

Myanmar: Until the End of the World: Notes on a Coup

Wednesday 10 February 2021, by [Soe Lin Aung \(Geoffrey Aung\)](#) (Date first published: 5 February 2021).

As night fell in Yangon this week, the city [echoed](#) every night with the sound of residents banging pots and pans and drivers honking their horns—noise to drive away evil spirits. In Mandalay, medical workers [gathered](#) in formation, their masked faces lit by phone flashlights. They sang the anthem of the 1988 uprising, *Kabar Makyay Bu*, its title a promise of un-ending struggle against military rule: “We won’t be satisfied until the end of the world.” As reports of arrests mounted this week, activists and student leaders sent out calls to take to the streets. The military moved to shut down Facebook—a key mode of communication in Myanmar—while friends were still circulating messages about protests, demonstrations, and other forms of resistance. One friend managed to reach me: “We will fight back as much as we can,” they said.

The news had built slowly, tapered off, then suddenly accelerated: Monday morning, Myanmar’s military launched a coup d’état. In a series of early-morning raids, the military detained Myanmar’s de facto civilian leader, Aung San Suu Kyi; the top figures in her cabinet and party, the National League for Democracy (NLD); and a growing number of artists and activists who were not part of the government or the NLD. Several hours later, the military used its television network to declare a one-year state of emergency during which Senior General Min Aung Hlaing—the military’s commander-in-chief—would rule. The coup came only hours before the country’s newly elected parliament was to meet for the first time since the November 2020 election, which the NLD had won overwhelmingly.

Speculation about a coup had mounted before fading. For months, Myanmar’s military-backed political party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), had cast doubt upon the recent election, alleging some 90,000 cases of election fraud related to voting lists and voter IDs. Political parties representing Myanmar’s major ethnic minority groups also raised objections. Before the vote, the Union Election Commission (UEC) cancelled the election in parts of Bago Region, as well as Kachin, Kayin, Mon, Shan, and Rakhine States—all ethnic minority areas where, the UEC said, armed conflict prevented free and fair elections. On January 26, a military spokesman went so far as to warn of a possible coup if election allegations went unaddressed. Two days later, the UEC rejected the military’s allegations. The UN and several western embassies then raised concerns, after which the military was seen as rolling back its threat, vowing to uphold the 2008 constitution and “act according to the law.” The respite was brief. Early Monday, as the coup went ahead, phone and internet service cut out, shops shut their doors, banks and airports closed, and some journalists went into hiding.

Friends and family describe an atmosphere that is tense: pregnant with possibility, yet menacing as well. As an earlier general famously threatened in 1988, “The army has no tradition of shooting into the air. The army shoots to kill.” (And they killed [thousands](#) at that time.) An older relative, reached this week by phone after repeated attempts from Thailand, said they didn’t want to say too much—only that with some shops having closed, they’re worried it might get difficult to buy food. A friend involved in political activities messaged me to say they’re on the run but safe. Some of our friends have been arrested, they explained; others are going underground as the circle of people detained expanded into civil society and the arts. “It’s a very painful feeling,” they said. Medical

workers stepped up early on. In the hours following the coup, employees from hospitals across the country issued calls for mass civil disobedience, which began with [their own series of work stoppages](#). Their [Civil Disobedience Movement](#) Facebook group gained over a hundred thousand members shortly after launching, before the military shut down Facebook. Still, expectations are high for unrest in coming days.

Statements of solidarity poured in from Thailand. The Progressive Movement, a group prominent in Thailand's recent protests, issued a [statement](#) condemning coups as a "plague" in Thailand and Myanmar. They called for a future in which "power truly belongs to the people." The Political Science Student Union at Chulalongkorn University also released a [statement](#)—calling for an immediate return to civilian rule in Myanmar. In Thailand's north, [signs](#) could be seen circulating on social media with Thai protest slogans written in Burmese—"Dictatorship must perish, long live the people." In Thailand's northeast, democracy activists were more blunt with their #SaveMyanmar campaign, [burning an effigy](#) of Min Aung Hlaing in the streets. Myanmar has also been formally (facetiously) [invited](#) into the much-vaunted #MilkTeaAlliance, which loosely links youth activists in Hong Kong and Thailand.

In the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh, the situation is less straightforward. [1] Some Rohingya believe Aung San Suu Kyi is essentially getting what she deserves—as a coward who [betrayed](#) the Rohingya in their hour of need. Others are more generous. The Rohingya poet Mayyu Ali [called](#) for solidarity against the military, recalling the struggles of 1988.

With Myanmar in turmoil, media reports have focused on the immediate context of the election dispute. Initial analyses have [suggested](#) little more than that the military, insulted and alarmed by its electoral showing, is reasserting power in the only way it knows. Much—too much—debate has zeroed in on the putative [rationality or irrationality](#) of Min Aung Hlaing's moves, speculating over his secret machinations and wounded electoral pride. Unfortunately, this psychologizing guesswork is only too typical of Myanmar watchers' liberal presuppositions, advancing a palace-watching, top-down, individual mode of analysis to the exclusion of structural factors.

