

The only beneficiaries of the military coup in Myanmar are the hard liners in Beijing

There has been widespread international condemnation of the military coup in Myanmar that unfolded on the morning of 1 February, sweeping away the civilian government and the country's fragile democracy. The Army in Myanmar (or Burma as it is otherwise known) is no stranger to coups and putsches, and has been the power behind every government the country has had since its independence in 1948, often assuming the role of governing the country directly, as it has just done now. There are a number of domestic reasons why it moved again now to assume full power, but the timing also coincides with a moment when China appears to be clearing the decks both internally, and with its immediate neighbours, ahead to what it perceives as an inevitable clash with the United States and its allies. Myanmar has huge geostrategic importance for China, and hardliners in Beijing are the main beneficiaries from the latest Myanmar coup.

Ravaged in World War II, the country never really recovered

Myanmar has never really recovered from World War II. The country was the arena of some of the heaviest fighting in the war seen on mainland Asia, with the Burmese themselves split between those supporting Japan, and those supporting Britain the US and their allies.

Since independence, the military have defined Myanmar in many ways, dominating every aspect of life, including its economy. Both as an institution, and senior officials individually, the military have put themselves in a privileged position, strengthening their elite status, including economically. In the meantime most Burmese remain impoverished. The country has remained largely aloof from international processes. With a population of nearly 54 million, Myanmar has one of the lowest GDPs per capita in the world.

Myanmar population consists of a mosaic of ethnic groups, and there is a history of tense relations between the mainly Buddhist Bamar, who constitute around 70% of the population, and smaller groups. These differences were accentuated during WWII when the Bamar initially supported the Japanese, whilst other groups allied themselves with the British.

Head to head between Aung San Suu Kyi and the army

In many ways Myanmar politics over the last three decades have been a head to head confrontation between the military and Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's most famous person – a politician and statesman, and a 1991 Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Aung San Suu Kyi has spent most of the last three decades under house arrest, but since 2016 she had been the force behind the civilian government after having played a vital role in Myanmar's transition from military rule to a semblance of democracy in the 2010s, including leading her party to victory in elections in 2015.

The latest crisis was ostensibly created by the convincing victory of Aung San Suu Kyi National League for Democracy (NLD) in elections held in November 2020, which the military says were falsified. Parliament was due to be sworn the day the coup took place. It is clear that the massive vote in support of the NLD threatened the army's hegemony on power, including the country's wealth.

Now 75 years old Aung San Suu Kyi, is together with most of the country's civilian government, in detention.

Aung San Suu Kyi could take on the army because of her political pedigree. She is the daughter of Aung San, a left leaning politician considered to be the father of modern day Myanmar who fought to secure the country's independence from Britain, but was killed a few months before his ambition was achieved. Ironically, Aung San is also recognised as the founder of the Myanmar Armed Forces. His nascent army initially backed the Japanese in WWII but switched sides and supported the allies as the tide of war changed. The assassination of Aung San in 1947 deprived Myanmar of a visionary leader, and what followed instead has been a story of diplomatic isolation, with China and North Korea being the country's only consistent friends.

Over the last two decades there has been some effort to integrate in regional processes, such as ASEAN, and with Aung San Suu Kyi as foreign minister since 2016, this process was accelerating. Aung San Suu Kyi own reputation however was somewhat tarnished when she defended the Army's clampdown on the Rohingya, a Muslim minority, driving them in their tens of thousands out of the country in a policy that has been characterised as being akin to ethnic cleansing.

Despite its political isolation, Myanmar is geo-strategically hugely important

Events in Myanmar need to be read within the context of wider developments in Asia where a standoff is fast developing between China and the US and its partners in the region, including India and the countries of the South China Sea.

Ever since the Coronavirus pandemic broke out Chinese diplomacy has been on the offensive throughout the world. In Asia this assertiveness has often had military undertones, with incidents with India on the Line of Actual Contact in the Himalayas, to incidents of all sorts involving the Chinese navy in the South China Sea. Internally we have seen China clamping down on democracy and dissent in Hong Kong, and tightening even further its grip on Tibet and Uighur region. In another neighbouring country, Nepal, China has been using its influence with the ruling Communist Party, to ensure a pro-Beijing government is in place in Kathmandu.

China has been Myanmar's military closest ally and supporter for decades. China sees the country as strategically hugely important, not only because of the long border that the two countries share, but also because it sits bang in the middle between India and Vietnam, two countries that the hard liners in Beijing see as competitors, and possibly enemies. Keeping Myanmar within Beijing's orbit is one of China's top strategic priorities. It is not clear to what extent China was behind the coup in Myanmar, but what is for sure is that it is enthusiastically welcomed by hardliners in Beijing keen to consolidate their position on China's south-western border.

Difficult days ahead as Myanmar falls more deeply in the Chinese embrace

The Burmese military say they will hold fresh elections in one year's time. The promise of free elections is however hardly credible. The level of criticism of the coup in Myanmar indicates wider concerns of the international community. There are calls for sanctions and other punitive measures. Myanmar's military are used to be being could shouldered. In the short term they will seek succour in the embrace of China, and the Chinese will welcome them with open arms. In the medium term this is not sustainable and what Myanmar faces now is not stability, but great uncertainty.

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