

Commentary

# **Snr-Gen Min Aung Hlaing, Coup Leader, Brought Myanmar to Its Knees to Sustain a Failed Political Dream**

100 Days Since Myanmar's Coup: Looming Economic Collapse, Poverty and Hunger

Sunday 16 May 2021, by [Naing Khit](#) (Date first published: 14 May 2021).

**Everyone wants a sustainable life, a sustainable economy, a sustainable environment and a sustainable country. For the people of Myanmar, however, those ambitions were dashed when the military staged a coup on Feb. 1. But the man who shattered an entire country seems satisfied with the purported “sustainability” he has created, presiding over the disaster in a place he has no right to be—the Presidential Residence.**

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One of the first actions coup leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing took a few days after he staged his coup was to forcibly move democratically elected President U Win Myint from the Presidential Residence to another location, also in Naypyitaw, where he was placed under house arrest. Right after that, the general and his wife held a traditional house warming party with five Buddhist monks in the residence's Ngu Shwe Wah Hall. Since then, sources close to the military's top circle have revealed, the coup leader and his family have occupied the residence.

In truth, it's a place that was never meant for him. It is intended for presidents, as its official name, the “Presidential Residence”, indicates.

In the decade after the previous military regime relaxed its total grip on power in 2011, the residence housed three elected presidents: U Thein Sein, U Htin Kyaw and U Win Myint. Even U Thein Sein, a former general, became an elected president, though the general election held in 2010 under the previous regime was not free, fair or inclusive. But in name, at least, he was an elected president.

To succeed him, the National League for Democracy, which won a landslide victory in the 2015 election, selected U Htin Kyaw for the first two years and later U Win Myint as its first civilian

presidents in its tenure between 2016 and 2021.

The leader of the NLD and State Counselor of its ousted government, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, wasn't forced to move but has been detained under house arrest at her home. Most of the NLD's cabinet members have also been detained in their houses in Naypyitaw.

It is believed that Min Aung Hlaing's decision to mount a coup in response to the result of the 2020 election, in which the NLD won another landslide, was motivated by a desire to secure "sustainability" for himself as head of state, or perhaps as an "elected" president in the future after he organizes a vote in the coming years—one of the regime's stated plans. Comments he made in an interview in 2020 show without a doubt that he really sought the top position in the country.

It seems fair to say he has been obsessed with the presidency, including the residence and all the other status symbols that go with the top position. The swiftness with which elected President U Win Myint was evicted from the Presidential Residence suggests the move was premeditated. Now, more than three months after the coup, the senior general and his family seem to have comfortably and shamelessly settled into this residence intended for a president. He may indeed think of himself as a future president, but in the meantime, as self-appointed head of state, he seems to believe he's entitled to live there.

Setting aside his political ambitions and viewing the coup in a military context, the way Snr-Gen Min Aung Hlaing has conducted himself has not only destroyed his image as armed forces commander-in-chief, but also made the military an object of total contempt in the eyes of the public.

What he did on Feb. 1 has been a disaster not only for the country but also for the military—known as the Tatmadaw—itsself. The military was already a notorious institution in Myanmar, but his coup has greatly magnified the public's antipathy toward it. What the people of Myanmar feel about the military now, and especially its leadership, is hatred and a sense that it cannot be forgiven.

Of course, military leaders have a long history of destroying democratic systems in Myanmar. But this time it seems worse. As the regime turned 100 days old early this week, it had yet to impose stability on the country, let alone achieve any of the goals it laid out upon grabbing power.

The country has suffered many bitter political experiences when it comes to the destruction of democratic systems of government.

In 1962, dictator General Ne Win staged a coup that did away with parliamentary democracy and the free and fair elections that had been held regularly since independence in 1948. The country would not see another democratic vote for 26 years.

The military leaders turned democratic Myanmar into an undemocratic nation under iron-fisted rule for almost 50 years. But the generals who seized power through illegitimate means had to find a way to make themselves legitimate.

Two years after the coup in 1988, the new regime held a general election, but the NLD won a landslide victory. In response, Senior General Than Shwe, head of the regime, and his deputy generals annulled the result of the election and refused to hand over power to the winner.

For the next 20 years, there was no election. But eventually Snr-Gen Than Shwe's regime decided once again it wanted to make itself legitimate and held another election. The vote in 2010—though not inclusive, free or fair—opened the door for the country to establish a partly democratic system under a semi-civilian government led by former generals.

