

The Myanmar Coup D'état: The Seeds of Colonialism and Implications on Regional Security

*A short commentary by Subham Barua**

Introduction

Myanmar, also known as Burma, has undergone a plethora of destabilizing events: widespread poverty due to isolationist economic policies, conflicts with ethnic minorities and decades of military rule are just to name a few.



MYANMAR AT A GLANCE

Area
252,321 square miles (slightly smaller than Texas)

Form of Government
Military junta (formerly parliamentary republic)

Population
57 million

GDP
\$76 billion

GDP Per Capita
\$1,408

Life Expectancy
69.6 years

Official Language
Burmese

Ethnic Groups

Burman (Bamar) (68%), Shan (9%), Karen (7%), Rakhine (4%), Chinese (3%), Indian (2%), Mon (2%), other (5%)

Religions

Buddhist (88%), Christian (6%), Muslim (4%), animist (0.8%), Hindu (0.5%), other (0.2%)

Sources: CIA World Factbook; World Bank.

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In 2011, power was transferred from the Tatmadaw¹ to civilian representatives and a beacon of hope for legitimate democratic institutions prevailed. However, the military still exercised significant control and undertook systematic ethnic cleansing of certain minority groups, specially the Rohingya. Recently, on the 1st of February, the military launched a coup d'état. A yearlong state of emergency was declared and key figures from Nationalist Democratic Party

¹ The Tatmadaw is the official name for the armed forces of Myanmar.

(NLD)² were arrested including State Counselor and de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi³. The junta's takeover was a major blow to democratic prospects in Myanmar and its implications spread far beyond the borders of the country. Firstly, the coup will most likely deter the repatriation efforts of the Rohingyas from its neighboring state of Bangladesh. The ethnic minority group is now in great fear of dire systematic persecution post repatriation efforts⁴ and this will severely affect border security between the nations. Secondly, the Sino-India relationship is a major factor as to how other major players in the region react. India has had long standing border disputes with China and Chinese engagement could prompt an Indian reaction. The international community also fails to make any progress with the issue as China has consistently blocked UN Security council resolutions on Myanmar citing sanctions and such would make the situation worse⁵.

This commentary will attempt to provide a historical context and reasons for Myanmar's current political landscape. It will describe the regional security implications of the recent junta takeover and highlight the Bangladeshi, Indian, and Chinese perspectives and interests. Finally, the commentary will explore the possibility and feasibility of a democratic future for Myanmar and provide recommendations on how to do so.

The Seeds of Colonisation

In 1988, the Tatmadaw brutally cracked down on pro-democracy protests, killing thousands of demonstrators⁶. In the aftermath, Aung San Suu Kyi rose as a bastion of hope – a hero who echoed the sentiments of the people to oppose military rule. In Western eyes, this country's struggles were viewed as a play on morality: on one side there was the cult of evil generals and their greed for absolute authority; on the other, an icon who was leading her people in their pursuit for democracy and human rights. The apparent ease with which these reforms unfolded led to many outsiders to overlook the actual challenge that Myanmar faced – decades of severely polarised tensions between ethnic groups. As with all bad things that persisted in Asia over the centuries, the root of Myanmar's problems stem from the aftermath of British colonial rule.

