President Thein Sein and Thura Shwe Mann. His critique of the prevailing views of the armed forces as a monolithic entity is valid. More research needs to be carried out on the splits, cleavages and factionalism within the Tatmadaw. I am grateful to one of the reviewers for raising the issue of intra-Tatmadaw factionalism.

confronting a much more diverse, better educated, connected and organised opposition compared to its earlier interventions.

The reaction to the coup reflects a shifting balance of forces within the opposition and Myanmar society as a whole, though not enough as the year came to an end, to reveal, encourage and deepen cleavages within the security forces, including the Tatmadaw and the police.³² In the early days of protests, the focus and the demands revolved primarily around the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and the restoration of the NLD government. As noted above, on 5 February 2021, the CRPH was established. Initially comprised mostly of NLD and Bamar members (fifteen), it gradually came to include representatives from other parties and ethnic minority groups. The CRPH nonetheless struggled with issues of legitimacy and inclusion, despite its attempts to portray itself as the continuation government. Subsequently, on 19 April the opposition forces launched the National Unity Government (NUG) in an attempt to broaden and legitimise the opposition to the SAC.

Built around the CRPH, the National Unity Government was, however, broader. Yet the CRPH and the NUG in their call to restore the status quo ante were clearly working within the (flawed) parameters of the 2008 constitution. Then towards the late spring, the direction and strategy of the anti-coup resistance began to change. Prasse-Freeman has referred to the resistance as «revolutionary forces» as the opposition began to call for the abolition of the constitution and the establishment of a federal democratic union.³³

Myanmar's opposition has always been fluid and fragmented, with ever-evolving plural identities, even when the NLD used to play a hegemonic role and despite Suu Kyi's commanding charismatic presence.³⁴ As mentioned, the plurality was more apparent this time, and a much greater segment of society was active and allowed to play a role in what was clearly more than simply a generational shift. The anti-coup resistance was evolving from being NLD-centred to a less NLD-centred approach. There were not only NLD members and Bamar citizens in the resistance but also non-Bamars, LGBTQ activists, the artist community, civil servants and many others. Crucially and precisely because it now reflects the diversity of Myanmar's society, the membership, agenda

32. While police officers and their families live within the community, the military (and their families) live isolated and insulated from society, separated even spatially in separate compounds, and attending different institutions (schools) or visiting different hospitals. Terence Lee and Gerard McCarthy, 'Are softliners the key to ending the crisis?', *Global Asia*, Vol. 16, Issue no. 1, March 2021, pp. 104-108.

33. Mael Raynaud, 'Asymmetrical federalism in Myanmar: a modern mandala system?', *ISEAS Perspective*, Vol. 155, 23 November 2021. Mael Raynaud, 'Asymmetric territorial arrangements and federalism in Myanmar,' *ISEAS Perspective*, Vol. 160, 3 December 2021. Htet Min Lwin, 'Federalism at the forefront of Myanmar's revolution', *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, 29, 2021.

34. Elliott Prasse-Freeman & Ko Kabya, 'Revolutionary responses to the Myanmar Coup,' *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 37, Issue no. 3, 2021, pp. 1-2.

and interests of the anti-coup resistance raised the question of the deeply engrained and embedded issues of inequalities and exclusion that have for long been associated with Myanmar. In 2021, there was a new attempt to articulate a vision of a new and inclusive Myanmar, which was built around solidarity across difference, class and ethnicity. Regionally, Generation Z established international linkages with the Milk Tea Alliance, a network of anti-authoritarian on- and offline activists in Hong Kong, Thailand and elsewhere across Southeast Asia. Discursively and technologically, the movement that emerged in 2021 was globally connected. Unlike earlier movements, it did not seek to have its activities broadcast on national television because it was already communicating globally directly itself and on its own terms. This was, indeed, a radical change.³⁵

Due to the violence of the military crackdown in the Bamar heartlands, the central belt running from north to south across the drylands began to resemble the country's periphery, which had long known and felt the brutality of the Tatmadaw. Additionally, the periphery itself was split in terms of its reaction to the coup.³⁶ As Loong aptly showed,³⁷ an overview of the reaction of the Ethnic Armed Organisations to the coup revealed the fragmentation of the situation in the borderlands. The Wa State Army, by far the largest and strongest EAO, remained mostly silent in a *modus vivendi* which suited its interests (the Tatmadaw never controlled its territory anyway). The Mon and Kayah State Democratic Party were seen as siding with the generals, perhaps in the hope of securing concessions. The Shan, the Kachin and Kayin, by contrast, sided more openly and vocally with the pro-democracy movement.