Four lines of analysis might suggest a more productive approach.

First, the coup is arguably a surprise. From a certain perspective, the military did not need to launch a coup; it already holds considerable political and economic power, despite having allowed a formally civilian government to take shape in 2011 after decades of outright military rule. In the post-2011 dispensation, the military reserved a quarter of seats for itself in parliament, enough to forestall any amendments to the 2008 constitution, which it largely wrote itself to protect its own position. Three key ministries remained under sole military control, including even the country's main administrative body until it was nominally placed under civilian control in late [2018](#). And perhaps most importantly, the military's economic stature has grown substantially since the early 1990s, when a managed shift towards a market economy found generals, their cronies, and military holding companies taking up increasingly strong positions in the private sector.

I have [argued](#) (together with Stephen Campbell) that this dispensation was best grasped not in terms of democratization, but as a civil-military dyarchy mixing liberalism and authoritarianism. By 2015, crucially, the generals depended less on formal political control in order to exert power now that they had shored up their economic stature. Hence their willingness to accept—even advance—a modicum of liberal democracy, which further enriched the generals as western companies became more willing to invest. Broader arguments suggest that an evolving [elite pact](#), or [hegemonic bloc](#), joining the NLD and the military had proved mutually beneficial, not least economically.

Insofar as these claims explain the military's qualified retreat from formal political power, they now

need to be re-examined. At stake is not necessarily a sudden autonomy of the political, as if the military is grasping at political power in isolation from its economic strength. Yet the precise relation between politics and the economy may need to be re-evaluated. Notably, the generals now reclaim political power from a position of ongoing economic dominance. At the same time, Myanmar's economy has been in decline for several years. Strong economic growth figures tracked the post-2011 period until around 2017, after which the Rohingya crisis and resurgent conflicts in Kachin and Shan States helped drive a marked economic decline. As [one account](#) put it in 2019:

Big-spending Western tourists were staying away in droves, concerned over human rights abuses. Bureaucratic red tape was clogging up business and investment, and the country remains a logistics nightmare. [... I]t is clear Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy was chronically under-prepared for government and has strikingly failed to get a grip on the economy.

Thus a possibility: the post-2011 hegemonic bloc once did well to enrich both civilian and military elites, but with a diminishing economic rationale, the mutual logic of the pact no longer held. It would be difficult to elevate this factor above all others—at least at this point—yet it could easily be one factor, and an important one, that made a once-symbiotic arrangement more precarious. The core insight need not be controversial: the post-2011 dispensation was simply historical. [2] As material conditions changed, so too did the relations of force they nourished.

A second line of analysis is that if the coup provokes some surprise given how much power the military already held, it is also unsurprising for precisely that reason: it was already clear that in the last instance, it is the military that holds sway. The coup simply codifies, as it entrenches, existing power relations. This position might be most obvious from the perspective of Myanmar's borderlands, where ethnic minority groups have been subject to ruthless counterinsurgency campaigns for decades. Saw Kwe Htoo Win, vice chairperson of the Karen National Union, had [this](#) to say: "No matter if the military stages a coup or not, the power is already in their hands. For us ethnic nationalities, whether the NLD is in power or the military takes power, we are still not part of it. Our people are the ones who will continue to suffer from this chauvinism."

This perspective has another angle. The assumed relay between political and economic openness—the favored subject of think-tank transitologists—no longer looks so clear. Instead, we see a decades-long capitalist transition intertwined with a variety of political forms, from dictatorship to dyarchy to dictatorship again. Even a brief glance at Myanmar's neighbors—China, Thailand, Singapore—underlines the reality that capitalism hardly guarantees democratization.

A certain configuration of bourgeois power stands out here. In both Myanmar and Greater China, for instance, a centralized state apparatus—the military on one hand, a party-state bureaucracy on the other—has navigated a tense relationship with separate bourgeois fractions, some of which are politically liberal and more connected to Western capital. What does it mean to break this alignment? In Myanmar, the military will no longer have the same access to Western capital. Still, Myanmar's long capitalist transition was always fueled far more by capital from East and Southeast Asia, ranging from its flickering garment sector to its growing agro-industries and major forms of resource extraction (namely oil and gas, especially offshore gas reserves now flowing to Thailand—and dual oil and gas pipelines flowing to Yunnan, China). Thus, in many ways, the core conditions of capital accumulation remain in place, even if the domestic liberal bourgeoisie faces greater exclusion from its spoils. Semi-subsistence agriculture will continue to erode in Myanmar's vast rural areas and mountainous borderlands as low-wage, precarious labor expands in urban centers. [3]