But inclusive, free and fair elections in 2015 reversed the results of 2010. The NLD again won a landslide victory. Under the undemocratic constitution drafted by Than Shwe's regime, the country was transformed and the people of Myanmar enjoyed freedoms they had been denied throughout the period of the previous military dictatorships. Though there were tensions between the military leadership and the ruling NLD over its five years in office, the country's democratic transition continued with some radical transformations in other sectors, including the economy.

Even under the undemocratic 2008 Constitution, which grants the military privileges in the political arena, the arrangement seemed to resemble that of normal countries, with the political situation remaining sustainable despite disagreements and confrontations between the main stakeholders.

In Myanmar, the military chief's mandatory retirement age is 60. In Snr-Gen Min Aung Hlaing's case, his tenure was extended for five years beyond that age—a period that was set to end this year. The "sustainability" of his military career was coming to an end, and the 2020 election result held similar implications for his political ambitions, not to mention his family's businesses.

It was out of that realization, it's believed, that the idea for the coup was born.

One man's desire for personal "sustainability" destroyed the sustainability of an entire country and its population of 54 million people. Myanmar now exists in a world without sustainability, stability or safety.

But the real question here is how long Min Aung Hlaing's unjust and illegitimate "sustainability" will be sustainable.

### **Naing Khit**

- The Irrawaddy. 14 May 2021:  
<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/commentary/coup-leader-brought-myanmar-to-its-knees-to-sustain-a-failed-political-dream.html>
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## **100 Days Since Myanmar's Coup: Looming Economic Collapse, Poverty and Hunger**

**Following the coup, Myanmar's economy is facing significant risks of a collapse and the level of impoverishment has not been seen in the country since 2005, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) recently revealed in a report.**

Over the past 10 years, Myanmar's average economic growth has exceeded 6 percent. However, the World Bank has now projected growth to contract by 10 percent this year because of the coup, by far the biggest contraction in Asia, which is already reeling from the impact of coronavirus.

Once the fastest growing economy in Southeast Asia, Myanmar's investment is drying up, international projects have halted and existing operations are being shelved. As a result, millions of people are facing food shortages and falling into poverty.

On Sunday, the kyat declined to its lowest level against the US dollar in a decade as public trust dropped. The regime has made several efforts to restart the economy, including threatening employers and claiming that it is business as usual. However, moves by the junta have been counterproductive, exacerbating the impact of COVID-19.

One hundred days after the coup, The Irrawaddy looks at how the generals have pushed the region's fastest-growing economy back into dire poverty, leaving it on the brink of collapse and impacting people across the country.



*Construction workers in Yangon in March last year. / The Irrawaddy*

### **Major projects halted**

Since the coup, foreign investors suspended more than US\$6 billion (9.4 trillion kyats) worth of projects amid concerns about international sanctions, propping up the junta and the stability of investment.

Among the significant projects, work on a US\$1-billion industrial hub backed by the Amata Corporation, Thailand's largest industrial real estate developer, was suspended due to possible international sanctions.

Toyota, the world's biggest car manufacturer, has delayed opening its US\$52.6-million vehicle plant in the Thilawa Special Economic Zone on the outskirts of Yangon with the company citing concerns over instability.

Singaporean conglomerate Sembcorp halted plans to develop an industrial park in Yangon's Hlegu Township and decided to wait until the situation stabilizes, saying the company also needs to see how its customers respond.

French energy giant EDF (Électricité de France) has suspended a hydropower project, worth more than US\$1.5 billion, in Shan State over human rights concerns, as the regime continues to kill protesters.



*Bottled water is delivered in Yangon in March last year. / The Irrawaddy*

## **Economy shrinks by 10-20 percent**

Last year, Myanmar's gross domestic product growth fell to 1.8 percent due to COVID-19. However, the World Bank and Asian Development Bank were forecasting a bounce back to 6 percent growth this year.

The World Bank has since projected that Myanmar's economy is set to shrink by 10 percent this financial year.

An anonymous economists' report projected an economic contraction of 20 percent this fiscal year.



*Queues for cash at a KBZ branch in Yangon on April, 12. / The Irrawaddy*

## **Banking crisis sparks cash shortage**

Myanmar's banking system has been paralyzed since the coup with branches closed for nearly three months, cash shortages and limited access to social welfare payments and international remittances for hard-pressed families.

All the sea trade has ceased as banks are unable to issue documents needed to import and export goods. Companies are struggling to pay salaries, as banks are not providing payrolls.

Since mid-February, businesses have suffered from a cash shortage. Immediately after the coup, many people rushed to ATMs to withdraw their cash as rumors spread of a banking collapse.

