

# An Exploration of the Causes of the 2021 Military Coup in Myanmar

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## Abstract

On February 1, 2021, the Burmese military suddenly staged a military coup, detaining some key officials of the democratic government, including Senior Minister Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint, and overthrowing the National League for Democracy (NLD) government elected in the 2020 election. Since the coup occurred only a few months after the election, its sudden occurrence shocked the world and caused extensive discussions among scholars. Focusing on the reasons for this military coup in Myanmar, this paper analyzes it from multiple perspectives. By observing the economic situation and social conflicts in Myanmar before the coup and studying the relevant measures under the NLD government, this paper argues that the NLD failed to solve the problem of being restricted by the military regime and that the military still manipulated the actual power of the country behind the scenes. Some of the political moves by the NLD even complicated the conflict between the democratic government and the military, which caused the military to have a sense of crisis, thus directly leading to the coup in 2021. Other reasons for the coup were the failure of the NLD to solve social problems, such as ethnic and religious issues in the country, and to improve the economic downturn, which allowed the military to stage a coup to prevent further democratization.

**Keywords:** Burmese Politics, National League for Democracy, Military Government, Military Coup

## Introduction

The political situation of Myanmar has been rife with change and turmoil since its independence. However, after decades of sustained efforts by successive generations of democracy-seeking progressives, Myanmar has slowly transitioned from a centralized government controlled by the military to a democratic government desired by the people. The victory of the NLD in the 2015 election and the establishment of a democratic government were great milestones in Myanmar's democratization process. However, only after six years, while the democratization process was well underway with great domestic and international expectations, the military staged a coup to regain power. To better analyze the reasons for this coup, this paper attempts to understand the background of the event comprehensively and concretely. By examining the relevant policies of the democratic government, this paper argues the inevitability of the military coup from multiple perspectives, including economic, political, and social conflicts that existed before the coup in 2021. In addition, the failure of the democratization transition process of Myanmar can also be used as a typical reference to help other countries in the democratization process to avoid the same mistakes. Studying the reasons behind it can be valuable.

## Background

### Brief introduction of Myanmar

As one of the least developed countries in Asia, Myanmar

is often considered a fragile state due to its economic backwardness and political instability. According to the definition of the international organization Fund For Peace (FFP), fragile states are mainly judged by Economic Indicators (Economic Decline/Uneven Development/Human Flight & Brain Drain), Political Indicators (State Legitimacy/Public Services/Human Rights & Rule of Law), Social + Cross-Cutting Indicators (Demographic Pressures/Refugees & IDPs/External Intervention), and Cohesion Indicators (Security Apparatus/Factionalized Elites/Group Grievance) of a country (Bassey & Woodburn, 2023). According to FFP, Myanmar's Fragile State Index in 2023 is 100.2, the 12th highest in the world and at the "High Alert" level. This proves that Myanmar is a fragile state indeed. In these indicators, Group Grievance (9.7), State Legitimacy (9.3), Human Rights and Rule of Law (9.3), Refugees & IDPs (9.2), Security Apparatus (9.1), Public Services (9.1), and Factionalized Elites (9) are notable issues (Bassey et al., 2023). These data show that Myanmar has problems in various aspects. Myanmar is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious republic country in Southeast Asia.

Since its independence from the British government in 1948, the situation in Myanmar has been volatile in various aspects. Politically, several military coups happened before, and most of the time, the military government has been in control of the country. Economically, despite the country's rich natural resources and key geographic location on the border between China, India, and Southeast Asia, most people in Myanmar

have long been impoverished. Although the economic development of Myanmar has been accelerated in the last two decades through the promotion of international trade, it has been difficult to make significant progress due to the low education level of the population and the weak structure of the economy, as well as the Covid-19 pandemic and political instability. From the point of view of social problems, human rights issues and social conflicts between ethnic and religious minorities have remained unresolved for a long time in Myanmar, with the Rohingya issue, a typical example, attracting the close attention of the international community. Civil wars and demonstrations have broken out in some of the provinces due to prolonged armed oppression by the military government and the lack of integration between ethnic groups and religions. Specifically, the northern part of Myanmar is difficult for the government to control due to strong local military power. It is like a semi-independent state, with many news reports of military conflicts and contraband smuggling.

