



# Myanmar: Revolution is in the heart

September 2021

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*Myanmar has a complex history with ethnic tensions, conflicts, and border issues going back to pre-colonial and colonial days. This article starts with a summary of more recent events relevant to the transition to democracy that resulted in the election of the National League for Democracy (NLD) in 2015 and to the lead-up to the military coup on 1st February 2021. It then focuses on the impact of the coup and some of the subsequent actions that have taken place in response to the coup.*

## Militarisation and ongoing conflicts

The 'Tatmadaw' (the Burmese name for the Myanmar army) came into being following independence from the British in 1948. General Aung San, the father of Aung San Suu Kyi, is credited as one of the main founders of the army, as well as being regarded as the father of the nation.

For decades, the Tatmadaw dominated politics in Myanmar since it assumed power in a coup d'état in 1962. The years that followed were characterised by repression and ruling by fear. The majority of the national defence budget goes to the Tatmadaw who at the turn of the 21st century had more than 370,000 troops.

In August 2017, the actions of the Tatmadaw against the minority Rohingya population were viewed internationally as 'genocide' and resulted in the burning of villages, deaths, and displacement of hundreds of thousands of people.

Between 2015-2020, despite internationally supported processes attempting to bring peaceful resolutions, the Tatmadaw was in active combat with armed ethnic groups representing the Rohingya, Chin, Kachin, Shan, Karen, and others.

## The long and difficult transition to democracy

On 8 August 1988, protests started by students in Yangon spread across the country and led to thousands of reported deaths as the military cruelly quashed the protests. During this period Aung San Suu Kyi returned to Myanmar and the National League for Democracy (NLD) was formed in September 1988 under her leadership.

In 1990 the NLD had a huge victory in the general election, but the military junta would not accept the result, and Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest.

More protests were known as the 'Saffron revolution' followed in 2007 triggered by the removal of subsidies on the price of fuel. These non-violent protests involved students, women, activists, and Buddhist monks. The military crackdown that followed led to many arrests and detentions.

The following year was notable for the 'Cyclone Nargis' which was the country's worst-ever natural disaster resulting in more than a hundred thousand deaths. It was also significant as in the midst of this disaster, the military government organised a vote to approve a new '2008 constitution', under which the military would always retain something of a stranglehold on the future of democracy in Myanmar - by holding 25% of all seats and ongoing responsibility for key ministries such as defence, border affairs, and home affairs.

The military had devised a 7-stage roadmap to democracy which eventually led to elections held in 2012, which the NLD boycotted, and subsequent elections in October 2015 which the NLD won by a landslide.

The military continued to exert control over much of Myanmar politics and the nature of the democracy they had designed was always a fragile one in which the NLD despite their popularity with the electorate had to tread a careful path.

Despite the ongoing conflicts in parts of the country (typically around the border areas with neighbouring countries), the period from 2015 gave people in Myanmar a taste of the new freedoms, openness, and the possibilities that democracy could deliver.

A new generation emerged who had mobile phones, who could access the internet, and who could travel internationally and develop as private sector entrepreneurs.

Universities gradually moved towards reform, re-established their role in supporting academic debate, and delivering the more relevant curriculum. Progress was also slowly being made by human rights and women's rights groups. Society was changing rapidly but unexpected events were to follow.

## A global pandemic and the 2020 election

The Covid-19 pandemic was met with a rapid response in Myanmar in March 2020. The Myanmar health system did not have the capacity to address a major Covid-19 outbreak in the country, so the response of the politicians was to immediately put the country into various forms of lockdown.

The country initially managed to successfully contain the pandemic with relatively few cases and deaths, though with a high cost on the economy and other sectors such as education with schools and universities being closed for most of 2020.

The pandemic crisis led to a reassertion of central government top-down grip over people that echoed some of the past limitations on freedom, but this was accepted as necessary for the public good, and there were hopes of things opening up again after the next round of elections that took place in November 2020.

The elections had been subject to a degree of controversy<sup>1</sup> with the election commission citing security concerns and cancelling voting in some parts of the country based on recommendations by the government, the Defence and Home Affairs Ministries, the military, and the police.