To avoid a run on the banks, the regime ordered limits on cash withdrawals for both individuals and companies. However, it created fears that the banks had no cash and would collapse. Each day, queues form at ATMs as people wait to withdraw their daily limit of 200,000 to 300,000 kyats.

Many return empty-handed as the ATMs quickly run out of money. Each machine can only allow 30 to 40 people to withdraw cash per day. Thousands of private-sector staff across the country have been unable to withdraw their April salaries.

Most private banks started to reopen in late April amid repeated junta threats of penalties and orders to blacklist staff who refuse to return to work. Customers only come to the banks to withdraw cash, creating more cash-flow problems.

Financial observers estimate that if cash withdrawals continue at the current rate, the banking system may collapse in the next two months. They said the Central Bank of Myanmar is unable to provide the required liquidity for the banks.

"This is a crisis of confidence. People do not trust the regime's administration. No wonder that they do not trust the banking system. The crisis will ease only when a democratic government returns," an analyst based in Myanmar, who asked not to be named, told The Irrawaddy.



*A private bank collects banknotes in September 2012. / The Irrawaddy*

## **Kyat slumps**

The kyat has tumbled in value as confidence and trade fall, losing more than 20 percent since the coup and recording its lowest level against the dollar in a decade on May 11.

The dollar exchange rate was 1,345 kyats in January, rising to 1,465 kyats after the coup. It touched 1,550 kyats in March and 1,680 kyats on Tuesday.

Exports fell by around 45 percent and imports by 65 percent. The tumbling kyat is sparking price rises, hurting the poor and causing shortages of some essentials, including the costs of fuel and medicine.



*Garment workers in Yangon's Hlaing Tharyar Township last year. / The Irrawaddy*

## **Half of million jobs lost**

Myanmar's trade unions estimated that around 600,000 workers have lost their jobs since the coup.

The garment sector has been paralyzed after major foreign brands halted orders and crackdowns in industrial areas forced factories to close and workers to return to their hometowns.

Myanmar earned between US\$4-6 billion from clothing exports in 2020 and the industry employed 500,000 people before the coup. Over 75 percent of the sector has been forced to suspend operations since mid-February.

The trade unions said over 300,000 garment workers have lost their jobs and Italy's Benetton and Swedish retailer H&M have paused new orders.

The Construction Workers Union said around 300,000 to 400,000 construction jobs have gone as all major infrastructure projects are halted in Yangon.

Professional jobs are also being lost. Job agencies said hundreds of staff from the foreign companies in the major cities are losing their jobs.



*A Yangon market in February. / The Irrawaddy*

## **Millions could go hungry**

The United Nations World Food Program (WFP) warned that up to 3.4 million citizens could go hungry this year amid rising food prices and the loss of manufacturing, construction and services jobs.

The WFP estimated that food insecurity is rising sharply in Myanmar alongside food prices and joblessness. It said COVID-19 concerns are also accelerating the economic deterioration and humanitarian crisis.

The global agency called for a concerted, immediate response to alleviate suffering and to prevent an alarming deterioration in food security. The WFP's food monitoring index shows palm oil retail prices have risen by 20 percent since the start of February around Yangon. Rice prices around Yangon and Mandalay rose by up to 4 percent, it said.

Further price rises are expected because of the near paralysis of the banking sector, slowdowns in remittances and widespread limits on cash availability, the WFP said.

## **Almost half population faces poverty next year**

The UNDP estimated that the impact of military rule and the COVID-19 pandemic could force nearly half of Myanmar's population into poverty by 2022.

The development agency said after a year of the coronavirus crisis, the Feb. 1 coup compounded its socioeconomic effects. "If the situation on the ground persists, the poverty rate could double by the beginning of 2022," its February report said.

According to the World Bank, Myanmar has 54.5 million people, which means more than 27 million could be hungry by 2022.

Twin crises were causing significant losses of wages and income, particularly for small businesses, and restricted access to food, basic services and social protection for the wider population, it said.

By the end of 2020, 83 percent of Myanmar's households reported that their incomes had been, on average, almost halved due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the number of people living below the poverty line was estimated to have increased by 11 percentage points, according to the UNDP. The situation worsened further with the February coup, with projections indicating a further 12 percentage point increase in poverty, the UNDP reported.

The UNDP said women and children are expected to be hit heaviest by COVID-19 and military rule, especially in urban areas, where most low-income families live.

## **The Irrawaddy**

- The Irrawaddy. 11 May 2021:

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/100-days-since-myanmars-coup-looming-economic-collapse-poverty-and-hunger.html>

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