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NEW
DIPLOMACY
PROJECT

The Coup in Myanmar: First Responses

TOP LINES

- Myanmar's military has launched a coup and claims to have taken control of the Government, detaining civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi and other members of the ruling party. This comes after a November election which would have given Suu Kyi another five years in office.
- The coup undermines democracy, rule of law and political freedoms in an already fragile political system. Labour should call on the UK Government to work with international partners to demand that the results of the November election are honoured.
- The events highlight the role of China, Myanmar's largest trading partner, which stood by the previous military dictatorship and has not condemned this coup. The UK must work with democracies in Asia to offer a regional alternative to China's influence.
- The events also highlight the importance of tackling human rights abuses and genocide abroad. The UK should introduce targeted Magnitsky sanctions on the individuals involved, the businesses that finance and back the Myanmar military, and reform its trade policy to penalise states found to be committing genocide.
- Myanmar's return to a military-led government opens up the risk of further ethnic cleansing and crimes against the Rohingya and other minorities. The international community must increase its efforts to protect minorities within Myanmar's borders and bring those within the military guilty of these crimes against humanity to justice.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

On the morning of Monday 1 February, Myanmar's military seized power from the Government in a coup, detaining de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi and other senior members of the country's ruling party. These events took place just hours before the newly elected parliament was due to meet, and days after a national election, results of which the military claims to be fraudulent.¹

Myanmar's military claims to have taken control of the Government and declared a year-long state of emergency. Meanwhile, telecommunications services have been stopped and television restricted.

¹ *Financial Times*, [Myanmar military launches coup against Aung San Suu Kyi](#), 1 February 2021

The UK Government has called for the results of the election to be respected, and for the military to release those who have been detained. The US White House has condemned “any attempt to alter the outcome of recent elections or impede Myanmar’s democratic transition”.²

Just two days ago, the UN and various embassies in Myanmar issued statements opposing any attempt by the military to alter the outcome of the election, after the military suggested they were prepared to launch a coup.

BACKGROUND: THE FRAGILE POLITICAL SITUATION IN MYANMAR

The military (Tatmadaw) has controlled constitutional arrangements in Myanmar since it seized power in 1962 from the democratically elected post-independence government.

After 1962 the country underwent successive upheavals, as civilian political movements sought the right to hold free elections. Failed economic reforms and restrictions on civil rights by the military regime under General Ne Win came to a head with the 8888 Uprising of 1988. Mass civil protests throughout Myanmar were viciously suppressed at the cost of thousands of lives and a new military-led administration took power.

In 1990, elections were held which delivered a clear majority for the National League for Democracy (NLD) party, led by Aung Sang Suu Kyi among others, but the military government refused to cede power, placing NLD leaders under house arrest. This situation continued into the 21st century, with various struggles for power within the military leadership and aborted attempts to run democratic elections. This period of instability has coincided with serious human rights abuses, including the persecution of the Rohingya Muslim population in Rakhine state.

In 2008, the military led on the drafting of a new constitution, which allowed room for a democratic process and enshrined certain rights for Myanmar citizens. Crucially, however, it enabled continued military control by requiring that 25% of seats in the legislative assembly be held by Tatmadaw representatives. It also includes a steep threshold for any constitutional reform, requiring 75% of both houses to approve a change

Following the adoption of the new constitution, Aung San Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders were released from house arrest and limited (but flawed) elections were held in 2010, 2012 and 2015. Despite this ostensible opening up, the Tatmadaw remain the controlling force. Civilian leaders have been forced to tread carefully in their opposition to the military, for example by limiting their condemnation of crackdowns on minority populations and other human rights abuses.

ANALYSIS: IMPACT OF THE COUP

The recent election result in November 2020 gave Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League of Democracy 83% of the seats available.

² Ibid.

According to a speech given by the military-installed interim president, Myint Swe, the Myanmar military intends to reform the Union Election Commission, scrutinise voter lists, hold another election and transfer power to the winning party. It has so far stood by the 2008 constitution and rejected earlier reports that it would abolish it.