As a result of this an estimated 1.5 million people mainly from ethnic minorities in constituencies in Kachin, Karen, Mon, Rakhine, Chin and Shan States, and the Bago Region were not able to vote.

The result of the election held on 8 November 2020 was a sweeping victory for the NLD who won over 80% of the seats and had control over both houses of the parliament. This was met with significant discontent among the military as the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) they supported had suffered a crushing defeat. Most parties representing minority ethnic groups had performed similarly poorly.

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<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/28/myanmar-election-commission-lacks-transparency>

As the country opened up and embarked on a transition to democracy there was a lot of hope for a bright future. A new generation relished the newfound freedoms that many of their parent's generation had fought for, for so long.

In a few short years, a country that had been among the last in the world to introduce mobile phone access transformed dramatically and the internet became available across most of the country, with the vast majority of the population having some form of smartphone and either 3G or 4G connectivity.

People were communicating actively on social media and the education system was being reformed to meet the changing livelihood needs and aspirations of both individuals and the national economy.

By 2016 a vibrant society was emerging who wanted to engage with the world and were genuinely excited to work on development projects with a wide range of international partners.

This welcome and willingness to collaborate made Myanmar a wonderful place to visit and work. The projects that commenced forged teams of committed people and created genuine and lasting friendships, as locals and foreigners worked together towards shared goals and learned more about each other's cultures and ideas.

## An unexpected coup: 1 February 2021

In the last weekend of January, the newly elected MPs gathering in Nay Pyi Taw were ready to take their seats when the parliament was due to open on Monday 1 February 2021.

In the previous week there had been rumours that the military might intervene, and whilst few truly believed that a coup was possible, the concern was significant enough for a number of embassies to issue a joint statement pointing to the need for the vote of the people to be respected.

There was a view that whatever irregularities may have occurred, the elections had been generally free and fair, and such irregularities would in no way warrant military intervention.

The early hours of Monday 1 February 2021, proved to be an outrageous watershed moment in the recent history of Myanmar, as military vehicles

moved in with a coup-d'état to control the parliament and as Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint, and many MPs were abducted.

It seemed the country, still under the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns could only watch in stunned silence as these shocking events unfolded.

Why the coup happened is difficult for anyone to understand, as the Tatmadaw had retained a controlling interest over many aspects of a fragile democracy that was only ever really partial.

Analysts will point to various factors and in particular the personal political ambitions of the Tatmadaw leader General Min Aung Hlaing. It was certainly a very unwelcome shock to the majority of Myanmar people as overnight the country was plunged back into the dark days of junta dictatorship and isolation from much of the international community.

The military took advantage of the challenging situation the country had been experiencing due to the prevailing Covid-19 pandemic and the constraints it had imposed on public gatherings and movement.

They moved in swiftly overnight to take control of the capital Nay Pyi Taw and detain the political leaders and elected MPs from the NLD who (following a landslide victory) had arrived there for the formal opening of parliament on Monday, February 1, 2021.

## Messing with the wrong generation?

The 'tatmadaw' may well have been prepared for international condemnation from Western countries and the imposition of sanctions against their economic interests<sup>2</sup>. They had dealt with international condemnation before following the Rohingya crisis and under the many years of past junta rule, when they could count on Chinese support and the benign acceptance of other ASEAN countries.

They had seemed oblivious to international sanctions and been prepared to cut off the country and its people from the benefits of engaging with the wider international community.

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<sup>2</sup> They benefit hugely from a shadowy business empire run through the Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC) and Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL) conglomerates

Although the Tatmadaw leader General Min Aung Hlaing announced that they were committed to a transition to democracy and having elections again within one year, few among the public trusted or accepted this statement which within a couple of months had been increased to a two-year aspiration.

Those who remembered the many past years of military rule in Myanmar simply felt that history was about to repeat itself and that their future 'had been stolen'.

None felt this more than the younger generation, who had heard the stories of past repression under the military, from their parents and relatives. They had spent their younger years with their families living in fear, and unable to speak freely, and then with the acceptance by the military of the election results of 2015 they had been able to begin to taste the freedoms and benefits that a democratically elected government could deliver to the country.