### **Overview of Myanmar's Politics**

Myanmar's Political Indicators are particularly prominent in the Fragile States Index. Myanmar has long been a unitary parliamentary country under a military dictatorship, with four military coups staged in its history by military governments to seize state power. However, since the national elections 2010 and the introduction of an 'actual' presidential system in 2011, the presidency was no longer held by the military-represented Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the highest authority of the military government. Instead, a candidate for president is nominated by each of the Nationalities House of the Union Parliament (Upper House), the People's House of the Union Parliament (Lower House), and the military-appointed members of the Upper and Lower Houses of Parliament. The president is then elected by parliamentary vote from these three candidates. Under the 2008 Constitution, Myanmar also has a parliamentary system with one-quarter of the seats in Parliament owned by the military and the remaining seats contested by candidates from various political parties. The main political parties in Myanmar are the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi, and the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), represented by the military and other ethnic nationality parties.

The NLD and the USDP are the strongest parties and have been rivals against each other. The NLD, founded in 1988 by Aung San Suu Kyi and other people, is the representative party of democratization based on its ideology of freedom and democracy, human rights, and

the rule of law. On the other hand, the USDP, whose predecessor was an organization supported by the military government, is the representative party of the military. The military government is a military-led regime that has long been the biggest obstacle to democratization in Myanmar. As it has ruled the country for the longest time since independence, the military government has strong internal roots and possesses strong military power. It has violently cracked down on democratic demands on many occasions. In such an unbalanced situation, the NLD has been engaged in conversations with the military government to promote democratization and to complete the transition from military rule to a democratic government to the satisfaction of both sides. However, this non-reciprocal situation limits the political power of the NLD. Once the interests of the military government are harmed, the military can simply repeat history and stage a coup to regain its power, which is the direct cause of the coup in 2021.

### **Literature Review**

Regarding the political situation in Myanmar, many scholars have conducted relevant studies. For example, by comparing the similarities and differences between Myanmar, South Korea, and Thailand in terms of military coups, Zhang Yiwen argued that the adoption of military coups in Myanmar is rooted in the country's historical development and current situation (Yiwen, 2021). Zoltan Barany mentioned the Rohingya crisis as a breakthrough in analyzing the ethnic problem in Myanmar and argued that it has always been a great challenge in Myanmar's politics (Barany, 2019). Murray Hiebert, Audrey Jackson, and Phuong Nguyen analyzed the transition to democratization and the political situation in Myanmar by observing its international relations with the United States (Hiebert, Jackson, & Nguyen, 2016). While there is ample research on Burmese politics, most papers focus on a particular perspective and lack a more comprehensive and specific analysis of the causes of the Burmese military coup. This paper combines economic, political, and social issues. It analyzes the relationship between the policies of the NLD and the military coup, filling the gap in this part of relevant scholarship.

## **Historical Sorting Out: The Rise Power of NLD and the Military Coup**

### **Elections in Myanmar and the NLD's rise to power (before 2015)**

In 1962, the military government represented by General Ne Win abolished the constitution and parliament of Myanmar. He prohibited the activities of other political

