

Who's Culpable for Myanmar's Coup? - "the Myanmar people returned a clear electoral verdict against the Tatmadaw"

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When Myanmar's armed forces, known as the Tatmadaw, staged a military coup on Feb. 1, reactions inside the country and outside were noticeably different. As the coup effectively disenfranchised millions of voters who chose hitherto State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) in a landslide victory on Nov. 8, public anger inside the country was immediate and conspicuous, just as Myanmar's newly elected Parliament was about to convene. Many outside observers, however, were more guarded and hedged, portraying the cause of the coup as more qualified and nuanced. How the coup came about has become a bone of contention that will have much to say about the post-coup dynamics and outcomes.

It is easy to understand the voters' fury that greeted the Tatmadaw's seizure of power, led by Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. After a decade of political liberalization and gradual economic development following nearly five decades of military dictatorship and economic isolation, countless Myanmar citizens from the majority Bamar to sundry ethnic minorities around the country, all with rising expectations from reform and change in the past decade, had a stake in staying the course of democratization and economic progress, despite flaws and shortcomings. They also voted overwhelmingly for the NLD exactly five years earlier at the expense of the Tatmadaw's electoral proxy, the Union Solidarity and Development Party.

The NLD's most recent poll triumph even surpassed the 86 percent it garnered in 2015. Such a huge winning margin is the largest supermajority in a free and fair election in contemporary Southeast Asia. The Cambodian People's Party swept all 125 assembly seats in the general election in July 2018 but only after the main opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party had been dissolved. Singapore's undefeated People's Action Party took 89 percent of parliamentary seats in the poll last July but just 61 percent of the popular vote. The Thai Rak Thai party was Thailand's first and only party to win a supermajority with 75 percent of seats in the February 2005 poll, and yet this unprecedented result was nowhere near the NLD's level of support. Other winning parties around the region where competitive multiparty elections are held do not come close.

That Myanmar voters opted for the NLD so resolutely has more to do with their rejection of the Tatmadaw and the country's dark past rather than an embrace of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her administration. Known as a micro-manager with controlling tendencies, her leadership has been roundly criticized for a lack of vision and an unwillingness to delegate and bring up a new generation of leaders. Her international supporters have been particularly disappointed with her handling of the humanitarian crisis in westernmost Rakhine State, where the Tatmadaw's "clearance" operations violently suppressed and chased more than 700,000 Rohingya into next-door Bangladesh, now eking out a squalid existence in border camps with uncertain prospects of return.

For all of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's mistakes and missteps, Myanmar voters have stuck with her

through and through, knowing that her government has underperformed and that progress has been patchy. Between the NLD and the Tatmadaw, the choice for more opportunities and a better future was obvious.

On the other hand, many outsiders attribute some blame for the coup to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's perceived intransigence and unwillingness to make concessions and compromise. As 65-year-old Snr-Gen Min Aung Hlaing faced mandatory retirement in July, it was thought that he should have been appeased more via the power-sharing agreement intrinsic to the military-concocted 2008 Constitution, which already gives a 25 percent parliamentary quota to the Tatmadaw, with one of two vice president posts, three cabinet portfolios overlooking internal and external security as well as border affairs. Perhaps he should have been appointed president, or the convening of Parliament could have been delayed to allow the Tatmadaw's allegation of widespread vote fraud to be investigated.

Other outsiders appealed for "no sanctions" immediately after the coup. This line of Myanmar watchers in Southeast Asia and elsewhere advocated more constructive engagement, arguing that sanctions are counterproductive and punish the Myanmar people more than their military government.

Lost in the excessive analyses on why the putsch transpired is the simple fact that the Myanmar people returned a clear electoral verdict against the Tatmadaw. Implicit in the constitutional bargain was the Tatmadaw's ability to gain electoral ground. The ruling generals already automatically control three powerful ministries, one vice presidency and one quarter of Parliament. The onus was on them to do better in the electoral arena. That they lost both times by growing margins indicate that Myanmar people do not want them to govern. The rightfully elected civilian government should not have to give in more and more to the military. Over time, civilian control over the military was to be expected, most likely through constitutional amendments. This is how democratic transition and military withdrawal have worked across countries with military-authoritarian backgrounds.

Also betraying pro-Tatmadaw sympathies and anti-Suu Kyi sentiments is Snr-Gen Min Aung Hlaing's naked ambition to seize power. While there were few complaints after the Nov. 8 poll, the Tatmadaw's opposition stiffened only after its negotiations for more power and positions were turned down. That the resoundingly re-elected administration of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi played hardball was understandable. Her electoral mandate and political legitimacy demanded that she should not bend to military demands.

Fundamentally, the coup was a blatant subversion and usurpation of the Myanmar people's will. The Tatmadaw is now paying the price of having underestimated the people's commitment and resolve to stay on the road towards a brighter and more promising future. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is ironically back as an icon for her people but her role now should be transitional. At 75, Myanmar's only post-reform leader so far should be looking beyond herself. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's sole job, if fluid and precarious conditions end up resurrecting her leadership, should be to pass on the mantle to suitable successors with the NLD and beyond.

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P.S.

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