On the one hand, it is positive that the Myanmar military has not abolished the constitution as it still presents a pathway for the country to be returned to democracy. On the other, the fact that the military has used the constitution to overthrow the Government demonstrates the huge power it continues to afford the military, who will hide behind the constitution as a way to legitimise this coup. It will also offer a smokescreen for Myanmar's neighbours, particularly authoritarian states like China, who wish to stand by the new regime in the face of calls for sanctions.

The government of Myanmar anticipated that the General behind the coup, General Min Aung Hlaing, would retire as Commander and Chief of the Myanmar Army in July on his 65th birthday. Analysts have speculated that his pending retirement was a factor in the decision of the Myanmar army to launch the coup, as this would have left him open to possible investigation for his unexplained wealth and business interests.³

Another complaint that may have driven the decision by the military to launch a coup was its frustration at failing to have total control of the government, despite drafting a constitution with a built-in veto for the generals. This was evident in the case of the military-dominated National Defence and Security Council, which gives the military total control of the country's defence and security but requires the President to chair meetings. Since becoming the government, the National League of Democracy has not allowed the council to meet, much to the frustration of the generals.⁴

While in government, the Labour Party under Gordon Brown championed democratic reform in Myanmar including the release of Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest and for free and fair elections in the country.

The UK continues to donate a substantial amount of development aid to Myanmar. In 2019/20 the UK sent £88 million worth of aid to the country focusing on food, health, and humanitarian assistance.⁵

Myanmar is also a key trading partner to the UK. With the UK importing £340 million of goods from Myanmar in 2018, including garments, frozen fish, and other agriculture products. This will likely increase as the UK considers its trading relationships outside of the EU.⁶

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS

The UK's Immediate Response:

³ [Min Aung Hlaing's secret motive for Burma coup | World | The Times](#)

⁴ [Why Won't the Myanmar Govt Call a Meeting of the National Security Council? \(irrawaddy.com\)](#)

⁵ [DFID Burma country profile July 2018 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

⁶ [Post-Brexit UK to keep Myanmar's trade preferences | The Myanmar Times \(mmtimes.com\)](#)

Will the UK Government call an emergency UN Security Council session about the coup in Myanmar, so that the UK can work with key democratic partners to coordinate efforts at a multilateral level?

Last week a spokesperson for the Myanmar military did not rule out a coup in response to the military-linked opposition losing the recent election. Can the Minister confirm what steps the UK Government took alongside partners last week when the rumours first surfaced that the Myanmar military was considering overthrowing the country's democracy?

What consular support is the UK Government offering to UK citizens overseas who are in Myanmar and caught in the middle of this military coup? What efforts are underway for repatriation, if necessary?

Protecting Democracy, Minorities and Human Rights:

The military generals in Myanmar have torn up their previous pledges of supporting democratic reform by launching a coup to override an election result. Will the Minister commit now to introducing more targeted Magnitsky sanctions against individuals involved?

Analysts note that the Myanmar military would not have launched a coup without the blessing of the Chinese Government and the Chinese state-owned enterprises that back them, what action will the UK Government take to respond to the deliberate undermining of Myanmar's democracy by outside actors?

Will the Minister consider using Magnitsky powers to target the financial backers of the Myanmar military who are responsible not only for overthrowing democracy but also undertaking ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya?

Does the Minister agree that the desperate act of a military coup following a resounding defeat for the military-backed opposition in November, demonstrates that the citizens of Myanmar have fully embraced democracy and no longer wish to be ruled by a military junta?

Will the Minister call on the military leadership in Myanmar to safeguard the rights of minorities within the country, especially those in Rakhine and Kachin states, whose security may be under particular threat if the situation deteriorates further?

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About the New Diplomacy Project:

The New Diplomacy Project is helping Labour to develop a foreign policy for the 21st Century. Our experienced network of foreign policy researchers provides expert advice to Labour MPs and Lords, from real-time reaction to global events to in-depth policy briefings on complex areas of foreign policy. We seek to expand Labour's capacity to think about the foreign policy, while complementing and bolstering the work of its frontbench team.