In sum, the domestic fallout from the 2021 coup invited observers of Myanmar's politics to move beyond a characterisation built around dichotomies and binaries. Myanmar was never a tale of democracy versus authoritarianism with two forms of illiberal and authoritarian governance contending in recent years for hegemony. Despite efforts at coordination and better organisation, opposition to the coup and the military remains variegated and heterogenous, split along social, geographic, religious, generational, class lines (and more), reflecting the fragmented nature of Myanmar's society. Fragmentation may more typically define the anti-hegemonic forces, but defections and factionalism have occurred within the armed forces too.

35. Jordt, Tharaphi Than & Sue Ye Lin, 'Generation Z'. The authors argue that the revolutionary movement driven by Generation Z is built around anti-military, anti-China, anti-authoritarian, anti-racist, anti-sexist values.

36. Patrick Meehan & Mandy Sadan 'Borderlands', in Adam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly & Ian Holliday (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*, London: Routledge, 2018, pp. 108-116..

37. Shona Loong, 'Centre-periphery relations in Myanmar. Leverage and solidarity after the 1 February Coup,' *ISEAS Trends*, Singapore: ISEAS, 9, 2021.

2.3 *Implosion of the health system*

The health system imploded under the combined pressure of the pandemic and the coup. Myanmar's health system had traditionally been one of its weakest points in the second half of the twentieth century and at the start of the twenty-first, but some improvement had taken place in recent years.³⁸

Doctors and other medical personnel joined the anti-coup demonstrators from February onwards. The military took control of some facilities, not because it needed to (the armed forces rely on hospitals reserved for military personnel and their families) but in order to prevent doctors and nurses from treating members of the civil disobedience movement. The distribution of oxygen cylinders which were used to treat the more serious cases of COVID-19 in hospitals was rationed, officially to prevent hoarding, but in practice to inflict a slow and painful death on anyone who was not complying.³⁹

At the end of 2021, Myanmar had reported just above 500,000 positive cases and some 130,000 COVID-19 related deaths,⁴⁰ although with the testing programme virtually at a halt, the vaccination programme also stopped. Thus, there is now gross underreporting since the only reported cases are those in which COVID-19 is mentioned in hospital-issued death certificates, and ordinary citizens stay away from hospitals, some of which have been seized by the military.

3. *Economy*

In the aftermath of the military takeover, domestic economic activity, already in dire conditions because of the COVID-19 pandemic, came to a halt. Anti-coup protests coalesced in the broad coalition of social forces that found expression in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). Strikes by doctors, nurses, bank employees, transport workers and teachers paralysed banks, hospitals, schools and transport infrastructure, casting a blow to the junta's claim that one of the rationales behind its intervention was to restore order to the country. The junta did not publish its own statistics last year, hence the paucity of data, no matter their reliability. In July 2021 the World Bank (WB) forecasted an 18% decline in the country's GDP.⁴¹ The

38. Céline Coderey, 'Health', in Adam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly, and Ian Holliday (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*, London, Routledge, 2018.

39. 'Desperate Myanmar residents queue for oxygen as cases surge', *Reuters*, 12 July 2021.

40. For regular updates on cases and deaths related to COVID-19 see <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/coronavirus-excess-deaths-estimates>

41. World Bank, *Myanmar Economic Monitor*, July 2021, p.12. Fiscal year ends in September, so the forecast was presumably quite reliable at the time.

International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated around 1.2 million job losses as of the second quarter of 2021.⁴² Many workers experienced a decline in income due to their involvement in the civil disobedience movement and the military retribution for taking part in the strikes. The kyat, Myanmar's currency, drastically depreciated in 2021, losing about 60% of its value from pre-coup years, with the exchange rate officially set at 1,395 to the US dollar (US\$). On the black market, the exchange was actually around 3,000 kyat to the US\$.⁴³ Cash became increasingly scarce and ATMs were often empty. The Central Bank of Myanmar struggled for much of the year to print money because the paper on which the banknotes are printed could not be flown in from the country's international partners; cheaper alternatives had to be sourced from China. The NUG issued its own bonds (worth US\$ 1 billion) to raise funds in order to support those who lost jobs due to participation in the anti-coup activities and movements.⁴⁴ However, this was barely a palliative for struggling individuals and households.

