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SOLDIERS BEHAVING BADLY: MYANMAR'S MILITOCRACY



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Four weeks on in Myanmar from what has been characterised as a military coup, the outcome remains unclear.

Since 2015 Myanmar has been governed by an uneasy and unequal partnership between the country's army (*tatmadaw*) and elected civilian parliamentarians drawn largely from the National League for Democracy (NLD), the party led by Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi. The country's constitution, promulgated in 2008, strongly favours the military, guaranteed 25% of seats in the legislature and control over the powerful Ministries of Defence and Home Affairs as well as all matters regarding Myanmar's many and sometimes fractious minorities through a Ministry of Border Affairs.

The trouble began in November last year when the NLD overwhelmingly won a general election, netting some 80% of votes cast. Those parties backing the *tatmadaw* did particularly badly. The upshot was that Aung San Suu Kyi's hand was considerably strengthened; and reliable sources indicate that she wasted no time pushing for greater (some might say actual) democracy. Imitating Donald Trump, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and his colleagues began saying the election had been rigged – a palpable absurdity since secretive and alarmingly efficient intelligence services answerable only to the army would have known about any intended electoral fraud well in advance.

In January 2021 rumours spread that Min Aung Hlaing was planning a coup. On Saturday 30 January, with characteristic bad faith, the army issued a statement denying that this was the case. At the same time it was announced that a scheduled re-opening of parliament was being pushed back a day to 2 February.

Early in the morning of 1 February Aung San Suu Kyi and several of her political allies, including the President, Win Myint, and (for good measure) the 'second' Vice President, Harry Van Thio, were seized and spirited away to places of detention, their whereabouts unknown. This cleared the way for the 'first' Vice President, Myint Swe, a former army commander, to convene the National Defence and Security Council, the highest authority in government, according to Article 201 of the constitution, with a membership weighted in favour of the military (six/five). With no-one present to object, the Council swiftly declared a state of emergency and appointed Myint Soe Acting President. Further, parliament was immediately and indefinitely suspended until such time (unspecified) as fresh elections could be held.

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So it was that the generals coated themselves with the thinnest veneer of legitimacy. Arguably, through an adroit piece of legerdemain, Min Aung Hlaing and his colleagues had merely asserted a power already vested in them constitutionally. What was absolutely unconstitutional was the manner in which Aung San Suu Kyi and others were detained; but, in a land where there has been no properly independent judiciary since General Ne Win's coup of 1963, that was dismissed as a nicety. It was only after Aung San Suu Kyi's arrest that her alleged crime was revealed: the possession among her own security personnel of 'unlicensed' radio walkie-talkies. Given that, in her 2015 incarnation as 'special state councillor', Aung San Suu Kyi is *de facto* head of state, such a charge is laughable.

Predictably, the people of Myanmar were outraged. The first mass protests against Min Aung Hlaing's junta began within two days, in the capital Naypyidaw, in Yangon (formerly Rangoon) and in Mandalay. They have swelled ever since, spreading to other cities. Soon, as well as Buddhist monks, teachers, civil servants, transport workers, bank staff and other key workers were taking to the streets, so that by the end of the third week what was seen by some as a national uprising had also in effect become a general strike.

The military's response to such peaceable yet disruptive demonstrations was at first relatively restrained; it has since ramped up almost by the day. What began as soft crowd control has become steadily more ruthless, with explicit threats of worse to come should the demonstrators persist. Water cannon has been replaced by tear gas, rubber bullets by live rounds and the use of stun grenades. Insidiously, in the fourth week of February, men in civilian dress, most probably soldiers, started attacking protestors with knives, iron bars and clubs, doubtless hoping to incite a violent and therefore punishable response.

At that point there had been only a handful of deaths on Myanmar's streets. On the last day of the month however eighteen protestors were reported killed, stirring distressing memories of a bloodbath in 1988, when many hundreds of demonstrators perished on the orders of General Ne Win. Meanwhile, the number of arrests has increased steadily, existing prisoners in some jails being given early release in order to clear their cells.

On the first day of March (yesterday) Aung San Suu Kyi briefly resurfaced, appearing via a video link in a nondescript court for the start of her trial. Fresh crimes were added to the charge sheet, including breaking COVID-19 rules in 2020 and provoking 'fear and alarm' in statements made during the run-up to the election.

Clearly, the Senior General is in no mood to negotiate, or stay his hand. One ray of hope for the pro-democracy movement is that it has, reportedly, been supported by a few off-duty policemen – which helps explain the regime's deployment of battle-hardened troops against civilians. Only if detachments of the *tatmadaw* itself mutiny, however, could what appears to be an unstoppably rising tide of state brutality conceivably be turned back.

Nor, realistically, can Aung San Suu Kyi's followers expect much succour from outside the country. While President Biden was quick to impose 'targeted' sanctions on the coup's orchestrators, such measures are tokenal. Myanmar's generals are too smart to invest any of their personal wealth – much of it acquired through the army's integration into large swathes of the national economy – in the USA; nor do they holiday in Florida.

More generally: the West has a problem with Aung San Suu Kyi, because of her complicity from 2017 onwards in the military's genocidal persecution of the Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine state. China sits on the fence, unwilling, due in part perhaps to its own 'problems' in Hong Kong, to condemn the coup, and fearful of a successful popular uprising. At the UN China will join hands with Russia in blocking any outright condemnation of what has occurred. Nor can the protestors look to ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations): Myanmar may be a member, but there is little or no group accountability in the trading bloc, which is committed to a principle of non-interference by member states in each other's 'domestic' affairs.

Short of another 'Vietnam' in which the USA fights a proxy war not against the USSR but the PRC on Burmese soil – of all developments the least probable – it seems that the current crisis will mainly have to resolve itself internally. For 'ordinary' Burmese people that is bad news, but thus was it ever. The quest for democracy in Myanmar is akin to the Greek myth of Sisyphus. Forever condemned to push a boulder to the top of a slope, always he fails: the boulder rolls back down the slope, flattening whatever rights and freedoms may have temporarily been gained.

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