parties and advocated the use of military power to crush the ethnic forces and expand the areas under the control of the government. However, the war and oppressive rule heavily affected the lives of people. Myanmar gradually became one of the most backward countries in Asia, and the Burmese people were very resentful of the military government. As a result, the NLD, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, began to emerge as a democratizing force in the political arena, with the 1988 demonstrations and protests in Myanmar as its cornerstone. Aung San Suu Kyi was also recognized as the leader of the democratization movement because of her activism in the protests and her prestige as the daughter of General Aung San, the nation's founding father. In the national election organized to revise a new constitution two years later, the NLD won a resounding victory at the polls, gaining 81% of the parliamentary seats (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1990). However, the military government, which intended to hand over power after enacting a new constitution, denied the results of the vote and arrested most leading members of the NLD. Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the democracy movement, was even repeatedly placed under house arrest by the military government for nearly two decades on various charges. It was not until 2008 that the military government gradually decentralized its power and resumed democratization by adopting a new constitution that guaranteed a fixed percentage of parliamentary seats. In 2010, Myanmar held another national election. Although the NLD was barred from participating, international pressure led the military to lift house arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi and allow her to run as a member of parliament in the 2012 by-elections for some parliamentary seats. Relations between the two sides gradually eased. In 2011, the parliament of Myanmar elected Thein Sein from the USDP as president and dissolved the previous military government, handing over the power to the new government. Since then, the NLD and the military have engaged in a long positive dialogue and reached a mutual compromise. After both sides admitted abiding by the '08 constitution and ensuring the rights and interests of the military, the NLD was allowed to participate as a political party in the 2015 national parliamentary election. Eventually, in an election that year, the NLD won again and became the new ruling party, marking the culmination of a decades-long democratization process. The results of this election were endorsed by the previous President, USDP Chairman Thein Sein, and the military Commander-in-Chief, Min Aung Hlaing. The international community widely supported them.

### **Policies after the NLD's rise to power (2015-2021)**

According to the 2008 constitution, Aung San Suu Kyi

could not become the president of Myanmar as the chairman of the NLD (Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2008). However, after coming to power, the NLD voted through the parliament to pass a bill to add the position of Senior Minister of State, giving the actual leadership of the state of Myanmar into the hands of Aung San Suu Kyi, who was already a minister of four Burmese ministries. After that, she was freed from the control of the 2008 constitution. As NLD held more than half of the seats in the parliament, military representatives and the USDP could not veto the bill, which set the stage for a deterioration in relations between the two sides.

After the NLD came to power, the military and the NLD cooperated actively to promote economic reforms, address the people's livelihood issues, and seek a peaceful resolution to the ethnic conflict. However, although the NLD carried out some reforms, due to the complexity of the country and the constraints imposed by the military, the results were not particularly satisfactory. There was still a huge gap between the NLD and the military.

On the political front, Myanmar moved from a monolithic military dictatorship in which the military handled all internal and external affairs to a new dualistic political system in which the military and the democratic government rule together. International relations of Myanmar grew exponentially due to the relatively good relations of Aung San Suu Kyi with Western countries. Domestically, the NLD controlled all internal affairs except those of the military. Because of its broad popular support by the people, the political base of the democratic government was more stable, and its policies could be implemented smoothly. While the military was ostensibly withdrawn from the political arena, it was still an important part of the political scene of Myanmar due to its control of military power and the powerful rights and interests granted to it under the 2008 constitution. Even after the NLD came to power, the military was still required to intervene in the long-term chaotic situation and armed conflicts in some parts of the country (especially in the north). Therefore, the military was responsible for maintaining the country's security, unity, and stability. This political system led to a unique path of democratization in Myanmar. In addition, the democratic government implemented a series of anti-corruption measures, streamlined government structures, strengthened the rule of law, and overhauled the chaotic judicial system, thus consolidating the political foundation and winning support from the people (Myint, 2018). However, the conflict between the NLD and the military still existed. The difference in the proportion of seats in parliament resulted in most of the military bills being

difficult to pass by NLD representatives, and the military was dissatisfied with this. On the other hand, the NLD attempted to amend the constitution but fixed 25% of military seats, which meant that it could veto all attempts to challenge its authority (the 2008 constitution). Thus, the NLD was unhappy too.

On the economic front, the NLD continued promoting international trade practiced by the USDP government before the 2015 election, promoting cooperation with foreign companies and securing the rights and benefits they could receive for opening factories in Myanmar. It also continued to focus on people's livelihoods through a series of policies in which the government had focused on improving infrastructure, building bridges and roads, developing the roots of the country in agriculture and manufacturing, and seeking to improve the living standards of ordinary people. Its initiatives to raise work wages have also effectively secured the rights of Burmese workers, and the economy has steadily risen. Its increase was not by leaps and bounds, though, during the time in power of the NLD, as reflected in the table of changes in GDP from 2015 to 2021 produced by The World Bank.