² The NLD is the main opposition party in Myanmar

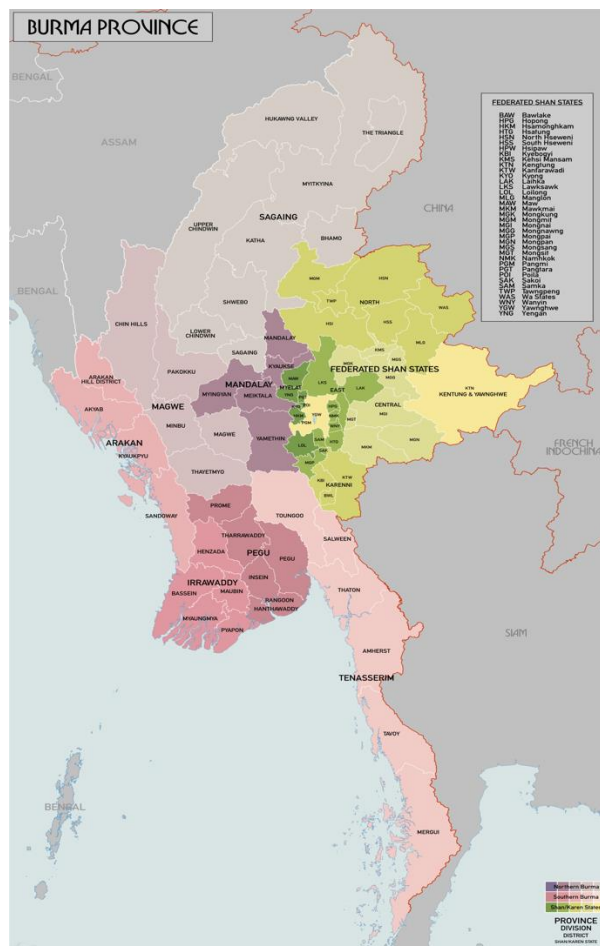
³ Maizland, Lindsay. "Myanmar's Troubled History: Coups, Military Rule, and Ethnic Conflict." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2 Feb. 2021, www.cfr.org/background/myanmar-history-coup-military-rule-ethnic-conflict-rohingya.

⁴ Islam, Arafatul. "Myanmar Coup Stokes Fear among Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh: DW: 04.02.2021." *DW.COM*, 2021, www.dw.com/en/myanmar-coup-rohingya-refugees-bangladesh/a-56459279.

⁵ "Myanmar Coup: China Blocks UN Condemnation as Protest Grows.", BBC, 3 Feb. 2021, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55913947.

⁶ Diaries, Radio. "As Myanmar Opens Up, A Look Back on A 1988 Uprising." *NPR*, NPR, 8 Aug. 2013, www.npr.org/2013/08/08/209919791/as-myanmar-opens-up-a-look-back-on-a-1988-uprising.

On the 24th of February 1824, Lord Amherst, Governor-General of India at the time, declared war on the Burmese Monarchy⁷. It was the most expensive war in British-Indian history, the total of which amounts to \$30 billion in today's market. For a race to that only knew victory in conquest, defeat came as a major shock to the Burmese. All subsequent, and even contemporary, nationalist thinking can be tied back to this moment – the great empire brought to its knees by invaders of the West. The British removed the old monarchy and erected completely new governing institutions which they imported, ready-made, from India. Burma was made a province of British-India and divided into 3 major parts. There was absolutely no regard for Burmese tradition or culture as the British exploited as much as possible through heavy taxes and provided the bare minimum services to the Burmese.



Burmese nationalists blame the British for following this divide-and-rule policy and the scars of this division and can be seen clearly, even today, in the form of ethnic conflicts in modern day Myanmar. By administering areas separately, the British set up fault-lines regarding

⁷ Quoted in Dorothy Woodman, *The Making of Burma* (London: Cresset Press, 1962), 64.

identity within the Burmese people and vexed any attempts at nation building. Another issue that contributed to the current ethnic divide was the encouragement of mass migration of Indians to Burma by the British. For the entirety of the colonial era, Burma was much richer than British-India and not just in terms of resources⁸. The income of the average Burmese individual was superior to that of their Indian counterpart. This attracted Indian migration into the region in hopes of better aspirations than what was prevalent in their homeland. However, the British imposed a division of labour along racial lines and made it each groups functionality distinct. There were even functions among the sub-groups of ethnicities, further establishing a divide based on occupation. After this reform, the Burmese were now poorer while Indians were better off thus resulting a negative attitude of the natives towards immigrants.