The public health situation considerably worsened throughout the year.⁴⁵ The third wave of COVID-19 started to hit the country in July 2021, and from May onwards, cases sharply increased from 100 cases/day (based on a seven-day average) in the early months of the year to over 5,300 by mid-July. This was in a situation in which underreporting is the norm due to lack of testing facilities and kits.⁴⁶ The already critical situation was compounded by a lack of medical supplies, striking doctors and nurses and the population's lack of willingness to be treated in hospitals taken over by the military. The vaccination programme itself also stalled. India's Serum Institute in early 2021 supplied 3.5 million doses which were administered to priority groups, but no additional stock arrived after that (the country's population is in excess of 54 million).

3.1. *Challenges and dilemmas for foreign investors*

The coup and the violence that followed confronted foreign investors with familiar dilemmas reminiscent of past coups. Investors, especially western ones, came under intense pressure from local rights groups which de-

42. Asian Development Bank, *Myanmar Fact Sheet*, July 2021. International Labour Organisation, *Myanmar Brief*, July 2021.

43. Gasoline prices doubled and a 48-kg bag of rice went up 40% since the coup. Bertil Litner, 'Myanmar's junta kills off all economic hope,' *Asia Times*, 3 November 2021.

44. Marimi Kishimoto, 'Myanmar's shadow government to issue \$1bn in zero-interest bonds,' *Nikkei Asia*, 6 November 2021.

45. Su Myat Han, Kaung Suu win, Khin Thet Sw, Stuart Gilmour, Shuhei Nomura, 'Military coup during COVID-19 pandemic and health crisis in Myanmar,' *British Medical Journal Global Health*, 6, e005801, 2021.

46. Fumagalli, 'Myanmar 2020'.

manded that they withdrew from the Myanmar market and severed ties with military-affiliated enterprises and the government. Yet many found it very challenging to leave, even when they were ready to write off their investment in the country.

The telecoms sector was a case in point. In the weeks immediately following the coup, the junta requested local companies to install surveillance technologies to enable the military to eavesdrop on citizens. Norway's Telenor, with Qatari Ooredoo and military-affiliated Viet JV Mytel, one of the main companies in the telecommunications and mobile sector, refused to comply and decided to withdraw. In May, Telenor wrote off the value of its Myanmar unit, booking a loss of \$750 million.⁴⁷ Determined to exit the market, Telenor announced in the summer that it had reached an agreement with Lebanese company M1 over the sale of its Myanmar subsidiary whereby M1 would acquire all shares in Telenor Myanmar for an amount of approximately US\$ 105 million. Yet in the Autumn, it appeared that the junta was in no mood to cooperate, as the SAC refused to approve the deal. Under the current law, the deal between Telenor and M1 would require the approval of the Ministry of Transport and Communication and the Myanmar Investment Commission, both of which are controlled by the military.⁴⁸

Other major investors in Myanmar, such as Japan's Kirin beer-making company, sought to retain a commercial presence in the country while seeking to disentangle their investments from close linkages to the military and partnership, achieving varying degrees of success. Kirin had invested in the country through a joint venture with the Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd (MEH), one of the two large military-controlled enterprises. Kirin oscillated between an intention to exit and a desire to remain present in the market, albeit outside a partnership with the military. In November, MEH filed a suit to dissolve the partnership and the venture, Myanmar Brewery. Kirin wanted MEH to sell its stake so that it could continue to operate in Myanmar by itself.⁴⁹ In December, Kirin Holdings filed for international arbitration at the Singapore International Arbitration Centre with regard to the dissolution of its venture with MEHL in Myanmar Brewery.⁵⁰ In the same month, South Korea's embassy in Myanmar organised a meeting between civil servants in the junta and a number of companies, including LG, Posco and Samsung, with the attendance as well of the Korean Chamber of

47. 'Telenor Group sells Telenor Myanmar to M1 Group', *Telenor*, 8 July 2021.

48. Rory Wallace & John Liu, 'Telenor's Myanmar sell-off mired in uncertainty,' *Nikkei Asia*, 7 September 2021. Poppy McPherson & Fanny Potkin, 'Telenor sale of Myanmar unit stalls as junta seeks local buyer participation,' *Reuters*, 9 November 2021.

49. Nana Shibata, 'Kirin CEO: top priority is to continue brewing in Myanmar,' *Nikkei Asia*, 15 December 2021. Kirin holds 51% stake in Myanmar Brewery.

50. 'Kirin seeking arbitration to end venture linked to Myanmar military', *Reuters*, 6 December 2021.