About ethnic relations, the NLD Government focused on the resolution of armed conflicts between ethnic groups and religious issues. Through the establishment of relevant departments responsible for ethnic relations and the organization of relevant meetings aimed at peacefully resolving the long-standing conflicts, the NLD government pushed the signing of a series of ceasefire and peace agreements between local armed groups. The Federal Peace Agreement, an important document discussed and formulated in annual meetings since 2016, has contributed a lot to this process (Choudhury, 2018). However, because the NLD did not possess military power, it had to compromise with the military to maintain national security and allow the military to manage the relevant affairs. The Rohingya issue could not be resolved peacefully for a long time. The ethnic conflict in parts of Shan and Kachin States in northern Myanmar was even intensified due to the continuing hostility toward the government.

### **The Military Coup in Myanmar (Since 2021)**

Although the NLD gained popular support from a few measures and its political status was greatly enhanced through the election, its reforms were limited by the military government and not thorough enough. The NLD failed to address the problems of some of the domestic people and even directly impacted the interests of the military government in some respects, ultimately leading to the military coup in 2021. In January 2021, faced with the situation in which the NLD once again won

a resounding victory and the power of the USDP got weakened again, a military spokesperson pointed out that the 2020 election was fraudulent and emphasized the possibility of a forced takeover of the state power by the 2008 Constitution (Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2008). The situation alerted international organizations such as the United Nations. Still, at the same time, marches against the unfair election results and foreign interference occurred in several cities within Myanmar. On February 1, 2021, the Commander-in-Chief of the National Defense Forces, Min Aung Hlaing, launched a military coup, detaining Senior Minister Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint and declaring a state of emergency to take control of the regime in Myanmar. Within a few days, the military dissolved the existing central government structure, replaced it with military representatives, and removed the Senior Minister of State position. The military also prevented the dissemination of information and online resistance by controlling social media and cutting off electricity. The battle between the NLD and the military government for over 30 years entered a new phase after this coup. As the coup failed to win the support of the majority of Burmese who sought democratization, many people in Myanmar launched several street protests after the coup, but the military force suppressed them. The democratization process of Myanmar was stalled completely, with the economy plummeting and local armed conflicts becoming more frequent (International Crisis Group, 2021). For Aung San Suu Kyi, the military made up a variety of charges to keep her in detention for the rest of her life. Although the sentence of Aung San Suu Kyi was commuted in August 2023 and the conditions of her detention were eased, with the situation in Myanmar stabilized after two years, the public is still uncompromising about the rule of the military government, and the upcoming general election at the end of 2023 is still very much in doubt. This incident represents the end of a long period of democratization in Myanmar, and the future of the military handing over power to the people is still far from certain.

### **Analysis of the Causes of the 2021 Military Coup in Myanmar**

#### **Political factors**

Regarding the occurrence of the coup, the political conflict should be the most crucial factor.

First, the conflict between the NLD and the military continued after the NLD came to power. Under the guarantee of the 2008 constitution, the military still dominated Myanmar and firmly held the lifeblood of all



aspects of the development of Myanmar. However, thanks to the victory of the NLD in the 2015 general election, it became the majority party in the parliament, far outnumbering the proportion of military representatives in the parliament, and in fact, was able to control the voting of motions to implement most of the issues apart from constitutional amendments and mobilization of the military. This made the military feel challenged. The continuous approach of the NLD of proposing constitutional amendments before and after it came to power was also a threat to the military, as the 2008 constitution guaranteed the military's place in Burmese politics. If it got amended, the military would likely be withdrawn from the political arena forever. In such background, the two sides had plenty of conflicts. The military, which was more dominant because of its military power, could then stage a coup if the NLD further threatened its rights.

