

The military coup threat myth

A persistent myth that the military in Burma are looking for an excuse to retake direct control of the country is now being used to justify inaction over the ethnic cleansing and possible genocide of the Rohingya.

For some, it is a genuine fear, for others, it is a convenient political excuse for inaction.

While a misplaced fear of a coup is understandable given Burma's history, it misreads the current political set-up in the country. The political system in Burma now is entirely the creation of the military.

It has been painstakingly designed by them to protect their interests while at the same time relieving the domestic and internal pressure they were under. It has and is working very well for them. To retake direct control would undo more than a decade's worth of painstaking work to create the system currently in place.

Broadly, there are two main schools of thought on the military coup myth.

One is that the NLD-led government, activists, and the international community must tread very carefully to avoid provoking the military and prompting a military takeover.

The other is that the military are deliberately creating crises that could be used as a pretext for retaking power. While it is likely that the military have and will continue to look for opportunities to undermine and weaken the NLD-led government, it is extremely unlikely they would want to retake direct control.

It would not be in their own interests to do so.

Top down reforms

Understanding the military is critical. Past characterisations of them being crazy and superstitious have now been exposed for how wrong they were. In various forms, the military ran Burma for more than 50 years, far longer than most regimes last. There have been some bumpy transitions of leadership during this time, and the odd purge, but overall, despite personal rivalries, they have stayed disciplined and united. Their effectiveness and ruthlessness in dealing with opponents in Burma as well as within their own ranks helped ensure their longevity in power.



Senior General Min Aung Hlaing

When a combination of domestic and international pressure finally did force the military to accept reforms would need to happen, they did so slowly, at their own pace, and on their own terms. They did not negotiate with anybody. They brought in a new constitution which would guarantee that they still controlled the key levers of power in the country, would have the legal power to retake control, and could veto any attempts at further reform which might threaten their power and interests.

They kept control of Defence, Home Affairs and Border Affairs ministries. This means the military are independent of the NLD-led government. They set their own budget and can decide their own actions, including military offensives in ethnic states. Control over home affairs gives them control of police, prisons and other security services. It also includes the general administration department, giving them control over large parts of the civil service.

The military has guaranteed places at every level of government, from 25 percent of seats in Parliament, to government ministries, to seats on the highest body in the land, the National Defence and Security Council. The military also continues to have very significant business interests.

The November 2015 election was the culmination of their careful transition plan to a new political system in Burma, which they see as essential to their survival. The constitution was designed knowing an NLD election landslide was likely. Hence the guaranteed seats in parliament, the high bar for changing the 2008 Constitution, and military appointed ministers.

International acceptance

Although the military were praised by the international community for a smooth handover of power in 2016, this was never really in doubt. They military needed the election to go smoothly, and they needed a smooth handover of power. They were being praised for implementing their own plan to cement their own power.

The military have been embraced and praised by the international community. With the exception of arms embargoes by the EU, USA and a handful of other countries, all sanctions against them have been lifted. This is despite their continuing to block democratic reform, and continuing military offensives in Shan and Kachin States, committing what the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has concluded could be war crimes.

The USA, UK, Australia, Japan and many others countries began military training and co-operation programmes. Min Aung Hlaing received numerous invitations from countries offering him high level visits.

In November 2016, even as Min Aung Hlaing's military engaged in burning Rohingya villages, using mass rape and sexual violence against Rohingya women, he was invited to speak at a prestigious meeting of EU military heads.

In the same month, the government of Italy gave Min Aung red carpet treatment, including sightseeing in Venice and tours of military suppliers. In April 2017, one month after the United Nations



Min Aung Hlaing at a meeting of EU military heads

Human Rights Council set up a Fact Finding Mission to investigate possible war crimes and crimes against humanity in Burma, largely committed by the Burmese military, the governments of Austria and Germany also gave Min Aung Hlaing red carpet treatment, more visits to military suppliers, and offered training.

For the military, this international acceptance is very important. They see themselves as deserving a position of respect internationally. Min Aung Hlaing's Facebook page meticulously documents his many foreign trips. He goes abroad more often than the Foreign Minister, Aung San Suu Kyi. Meeting with ambassadors and foreign dignitaries are also always reported. They don't want to lose these gains.

Domestic opposition reduced

Most political opposition in the country has come in under their constitution. The military no longer face the risk of a popular uprising and losing everything. Min Aung Hlaing has more followers on his Facebook page than Aung San Suu Kyi's State Counsellor Facebook page. The military offensive against the Rohingya which began in August 2017 has boosted the popularity of the military.

The military want to be seen by the population of Burma as saviours and protectors of the nation. Their status is important to them. They put significant effort into public relations and media to promote their image.

Retaking direct control would undermine much of what they have achieved. They are fully aware

that if they did so, there would be mass protests in Burma, and that the approach of the international community would change. It is not in their interests to do so.

No excuse needed for a coup

If the military want to retake direct control of government, they don't need to wait for an excuse. Most people in Burma would not accept any excuse for removing Aung San Suu Kyi. The international community, weak as it has been on the military, would not accept any justification for retaking power either.

If the military wanted to retake power, they can do so at any time. They could use loosely worded parts of the Constitution on national unity and security, or do it anyway because they have the guns.

Another way in which the military coup myth argument is used is to justify inaction by Aung San Suu Kyi and her government on key issues. It is argued that she is constrained by the risk of provoking a coup.

Undoubtedly the military have some red lines which would trigger a coup, but this is only likely over a very significant threat to their interests regarding the political system they have put in place.