Commerce and the Directorate of Investment Company administration, a government agency in Myanmar.⁵¹

These prominent cases illustrate the broader challenges that many investors who ‘flocked’ in large numbers to Myanmar after sanctions were lifted in 2013-2014 are facing, also in light of international and local pressure from activists and domestic and international reputational risk as well as operational issues (such as repatriating capital). There is, as Farrelly and Dawkins aptly put it, «no easy exit».⁵²

4. Foreign policy

Although the origins of the coup and Myanmar’s current crisis are domestic, the turmoil had immediate international reverberations. The current crisis in Myanmar is by and large intractable to outside forces, but the divisions across the international community did little to help bring about a resolution or even alleviate the suffering of the local population.

The type and extent of response varied considerably depending on the political player involved. Russia maintained cordial relations with the junta, as Moscow had been cultivating cooperation and training and had been providing supplies to the Tātmadaw for years.⁵³ In recent years, Moscow has bolstered arms sales to the country for US \$1.5 billion (during 2000-2020), including fighter aircraft, military transport and attack helicopters, air defence systems and drones.⁵⁴ Russia’s objective has been to become the primary arms vendor, something which was well received by the armed forces, which wanted to avoid becoming too reliant on China for support, much like after the 1988 coup and the western sanctions and isolations that followed. China engaged with the SAC, too, but displayed a more mixed reaction compared to that of Russia, not least because of Beijing’s warm relations with Suu Kyi and the NLD government from 2015-2020 after tense relations during Thein Sein’s presidency (2011-2016).⁵⁵ Anti-Chinese sentiments run deep across Myanmar’s society, and regardless of China’s actual role in the coup (for which there is no evidence), protests against Beijing soon erupted across the country. In reality, Beijing hesitated,

51. Christian Davies & John Reed, ‘South Korean companies met Myanmar officials despite coup censure,’ *Financial Times*, 17 December 2021.

52. Nicholas Farrelly & Alice Dawkins, ‘No easy exit for investors from post-military takeover Myanmar,’ *Nikkei Asia*, 12 October 2021.

53. ‘Myanmar and Russia’s close post-coup relationship’, *The Irrawaddy*, 2 November 2021.

54. Ian Storey, ‘Russia’s defense diplomacy in Southeast Asia: a tenuous lead in arms sales but lagging in other areas’, *ISEAS Perspective*, Singapore: ISEAS, Volume 33, 18 March 2021.

55. Matteo Fumagalli, ‘Myanmar coup: How China could help resolve the crisis’, *The Conversation*, 8 March 2021.

although it blocked any strong wording in the UN reactions.⁵⁶ Russian and Chinese geostrategic interests converge in Myanmar, and basically entail keeping western presence and influence at bay.⁵⁷ At the same time, China's stakes exceeded Russia's as it is the largest cumulative investor, leading trading partner and biggest arms supplier. China had previously shielded the military regimes from criticism and the impact of sanctions.

On 4 February 2021, the United Nations promptly condemned the coup and called for the release of the detainees and the restoration of democracy. It also called for dialogue and restraint in the use of force.⁵⁸ Four formal UNSC meetings were held after that in 2021, with briefings from the UN Special Envoy to Myanmar. The UN never applied sanctions against Myanmar, and with the constant prospect of either Russia or China exercising their veto power, this is probably as strong as it could get, especially in light of the pushback from China and Russia against any further action. Western countries and organisations were (predictably) firm in their condemnation of the events, though this condemnation turned out to be rather toothless apart from resorting to wide-ranging sanctions. No response exemplifies the dilemmas and hesitations in the international response to the coup better than that of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).⁵⁹ Operating by consensus and moved by a concern for sovereignty and thus, structurally opposed to interference in a member states' domestic affairs, ASEAN was not the most obvious candidate to take the lead in shaping a regional and international response. Two events were illustrative of ASEAN's difficulties in responding to the coup. On the occasion of the junta leader's visit to Jakarta on 24 April, the organisation and Myanmar announced that they had reached a five-point consensus covering the immediate cessation of violence, the exercise of utmost restraint and a dialogue among all parties to seek a peaceful solution to the crisis.⁶⁰ Upon his return to the country, General Min Aung Hlaing reneged on the agreement, stating that these were mere «suggestions» rather than anything binding.⁶¹ In the leadup to the Summit of 26-28 October, which was held virtually because of the pandemic, ASEAN noted that «the situation in Myanmar was having an impact on regional security

56. Fumagalli, 'Myanmar coup'.

57. Ian Storey, 'The Russia-China partnership and Southeast Asia: alignments and divergencies', *ISEAS Perspectives*, Vol. 117, Singapore: ISEAS, 6 September 2021.