Secondly, further democratization was a long way off for the NLD, new to the biggest political arena. It needed to be pursued slowly with constant communication with and concessions from the military. The NLD acted like this in the early stages of its rule. However, at the time of the 2020 general election, the NLD, coupled with the mistaken belief that its popular base was mature enough to counterbalance possible actions of the military, took aggressive measures to try to accelerate the process, which led to a complete breakdown in the relationship of the NLD with the military. As HEIN Khaing argued, attempts of the NLD to amend the constitution in the year before the election (2019) served as a 'pre-election political show' that alerted the military to challenge the NLD to its disciplinary authority and its attempts to criticize the legitimacy of participation in politics of the military. A series of propaganda initiatives in the run-up to the 2020 election also resonated with people in a way that rekindled the traumas of history and gained public support for actions of the NLD, garnering widespread support for democracy, and targeting the USDP, the party represented by the military, which was attempting to win votes by explaining the disciplined nature of the state (HEIN, 2022). These two events won much support for the NLD, but the NLD fundamentally ignored that the military was still dominant and occupying military power. All measures of the NLD were obvious provocations in the military's view, and its true intentions were soon noticed. A sense of crisis grew in the military, laying the groundwork for the following military coup. In the general election held on November 8, 2020, the NLD won 920 out of 1117 seats (Kipgen, 2021). The military did not expect such a dramatic victory, and the share of parliamentary seats of the NLD exceeded the minimum percentage of

75% required to amend the constitution. The military believed, judging from previous repeated attempts of the NLD to amend the constitution, that the election victory of the NLD would surely lead to a direct push to amend the constitution, shaking the foundations of rights and interests of the NLD in the political arena. This is why the military was determined to stage a coup on February 1, 2022, on the eve of convening the new parliament.

Meanwhile, according to the observation of international organizations, Myanmar's 2020 general election does have certain problems, such as suppressing the rival political party USDP in propaganda, monopolizing social platforms to propagate and incite emotions of people, and some ethnic groups (e.g., Rohingyas) were not allowed to vote (Human Rights Watch, 2020). These behaviors allowed the military to find an excuse to claim that the NLD agitated the population to rebel against discipline and challenged the 2008 constitution previously enacted by the military. After the general election results were released, the military repeatedly claimed that the voting process had been marred by double-counting. In late January, the military even declared to the domestic public and the international community that it might consider overthrowing the NLD government and revamping the constitution to maintain national security and order. The military eventually forcibly seized power on February 1 after arranging for USDP supporters to take to the streets to march against the results of the vote. In addition, as 2021 was the legal retirement age for Min Aung Hlaing, the commander-in-chief of the Myanmar Defense Forces (MDF), he would not be able to return to the political arena once he retires. Taking the opportunity to protect his personal and military rights was also one of the reasons why he decided to stage a coup.

### **Economic factors**

Thanks to implementing the economic policies set by the previous government before the NLD came to power, the level of the economy of Myanmar continued to increase slowly since 2015, with a steady rise in GDP and a slow increase in international trade exchanges. However, several factors prevented the economy's growth, even with the initiatives to attract foreign investment. Infrastructure in Myanmar remained poor, with only 37% of the population having access to electricity, and road transportation also suffered from underdeveloped infrastructure. In addition, the military continued to dominate the economy. It had set up organizations that controlled domestic and international economic exchanges, limiting the ability of the NLD government to pursue further economic reforms. The basic industrial composition of Myanmar was still dominated by relatively basic agriculture, and the backwardness of

its labor force made it difficult to create the prerequisites for a market economy (Stokke, Vakulchuk, & Øverland, 2018). Since the economy had not skyrocketed, its role in possible political change by the NLD was too insignificant to be a prerequisite. In addition, according to surveys, the COVID-19 pandemic has dealt a great blow to improving the economic development of Myanmar (World Bank Group, 2023). According to a survey by the International Monetary Fund, merchandise imports and exports of Myanmar and tourist arrivals had fallen by leaps and bounds in 2020.