No one felt the situation following the 2015 election was perfect, and there was a recognition that democracy was fragile, and it would take time to transition fully to a country that respected the rights of all its citizens.

However, the fight for it had been a long hard road, and this new generation was not going to lie down and passively accept the military coup that, for no apparent good reason, had robbed them overnight of newly cherished freedom and bright hopes for the future of their children.

The months that followed highlighted just how much the Tatmadaw underestimated the response of the people, and just how courageously the people of Myanmar would respond to their actions with creativity and resolve.

What took place in the country in the immediate response to the coup was in many ways extraordinary, and commanded global attention and admiration, as thousands of people across the nation, in every town and city, took to the streets to protest.

Inspired by the young generation with their slogan 'you have messed with the wrong generation' the protests became ever more creative and courageous and even as the tanks and soldiers rolled into the big cities of Yangon and Mandalay the protestors were not deterred.

Artists, poets, musicians, punks, drag queens, bodybuilders, film stars, celebrities, monks, academics, students, and social rights activists were all out on the street making their voices heard in a whole range of creative ways doing

everything they could to make themselves heard by the country's leaders and by the international community.

Oblivious to the wishes of the people, the Tatmadaw responded to this creativity and peaceful protest with unwarranted gunfire, shooting direct to the head, at young children, women, and peaceful protestors. A moving account of the protests is provided by a young musician in this BBC report<sup>3</sup>.

Women have been particularly prominent in the protest both in the front line and in providing care to the injured. Noted examples have been Ma Kyal Sin<sup>4</sup> known as the 'Angel of Mandalay' whose t-shirt carried the optimistic message "Everything will be okay", and the nun Sister Ann Rose Nu Tawng<sup>5</sup> who confronted armed police in Myitkyina begging them to spare the lives of the young protestors and shoot her instead if they had to kill someone.

Women's rights groups have also been very active in protests. After many years of hard work and advocacy, they were gradually having a positive influence on parliamentarians and potential new legislation to protect women's rights, but they are now being targeted by the Tatmadaw as evidenced by the abduction on 8 April of Thin Thin the founder of the 'Women's League for Burma'.

## Repression and resistance

Several months have now passed since the Tatmadaw staged their coup and since then they have ruthlessly tried to crush the hopes of the people for a free, open, and democratic country. Since the coup took place, it is reported that over a thousand people have been killed and thousands more have been arrested and detained.

In the months following the coup, the military imposed a regime of repression and fear, with nightly state media tv broadcasts announcing lists of named people they planned to arrest. No one felt safe at night, as police and soldiers arrived at doors, raided homes, and arrested more people whose only so-called crime was to peacefully protest their opposition to the coup. Prisons

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<sup>3</sup> <https://youtu.be/oXERbFiHqEs>

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<https://edition.cnn.com/2021/03/12/asia/myanmar-protester-angel-democracy-martyr-intl-hnk/index.html>

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/09/shoot-me-instead-myanmar-nuns-plea-to-spare-protesters>

were emptied of criminals who were given amnesty and in their place were filled with those who opposed the military oppressors.

Protests turned into a well-organised and widely supported civil disobedience movement (CDM), with many health workers, teachers, academics, and other government-employed workers refusing to work or do anything that would lend credence or any semblance of support to the military assumption of authority.

Many were dismissed from their posts and have lost their livelihoods but were prepared to do anything they could to oppose the coup. Even after several months, many people in Myanmar continue to support CDM, which has meant that the education and health systems have been dysfunctional, and the economy and a range of public services (including banking and utilities) have also been in a state of collapse.

The Covid crisis has also grown in the country in recent months with many cases reported and public distrust of a vaccination campaign overseen by the military government which has meant that vaccine uptake has been very low.

As the days have passed the terrible situation in Myanmar has gone from the global headlines. The flood of social media posts on Facebook and Twitter has gradually faded and less and less news is visible now to the outside world as Internet access has been severely curtailed, with communications being controlled and monitored by the Tatmadaw.

People have become more and more fearful for their safety and that of their families. Their online presence is fading, many photos have disappeared, profile pictures are simply blacked-out images or defiant images (such as the popular three fingers 'hunger games salute'), and those that are able to have left the country to find a better future elsewhere.