58. 'UN Security Council condemns military takeover in Myanmar', *The Diplomat*, 5 February 2021.

59. Michael Vatikiotis, 'Myanmar crisis highlights ASEAN's identity dilemma', *Nikkei Asia*, 18 October 2021.

60. ASEAN, 'Chairman's Statement on ASEAN Leaders' Meeting', Jakarta, 24 April 2021 (<https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/Chairmans-Statement-on-ALM-Five-Point-Consensus-24-April-2021-FINAL-a-1.pdf>).

61. 'Myanmar's junta to consider Asean's five-point consensus after 'stabilising' the country', *South China Morning Post*, 27 April 2021.

as well as the unity, credibility and centrality of ASEAN as a rules-based organisation». ⁶² Thus, the organisation opted to invite a non-political representative to the Summit. Towards the end of the year ASEAN's envoy to Myanmar, a former diplomat from Brunei, was replaced by Cambodia's prime minister. Hun Sen, Southeast Asia's longest serving politician (in power for over thirty years) and no democrat himself, visited Myanmar and held meetings with Min Aung Hlaing, but he did not meet with either Aung San Suu Kyi or any representative from the opposition. ⁶³

ASEAN was split between those countries that have long suffered from the repressive policies of the military, such as Indonesia and Malaysia; those more attuned to western positions, such as Singapore; and those that are instead more in sync with the strongmen of Nay Pyi Taw, such as Cambodia and Vietnam. Some are military dictatorships themselves, such as Thailand, while others are one-party systems, such as Laos and Vietnam. ASEAN's two key principles of consensus and non-interference made it impossible for the organisation to take a stance.

The European Union, just like the United Kingdom and the United States, were swift in reintroducing the sanctions that had been suddenly lifted in 2013/2014 to encourage the democratic transition. The events of 2021 – as well as those related to the Rohingya crisis in 2017 – clearly showed that it had been a wildly misconceived and hurried move. In its Decision (CFSP 2021/482) of 22 February, the Council condemned the coup. ⁶⁴ On 22 March, the Council of the European Union raised the possibility of imposing restrictive measures against the interested members of the armed forces and eleven individuals involved in the SAC. ⁶⁵ In April, Regulation EU 2021/638 extended sanctions to include nine members of the junta and the Minister of Information and entities related to the military, including ⁶⁶ the Myanmar Economic Holdings Public Company Limited (MEH) and the Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC), two conglomerates owned and

62. Bertil Litner, 'Summit snub a setback for Myanmar junta but its eyes are on China, not Asean,' *The Irrawaddy*, 27 October 2021. Prem P. Kumar, 'Malaysia urges ASEAN talks on Myanmar non-indifference policy,' *Nikkei Asia*, 1 November 2021. Shitaro Tani and Kentaro Iwamoto, 'ASEAN summits bring wins but leave big questions on Myanmar unity,' *Nikkei Asia*, 29 October 2021.

63. Sebastian Strangio, 'Myanmar junta decries exclusion of coup leader from ASEAN summit,' *The Diplomat*, 25 October 2021. Bertil Litner, 'Why ASEAN finally took a stand on Myanmar,' *Asia Times*, 18 October 2021.

64. *Conclusions of the Council of the European Union* 6287/21 Annex, 22 February 2021. (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/02/22/myanmar-burma-council-adopts-conclusions>).

65. *Council of the European Union*, 'Myanmar/Burma: EU sanctions 11 people over the recent military coup and ensuing repression', press release, 22 March 2021.

66. *Regulations of Council implementing regulation EU 2021/638*, 19 April 2021. (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/04/19/myanmar-burma-eu-imposes-sanctions-on-10-individuals-and-two-military-controlled-companies-over-the-february-military-coup-and-subsequent-repression/>).

controlled by the armed forces. A third round of sanctions followed on 21 June,⁶⁷ whereby eight more individuals, three economic entities and the war veterans organisation, also allegedly in support of the coup, were targeted.