The aforementioned distinction led to a need to identify which groups were indigenous to Burma and which were not. The 1921 census decided that “Races which are associated particularly closely with Burma, even if the greater part of their people live elsewhere, have been regarded as Indigenous Races, and have been classified in fifteen Race-groups”. However, this decision did not help to identify the origin of many Muslim ethnic groups, particularly those in the Arakan region – the site of the current Myanmar exodus. Although they have ties to the region for millennia, their darker skin complexion, dialect consisting of Bengali and the simple fact that they were Muslim raised questions regarding their indigeneity. This provides us the historical context for the origins of the ethnic clashes in Myanmar.

Regional Security Implications

India

One of biggest challenges that India faces due to its geography is its connectivity to its north-east region. The only connection the region has to mainland India is through a narrow corridor between the southern border of China, north west border of Bangladesh and south east border of Nepal known as the Siliguri corridor. However, this passage has become an unreliable option for India as Delhi’s control has been challenged by the rise of violent insurgencies by battling ethnicities⁹. To add salt to the wound, India’s delicate relationship with China over the years further escalates tension in the region. Delhi’s worst nightmare would come in the form of a complete siege or blockage of the Siliguri corridor. These circumstances have driven India to undertake the Kaladan project which aims to connect the landlocked north-east to the sea.

⁸ *Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism, and Democracy in the 21st Century*, by Thant Myint-U, W W Norton, 2021, p. 28.

⁹ Subir, Bhaumik, *Troubled Periphery: Crisis of India’s Northeast*, Sage, Delhi/New York/London, 2009

The project will flow through Burma via the Arakanese port of Sittwe and the Kaladan River that flows out of India's Mizo Hills to the Arakan coast and Bay of Bengal¹⁰. The stretch of Myanmar land it will cover almost accumulates to 168km making the nation a key partner for achieving Indian interests.



Source: M. Ramesh (2013), *The Hindu Business Line*

The Rakhine insurgencies and the current coup d'état poses great risk for the Kaladan project. With the state of Myanmar in political shambles, Delhi will be concerned about their key project given the amount of investment that was made. India has already splurged around USD 134 million rebuilding Myanmar's Sittwe Port. Furthermore, the Kaladan project is at risk of being used for illegal drug and weapons trafficking. As the primary objective of the route is for Indian goods from the mainland to reach constituents in the north-east, any illegal activity and trigger backlashes from Myanmar, also keeping in mind their close relationship with China. Lastly, insurgents of the Arakan army have been disrupting the project's operations. Any future disagreements regarding this issue can affect the flow of goods in the Sittwe port. Although both countries would be affected, India has more to lose as they have borne the entire cost of the project.