Aung San Suu Kyi went ahead with crossing what was considered a major red line, the constitutional ban on her becoming President by making herself State Counsellor. There were protests from the military but of course they did not launch a coup, they had too much at stake to lose over this.



Min Aung Hlaing with the military in Germany

The calculations by the military will be the same over other issues. For example, they are not going to risk losing everything they gained and spent years putting into place because Aung San Suu Kyi released political prisoners.

On the Rohingya crisis, Aung San Suu Kyi is constrained in that she cannot control the military and order them to stop what they are doing, but she is not constitutionally or politically constrained from defending human rights for the Rohingya, and not obliged in any way to defend the military and protect them.

The military coup myth is a convenient shield for the government of Burma to hide behind when facing criticism for inaction on human rights issues.

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing himself recognises the value of the perception by some that the military are itching to retake power. At least once a year he makes a reference to constitutional provisions that allow the military to retake direct control, sparking anxious debate within Burma.

Excuse for inaction by the international community

Some governments around the world are also using the military coup myth argument as a fig leaf for their inaction on promoting human rights in Burma. This even extends to doing nothing in the face of ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya for fear of risking a military coup.

This is an extraordinary argument. In effect, it is an argument that ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya will be accepted by the international community for the 'greater good' of the reforms which have taken place in Burma since 2011. It renders the Rohingya expendable for the 'greater good' of the military drafted undemocratic 2008 Constitution.

Burma after Aung San Suu Kyi

Discussing a time when Aung San Suu Kyi is no longer involved in politics in Burma is pretty much taboo among people from Burma, but there is no doubt the military have thought this far ahead.

The military always think long term.

What will politics in Burma look like after Aung San Suu Kyi?

There is no obvious successor to Aung San Suu Kyi within the NLD. There is no deputy with significant authority and with widespread recognition within the country. There was no system of spokespeople or shadow ministers on different issues when the NLD was outside government, allowing people to develop political skills, expertise and profile. Even now, only a handful of the 21 union ministers are NLD members.

There is no clear ideology within the NLD either, although it is generally economically and socially conservative. What policy making there has been has largely been top down from Aung San Suu Kyi. Aung San Suu Kyi is the person who holds the disparate people in the NLD together. She is also the person who is responsible in large part for their electoral success.

Without a clear successor or a unifying ideology, what will hold the NLD together after Aung San Suu Kyi?

Some NLD MPs privately argue that when Aung San Suu Kyi is gone it will be an opportunity for the NLD to have more healthy internal discussion on issues



Aung San Suu Kyi

and will unleash talent currently held back. But apart from strident Aung San Suu Kyi/NLD loyalists, few people believe the NLD will avoid splits after Aung San Suu Kyi has stepped down or passed away.

How does this impact Parliament and government in Burma?

At the 2015 election the NLD won 57% of the vote and 79% of the seats. The pro-military USDP won 28% of the vote and just 8% of the seats. Almost 100 political parties competed in the 2015 elections and 13 parties won seats in the national parliament.

The first past the post system gave the NLD a landslide but it is significant that the main pro-military party won as much as half the votes that the NLD did. The USDP would likely benefit from any split within the NLD, which could divide votes.

Votes for the NLD would also likely drop without Aung San Suu Kyi at the helm. This is probably particularly the case for ethnic voters, who surprised many with the level of support they gave to the NLD in the 2015 election. Many of these are believed to have been votes for 'Mother Suu', rather than the NLD.

Support for the NLD is likely to drop in any case as a combination of unrealistic expectations of the new NLD government, constitutional constraints and obstructions by the military, and general incompetence and failure to deliver change, impact on NLD support.

Possible scenarios

An entirely feasible future political scenario, in ten years or so, is of a divided and weakened NLD, and the military MPs and pro-military USDP a powerful force within Parliament.

One scenario is that the NLD will depend on ethnic political parties for support. This could have positive outcomes in forcing the NLD to make more concessions on ethnic and political rights. It could also be a fractious and unstable coalition. An alliance involving nationalist Rakhine parties, bringing them into government, could be very dangerous.

Some ethnic political activists and observers believe that the NLD would even prefer to enter into an alliance with the USDP, rather than with ethnic political parties, giving the military additional influence over government.

Any future political scenario is likely to see a weakened NLD, ethnic and pro-democracy political parties divided, and an increasingly powerful military and pro-military bloc in Burmese politics and within Parliament. This on top of the power the military already have over politics via the 2008 Constitution.

As far as the military are concerned, they will become an even more dominant force politically. These scenarios are not inevitable, an alternative path is possible with domestic political will and international support, but they are possible future outcomes and the military will have considered them.



Burmese soldiers in Parliament

What next?

The military have not and do not show any signs of being willing to consider constitutional reforms which will make Burma more democratic and reduce their power. As far as they are concerned the reform process is over, and the new political system they have created is working for them very well.

Compare the international outrage and sanctions imposed following the crushing of the uprising in 2007, to the reaction of the international community following the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya in 2017. The military have committed atrocities on a scale that far exceeds those in 2007.

As of 11th October, six weeks since their ethnic cleansing campaign began, the only international sanction they have faced is the UK suspending a military training programme, and the USA cancelling plans for expanding training and co-operation (while keeping the existing programme in place).

The current political system is the military's creation and it is working for them. They are enjoying growing popularity at home and acceptance and effective impunity abroad.

The false bogeyman of a military coup must not continue to be used as a reason for inaction, allowing horrific human rights violations to continue.

More information

See our briefing paper 'Time for a rethink on policy towards Burma's military':

http://burmacampaign.org.uk/burma_briefing/time-for-a-rethink-on-policy-towards-burmas-military/



Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh

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& Development in Burma