Moreover, natural gas exports, an important component of Myanmar's economy, were hit by decreasing prices worldwide, and the actual domestic GDP figures were contrary to the forecasts. When the Myanmar military began to gradually decentralize power to the NLD, one of their expectations was to improve people's livelihoods and raise the domestic economy through the rule of the NLD because the military had not been successful in economic development. As the COVID-19 pandemic hit the economy of Myanmar, the lives of some people became more difficult, and they became slightly dissatisfied with the current government. This provided a good excuse for the military to stage a coup. Under the difficult domestic situation, the military tried to give the public the impression that the 'rule of the NLD had not brought benefits to the people' so that they could take over the power logically. At the same time, judging from the election results, the military also realized that once the pandemic was over, the economy of Myanmar would continue to develop, and the NLD would gain wider support from the public. The ruling base of the military would be further shaken, so they took advantage of the uncertainty of the pandemic to 'strike first' and staged the military coup.

### **Social factors**

Social conflicts and ethnic minority issues have long plagued the internal security of Myanmar and stability, especially the Rohingya issue, which has been a subject of international debate. However, due to the lack of military power and the compromise with the military government, they remained unresolved under the leadership of the NLD. According to surveys, regional conflicts in Myanmar did not decrease significantly after the NLD took over power (Fink, 2018). Also, the NLD government cooperated with the military, allowing it to suppress local riots by force to show its 'friendship' with the military. Aung San Suu Kyi's defense of armed repression of the military even sparked great discontent among the international community and ethnic groups in the country, and she was proposed to be stripped of

the honorary recognition she had previously received. In the run-up to the 2020 elections, and the absence of any significant improvement in the situation, local people in some ethnic areas were opposed to new elections. They felt that the NLD had not honored its promises during the 2015 general election and no longer viewed the NLD as a good political party. Although the number of people taking to the streets in the region didn't increase due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was still significant. The conflict was further exacerbated by the government's move to prevent voting in minority areas (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, 2020). The previous attitude of the military towards ethnic minorities had always been forceful repression rather than peace talks. Despite NLD's goodwill gestures to the military, peace talks remained an important initiative for the NLD government. To consolidate the state power and to solve local problems forcefully, the inability of the NLD to solve local conflicts could also be used as an excuse for the military government's coup in 2021.

### **Conclusion**

The 2021 Military Coup in Myanmar is not a historical accident but an inevitable event due to a combination of factors.

Under the precondition of conflicts still existing between the NLD and the military, the results of the 2020 general election and the continuous proposal of the NLD to amend the constitution directly threatened the foundation of the military's ruling, which led to the carefully planned military coup on February 1.

Although the NLD made some economic progress, its growth was limited. The NLD was mainly only carrying the economic policies implemented by the USDP government. The COVID-19 pandemic even led to a significant decline in the economic level. The military believed that the economic measures of the NLD were ineffective, so they could use this as an excuse to take over. Social problems in Myanmar, such as ethnicity and religion, have not been solved. The NLD had no control over the initiatives of the military, and its collaborative approach with the military had led to a significant decline in its popularity with the people in the ethnic areas and internationally. The chaotic situation in the north of the country continued, and the military could take over on the background that the NLD was ineffective and unable to maintain national security.

Overall, the military government remains dominant. The coup might not have happened had the NLD not taken radical electoral measures or shown a clear will to resist. But such a relationship would not last forever. As long as the elections are fair, the NLD will always win the support of the democracy-seeking Burmese people. Since the military has military power, a coup would be easy, and cooperation with the NLD might just be a measure to "give away power to develop the country." Once the military

senses that its power is under great threat or realizes that the NLD is attempting to challenge its authority by controlling the people, it will repeat history and stage a coup.

In short, there is still a long way ahead for Myanmar to reach democratization. As a fragile state with a chaotic and volatile national situation, where the military is still quite important, the ordinary path of democratization and transformation is bound to be unworkable. Although it has been over two years since the coup, and the state of emergency under prolonged military martial law cannot last forever as the COVID-19 pandemic is almost over, the road to democratization has ended as the military government has disbanded the NLD. Although Aung San Suu Kyi's sentence has been commuted, she is still under control, making it difficult for the country to return to the previous situation. Hopefully, in the future, the Burmese people will find a more reasonable path to democratization in the face of resistance and make greater breakthroughs in resolving domestic disputes and taking control of the military to truly establish a democratic political organization that is a counterweight to the military government.

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