Yet even Chinese investment prospects are not entirely clear, though they'll presumably be subject

to less disruption than more tenuous Western projects. On one hand, the Chinese government's muted response to the coup—noting a [“cabinet reshuffle”](#)—reflects a consistent tendency to frame political unrest simply as a question of internal affairs. Chinese investment was always considerable throughout Myanmar's years of military dictatorship. From the Chinese side, there is no reason to expect any serious hesitation to engage the new military dictatorship. On the other hand, the NLD government managed to develop very strong relations with China, and the Myanmar military has long seen China as backing insurgencies in Myanmar's Chinese borderlands, from the Communist Party of Burma's forty-plus years of rebellion to the armed groups that emerged in its wake. There is some possibility (however slight) that the military's presumed de facto dependence on China may no longer be entirely guaranteed. Regardless, China is already heavily invested in several major infrastructure projects, from the Myitsone Dam in Myanmar's north—which China might pressure the generals to resume—to the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor in Myanmar's west, part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Chinese government will presumably aim to push these projects forward irrespective of Myanmar's political leadership. This relationship would be threatened only if Myanmar's military moved to sever ties with China (highly unlikely), rather than the other way around.

The third line of analysis has already emerged: the view from the borderlands. Discussion of the military's election fraud allegations—widely seen as groundless—has largely overshadowed the fact that the UEC simply canceled the election in many ethnic minority areas. At issue is the borderlands' relation to conflict, capital, and political transformations in recent decades. Since the 1990s, frontier capitalism in Myanmar's vast border areas—investment in mining, timber, and agro-industry like palm oil plantations, mainly from Thai, Chinese, and lowland Myanmar capitalists—has [incorporated ethnic minority economic and political elites](#) within Myanmar's capitalist transition, largely ending ethnic armed groups' once-existential threat to the Myanmar state. Arguably this was the decisive dynamic that made possible the political and economic reforms of the post-2011 period.

Is it possible that, with so much focus on the military's election dispute, a wider unraveling of Myanmar's political and economic trajectory is looming? If incorporation of the ethnic borderlands through frontier capitalism ultimately ended existential threats to the Myanmar state, then disenfranchisement in the borderlands—a break with that dynamic of incorporation—suggests a potential close to a historical cycle that shored up the very possibility of the state through a long capitalist transition. As the coup moved forward, reports also surfaced about military clashes taking shape in eastern Myanmar's [Shan](#) and [Kayah](#) States—signaling a possible return to open conflict. Then again, the election cancellations notwithstanding, it would be a mistake to over-estimate the degree to which ethnic minorities, aside from their political and economic elites, understood themselves as enfranchised in the first place. Moreover, resource extraction and agro-industry in the borderlands—lynchpins of frontier capitalism—face little threat in the context of the coup, being more connected to military fractions than liberal bourgeois fractions of Myanmar's ruling class. The incorporative dynamic they drive appears set to continue.

Fourth, it must be added that Aung San Suu Kyi appears to have failed, decisively, in her attempt to build and maintain relations with the military. Most notoriously, Suu Kyi [appeared](#) at the International Court of Justice in the Hague to defend Myanmar against charges of genocide committed by the military against Myanmar Rohingyas. Outside observers saw her appearance as a politically expedient—even cynical—move to shield the military from international condemnation in order to gain favor with the generals. Her aim, ultimately, was to build strong enough relations with the military so that her party could push through amendments to the 2008 constitution that would more completely force the military out of formal politics. Instead, she finds herself once again the military's prisoner.

The reasons for her failure will be debated ad nauseam. Discussions to date suggest superficially

that the military simply became jealous of her continued popularity and electoral success. She is said to have “[outcompeted](#)” them, for instance, on social media when it came to voicing anti-Rohingya sentiment. More sophisticated analysis will be necessary. Provisionally, however, one notes that the fascination with civil-military relations (read: Suu Kyi-Min Aung Hlaing relations), abstracted from larger political and economic forces, too often boils down to the old palace-watching that reduces politics to personality, structure to individual contingency. The point is not that these leaders don’t matter, but simply that even when leaders do make history, it is not under conditions of their own choosing. The time for palace-intrigue psychologizing is over. The time for resistance is here. And we won’t be satisfied until the end of the world.

Soe Lin Aung [\[4\]](#) [\[5\]](#)

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Chuang

<https://chuangcn.org/2021/02/until-the-end-of-the-world-notes-on-a-coup/>

Footnotes

[1] See Elliott Prasse-Freeman and Tani Sebro’s forthcoming article in the Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, “The View of the Coup from the Camp.”

[2] A formulation I owe to Ko Leik Pya.

[3] A set of phenomena I will be spelling out in more detail in my longer history of Myanmar’s capitalist transition in the third issue of the *Chuang journal*.

[4] Also see Soe Lin Aung’s previous articles for the Chuang blog: “[Notes on a Factory Uprising in Yangon](#)” and “[Three Theses on the Crisis in Rakhine](#).” His long-form article on the modern history of Myanmar in relation to capitalism, “socialism,” China and the changing horizon of communism will appear in issue 3 of the *Chuang journal*.

[5] Header image: *Cloud City* by Ko Leik Pya (February 2021). Also see his article “[The 1221 Coup in Myanmar](#),” on New Multitude.