In its sanctions, the European Union targeted individuals at the ministerial and/or deputy ministerial level, the attorney general and anyone else it considered responsible for «undermining democracy and the rule of law and for serious human rights violations in the country». Furthermore, it targeted entities owned and controlled by the Tatmadaw with the aim of impacting its revenues and, more generally, the revenues of the gems and timber sectors in order to impact the profits of the armed forces and of their affiliates arising from the country's natural resources. Pre-existing measures also remained in place, including an embargo on arms and equipment which can be deployed for internal repression and dual use goods, which can be used by the military for the border guard policy to monitor communications for military training or other forms of domestic repression. On 2 September, the United Kingdom announced a new round of sanctions, which targeted key business associates of the junta for providing arms and financial support following a coup. As part of this policy, the United Kingdom imposed an asset freeze on Htoo Group of Companies and its founder Tay Za who had contributed funds to the operations against the Rohingya in 2017.⁶⁸

4.1. *The thorny issue of recognition*

The battle for legitimacy physically took place in the streets of Myanmar cities, towns and villages for much of 2021. Discursively, it also took the form of the battle for recognition of the two governments, the SAC and the NUG.⁶⁹

The NUG has repeatedly called upon Myanmar's international partners to recognise it as the government and its legitimate representative, the successor of the CRPH and the heir of the authorities deposed during the coup. Some Myanmar diplomats abroad have endorsed the CRPH and the NUG, as in the case of Myanmar's representative to the United Nations and the Ambassador to the United Kingdom, whose positions were subse-

67. *Council Implementing Regulation (EU) 2021/998* of 21 June 2021 implementing Regulation (EU) No 401/2013 concerning restrictive measures in view of the situation in Myanmar/Burma (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/06/21/myanmar-burma-third-round-of-eu-sanctions-over-the-military-coup-and-subsequent-repression/>); Council of the European Union, 'Myanmar/Burma: Council extends sanctions for another year', 29 April 2021; Council of the EU, 'Myanmar/Burma: EU imposes sanctions on 10 individuals and two military-controlled companies over the February military coup and subsequent repression', press release, 19 April 2021.

68. 'Britain announces new Myanmar sanctions', *Reuters*, 2 September 2021.

69. David Hutt, 'UN's challenge: who will sit in Myanmar hot seat?', *Asia Times*, 13 September 2021.

quently revoked by the junta. In other cases, such as with South Korea, the NUG was allowed by local authorities to set up representation.⁷⁰ The NUG and the SAC are embroiled in an international contest for who should be considered as the legitimate government of the country and who should represent it internationally. The UN's position⁷¹ exemplifies the international community's dilemmas. There may be displeasure with the military takeover, but international recognition is granted to states, not governments. Recognition of the NUG would be symbolically important and this is what the anti-military movement has been seeking, but it is unlikely – on its own – to change dynamics on the ground or in terms of external diplomatic support.

5. Conclusion

The Tatmadaw's fourth intervention in the history of post-independence Myanmar brought the uneasy cohabitation between the civilian administration and the military to an abrupt halt, for now. Additionally, it has also halted the economic, political and cultural opening of Myanmar's population.⁷² For older generations, the 2021 coup had a feeling of *déjà vu*. For Generation Z, the military intervention ended a decade of limited and uneven opportunities. For many others, especially those at the margins and in the borderlands (not only geographically), this felt like 'more of the same' and Myanmar's centre came to gradually resemble its peripheries.

Throughout 2021, Myanmar experienced a complex and violent multi-cornered conflict. The different players did not share a single vision, and overall, the anti-coup movement seemed more united in its opposition than by a shared vision of a post-military future for the country, despite some timid signs of the emergence of a more inclusive agenda that crossed ethnic and religious lines among some anti-opposition groups. Against this backdrop, the roles of the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi appeared to be fading into the background, bringing an end to an era.

70. 'Myanmar shadow government sets up office in South Korea', *Nikkei Asia*, 8 September 2021.

71. 'Who will win the battle for Myanmar's UN seat?', *The Diplomat*, 3 September 2021. 'US and China's procrastination on Myanmar UN seat row does more harm than good', *South China Morning Post*, 17 September 2021. 'Quandary at U.N.: Who Speaks for Myanmar and Afghanistan?', *The New York Times*, 11 September 2021.

72. This, of course, is not intended to downplay the rise in Buddhist nationalism and anti-Rohingya and anti-Muslim violence that took place during the 2010s, culminating in the 2017 Rakhine conflict. For more on this, see Matteo Fumagalli, 'Myanmar 2018: botched transition and repatriation plan', *Asia Maior*, XXIX/2019, pp. 233-246 and Matteo Fumagalli, 'Myanmar 2017: The Rohingya crisis between radicalisation and ethnic cleansing', *Asia Maior*, XXVIII/2018, pp. 227-243.