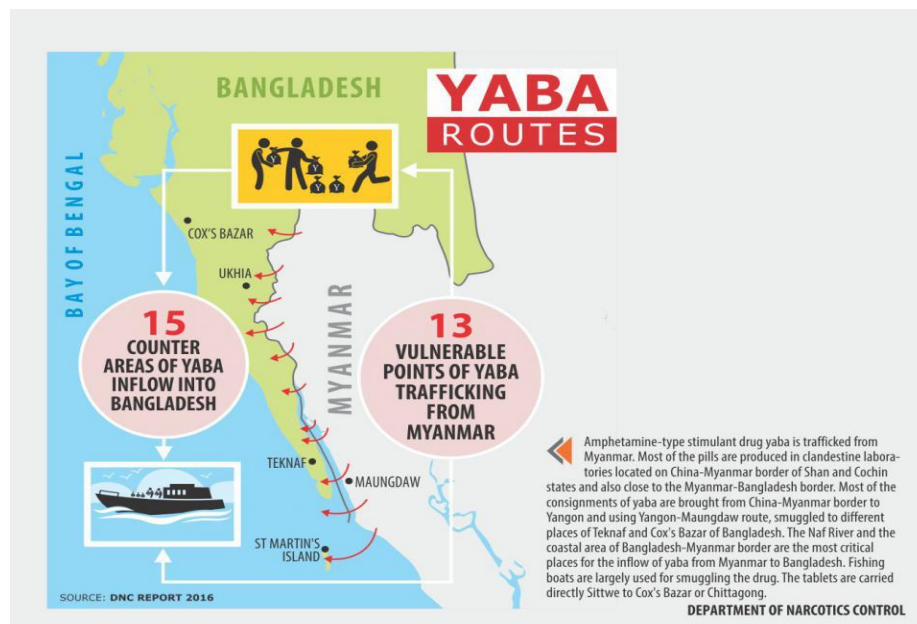
Bangladesh

The Rohingya crisis emerged as the most important refugee crisis in recent history as the influx of almost 1 million people into Bangladesh has made the nation a key stakeholder of the aftermath. Several repatriation efforts have been made, although not successful. However, even the slightest glimmer of repatriation seems far-fetched with the circumstances of the current coup d'état. Fear has been raised regarding the new regime's commitment to honour

¹⁰ Subir, Bhaumik, *Kaladan Project: Vision, Challenges, Prospect*, CSEAS, Guwahati, 2020

repatriation efforts¹¹. In fact, many at the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh stated that they do not feel safe to go back as there is no guarantee of a safe future upon landing¹².

With the expectation that the instability in the Rakhine region will only escalate in the days to come, preventing the rise in flow of illicit drugs and border terrorism should be the major priority for Bangladesh. Recently, a staggering USD 1.8 million worth of narcotics was seized by the Bangladesh Border Guard (BGB) on a raided boat on the Naf River, near the Myanmar border.



Source: *The Daily Star*

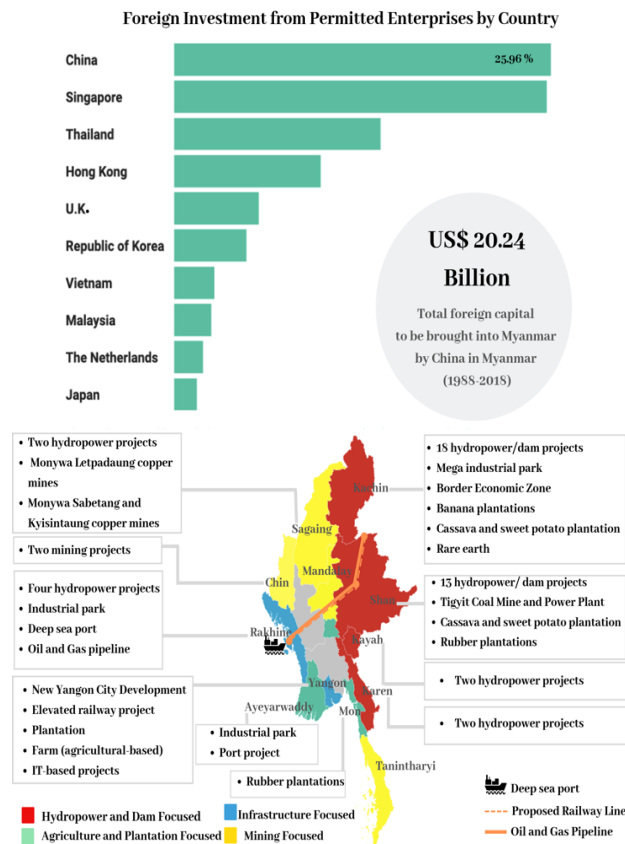
The current military coup may exacerbate efforts by traffickers looking to exploit the instability. The susceptibility of the refugee population towards radicalization and terrorist recruitment is also a cause of great concern. Seeing as Bangladesh has been taking a proactive approach in fighting the smuggling of illicit drugs and radicalization, the nation should devote more resources into the matter if they wish to have appropriate border security.

¹¹ Ghosh, Palash. "Military Coup In Myanmar May Scuttle Plan By Bangladesh To Repatriate Rohingya Refugees." *Forbes Magazine*, 4 Feb. 2021, www.forbes.com/sites/palashghosh/2021/02/01/military-coup-in-myanmar-may-scuttle-plan-by-bangladesh-to-repatriate-rohingya-refugees/?sh=662c10896ff1.

