

Burma

India Must Break its 'Silence' on Myanmar Coup to Avoid Global Embarrassment

Wednesday 17 March 2021, by [KALITA Jayanta](#) (Date first published: 16 March 2021).

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India's ambivalence towards condemning the military coup in Myanmar raises several questions, including the most fundamental one pertaining to democracy. The Southeast Asian nation is witnessing widespread protests and a nationwide civil disobedience campaign, with more than 190 people killed and over 2,100 arrested since the Feb. 1 coup.

The military regime is also continuing its crackdown on the media, arresting journalists and raiding newspaper and magazine offices. Even The Irrawaddy, one of the country's most respected publications, has not been spared with the junta [accusing it of "disregarding"](#) the military while reporting the anti-coup protests.

Media workers are being targeted under [Section 505\(a\)](#) of Myanmar's penal code, which criminalizes the circulation of information that could cause government employees or soldiers to mutiny.

At least 38 journalists had been arrested as of March 12, according to the Assistance Association of Political Prisoners, with 19 still being detained.

India's position raises suspicions

A Reuters report on March 9 highlighting India's purported role in changing a UN draft resolution triggered a massive backlash on social media. The [news agency reported](#) that the UN Security Council (UNSC) had failed to agree on a statement that would have condemned the military coup in Myanmar.

It said India, along with China, Russia and Vietnam "all suggested amendments late on Tuesday (March 9) to a British draft...including removal of the reference to a coup and the threat to consider further action".

The [Indian embassy](#) in Myanmar rejected the report, calling it "mischievous and biased", but the damage had already been done. Social media users took exception to India's role with Phil Robertson, Deputy Asia Director of Human Rights Watch, describing the four countries cited in the Reuters report as "villains" who had stopped the UNSC from issuing a much more forceful statement.

India has been careful not to make any direct reference to the military coup or to condemn it in its statements since Feb. 1. Earlier this month, India's permanent envoy to the UN said, "India has direct stakes in the maintenance of peace and stability in Myanmar, given the fact that we share long land and maritime borders..."

"We are deeply concerned and saddened by the loss of lives in Yangon and other cities of Myanmar. We have urged all parties to exercise maximum restraint. We call on the Myanmar leadership to work together to resolve their differences in a peaceful and constructive manner."

Northeast India facing influx of refugees from Myanmar

Meanwhile, India's federal government has asked the north-eastern states to stop the "influx" of Myanmar nationals, following reports of more than 100 people fleeing to the region. Four NE states — Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh — together share a 1,600-km land border with Myanmar.

Media reports suggest as many as [116 Myanmar nationals](#) crossed the Tiau River and reached Farkawn Village in Mizoram through a stretch where border guards, the Assam Rifles, were not present. It is believed several of them were police and fire services personnel who had fled because the Tatmadaw (Myanmar military), were hunting them after they refused to obey orders.

[In a communique](#) to the chief secretaries of north-eastern states, India's Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has said that "it has been reported that an illegal influx from Myanmar has started... instructions were issued to sensitize all law enforcement and intelligence agencies for taking prompt steps in identifying the illegal migrants and initiate the deportation processes expeditiously and, without delay".

It also stressed that "State Governments and UT (Union Territory) Administrations have no powers to grant 'refugee' status to any foreigner and that India is not a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention of 1951 and its 1967 Protocol".

India faced a similar surge of refugees from Myanmar in 1988 after a violent crackdown on pro-democracy supporters. Thousands of people fled to neighbouring countries fearing persecution by the then junta. An estimated 360,000 Myanmar nationals were living in Thailand, China, Malaysia, Bangladesh and India in 1991-92, according to a 1992 study carried out by the International Commission of Jurists, a Geneva-based human rights organisation.

A large number of the people who took shelter in India were from Chin state. They are largely concentrated in Mizoram with some living in New Delhi, India's capital. The [India office](#) of the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees reported that some 3,300 Chin people were among the 21,000 registered refugees and asylum seekers from Myanmar.

How India changed its position

New Delhi seems to have made a complete U-turn from the position it took during the 1988 uprising. Then, India was the first country neighboring Myanmar to criticise the military regime. The Indian embassy in Yangon actively supported the pro-democracy student activists and many fled to India after the 1988 uprising was put down by the Tatmadaw.

Between 1988 and 1990 India openly supported the pro-democracy forces and called for "complete

disengagement” with the ruling military junta in Myanmar, according to the UK-based Burma Campaign. India even conferred the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru Award on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who had emerged as the leader of the pro-democracy movement.

Subsequently, India demanded that the junta recognize the 1990 parliamentary election results where the National League for Democracy party won 392 out of 492 contested seats. However, New Delhi changed its policy in 1993 and forged closer relations with the junta for fear of the growing Chinese influence in Myanmar.

Perhaps it’s time that India, as the largest democracy in the world, called a spade a spade. New Delhi may have its [strategic interest](#) in mind for not denouncing the Feb. 1 coup, but its prolonged silence on the state of affairs in Myanmar may be seen as giving overt support to a dictatorial regime. India’s reputation is at stake and the country runs the risk of the international community placing India in the same league as authoritarian regimes such as North Korea and China.

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P.S.

- The Irrawaddy. 16 March 2021:
<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/india-must-break-silence-myanmar-coup-avoid-global-embarassment.html>
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