It can seem that the light is going out both online and within the country and that hopes are fading that things will change anytime soon or that the international community will do anything to support the will of the Myanmar people.

Alongside the anger, there is a very deep sense of loss and growing despair. The younger generation in Myanmar and the population as a whole are crying out to be heard. Their message is clear - "Our future and those of our children are being stolen".

Was anyone really listening or was it all a false hope that is now being successfully and ruthlessly crushed by the Tatmadaw, who simply ignore what



amounts mainly to words rather than significant action from a disapproving but toothless international community?

For Myanmar people around the world, the situation in their homeland is a desperate concern and one which is really hard to deal with. Mi Mi Aye<sup>6</sup>, a UK-based Burmese author of a highly regarded Myanmar recipe book called 'Mandalay' writes movingly about this, but she still sees reasons to be hopeful particularly coming out of the energy of the younger generation.

In writing about Myanmar at this time it is important to acknowledge the unforgivable Rohingya genocide which took place at the hands of the Tatmadaw. Events of February 1 and the violence the Tatmadaw has now inflicted on people from all ethnic groups, has however sparked a new unity of purpose and mutual understanding across the majority Burmese population and the ethnic groups including the Rohingya, Karen, Kachin, and Shan who have all been fighting the Tatmadaw for many years.

Following the coup, many of the elected parliamentarians formed their own parliamentary body called the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CPRH) and subsequently announced the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG)<sup>7</sup>.

The NUG publicly committed to forming a federal democracy and announced the scrapping of the 2008 constitution that had retained a powerful role for the Tatmadaw in Myanmar politics.

The NUG is made up of leading female and male figures from wide-ranging ethnic backgrounds most of whom are now in exile or hiding. They are regarded as traitors by the Tatmadaw who are trying to hunt them down<sup>8</sup>.

The female appointments include Naw Susanna Hla Hla Soe<sup>9</sup> who is of Karen ethnicity and Chair of the Women's Organizations Network of Myanmar, appointed as head of a new Ministry of Women, Youth, and Children's affairs.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://time.com/5953413/myanmar-protests-hope/>

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<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/whos-myanmars-national-unity-government.html>

<sup>8</sup>

<https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/wanted-posters-appear-arakan-townships-asking-public-help-nab-democracy-activists>

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.womensrights.asia/rfa\\_susanna\\_hla\\_hla\\_soe.html](http://www.womensrights.asia/rfa_susanna_hla_hla_soe.html)

The Ministry of Foreign affairs is led by Daw Zin Mar Aung, a Botany graduate from Yangon University of Distance Education (YUDE) who became a human rights activist and was imprisoned<sup>10</sup> for many years.

## Hope for the future?

The hope for the future for a federal democracy that can unite the country will depend greatly on the extent the NUG can gain international support and sustain the Civil Disobedience Movement within the country.

Without greater international intervention and targeted sanctions, there are fears that the next stage will be a long and bloody civil war that will be very divisive for the country. The UN General Assembly is faced with an important decision on whether to continue to recognise U Kyaw Moe Tun (who supports the NUG) as the credentialed Ambassador for Myanmar, and the international community also have to decide whether to recognise NUG or the Tatmadaw run State Administrative Council as the legitimate government for the country.

Whatever comes next it is clear from the actions and courage of those who have been standing up against the Tatmadaw, that people want their freedom and will not give up. On May 7 the poet Khet Thi was detained and the next day, after interrogation his body was returned to his widow with the organs removed. This is the horrendous reality of the country now, but to conclude with his words of inspiration:

“They shoot in the head, but they don’t know that revolution is in the heart”<sup>11</sup>

People are no longer fighting for the return of the elected NLD but have been campaigning for a new, inclusive, and federal approach, based on a new constitution that takes the military influence out of politics.

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Potential Artwork source: [Threefingers.org](https://www.threefingers.org)

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.womensrights.asia/rfa\\_zin\\_mar\\_aung.html](http://www.womensrights.asia/rfa_zin_mar_aung.html)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/10/body-of-arrested-myanmar-poet-khet-thi-returned-to-family-with-organs-missing>