¹² Islam, Arafatul, Deutsche Welle. "Myanmar Coup Stokes Fear among Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh." *DW.COM*, 4 Feb. 2021, www.dw.com/en/myanmar-coup-rohingya-refugees-bangladesh/a-56459279.

China

China has the biggest stake in terms of investments in Myanmar out of the three stakeholders mentioned. Between 1988 and 2018, Beijing invested a whopping US\$ 20.24 billion in projects as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)¹³.



Source: Directorate of Investment and Company Administration (DICA), Myanmar via *The Irrawaddy*

For decades, China was the main economic outlet for a Myanmar that was on the receiving end of economic sanctions. With the connectivity it can provide to the Indian Ocean and South to Southeast Asia, the country is a key strategic interest for Beijing. However, the recent takeover by the military has seen public outrage spillover into Chinese companies and threaten their operations. Protestors are targeting foreign business, particularly Chinese, in a bid to weaken the economy and are operating under the assumption that these entities back the military¹⁴.

¹³ DICA via the Irrawaddy

¹⁴ Lily Kuo, Shibani Mahtani. "As Myanmar Protesters Torch Chinese Factories, Workers Are Caught in Spiraling Crisis." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 18 Mar. 2021,

The targeting of these Chinese businesses highlight the quagmire Beijing is in, in regard to the coup. On one hand, not raising their voice against the actions of the military has resulted in them being the recipient of public hate, on while the other, stark criticism would eliminate chances of cooperation with the Tatmadaw and go against Beijing's philosophy of non-intervention. Furthermore, with India at the helm of investment at the Sittwe port and recent US sanctions directly affecting Chinese industry, China needs to carefully revisit the depth of their partnership with Myanmar in order to ensure no tension arises between Delhi and Beijing and make sure they do not back track on the BRI timeline.

Conclusion

A Myanmar government upholding democratic values seem a distant memory with the current landscape on the ground. Protestors are on brutal crackdown as the Tatmadaw and its constituents go as far as storming universities and hospitals in order to suppress even injured protestors¹⁵. One approach of applying pressure on the Tatmadaw is through the use of sanctions on key operations. The US has already applied their own and blocked the flow of money and property of children of top military officials. The international community can also sanction key military holding companies, Myanmar Economic Corporation and Myanmar Economic Holding Ltd¹⁶. These contribute immensely to the armed forces and hitting them with an economic pinch may make the Tatmadaw to reconsider their actions. However, this could affect any progress at the United Nations Security Council as Chinese business may be affected by the outcomes of the sanctions and prompt Beijing to veto resolutions. Another measure could be to look at the use Track II¹⁷ dialogue process as a short-term solution. Expert non-governmental representatives from regional member states can come together, discuss policy and later advise their own states regarding the most pragmatic approach for a pragmatic solution. The Track II approach also allows for the representation from disenfranchised minority groups in Myanmar and gives them a voice in the conversation. Under the status quo, members of the regional and international community, given their stakes, will look to mitigate the spill-overs at the earliest convenience but a democratic future for Myanmar seems but a mirage.

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www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/china-myanmar-coup-military/2021/03/17/39989378-86c2-11eb-be4a-24b89f616f2c_story.html.

¹⁵ Beech, Hannah. "Myanmar Military Storms Universities and Hospitals and Revokes Press Licenses.", The New York Times, 8 Mar. 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/03/08/world/asia/myanmar-coup-violence.html.

¹⁶ Kurlantzick, Joshua. "Aftershocks of Myanmar's Coup: Policy Options." Council on Foreign Relations, 1 Feb. 2021, www.cfr.org/blog/aftershocks-myanmars-coup-policy-options.

¹⁷ Where Track I dialogue refers to communication between official government representatives, **Track II** dialogue refers to exchanges between influential non-governmental actors (e.g., think-tanks)