

# The February 1, 2021 Coup d'Etat in Burma: Some Reasons Why

Donald M. Seekins

**Abstract:** The Army-State, which had ruled Burma with an iron fist between Ne Win's March 1962 coup d'état and the initiation of a hybrid civilian-military government after the General Election of November 2010 and the convening of the Union Parliament (Pyidaungsu Hluttaw) in early 2011, has been resurrected. Burma's "transition" to democracy is finished, despite the promises of the new junta's leader, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, to hold new elections in 2022. Burma's tragic history of military control is a kind of alphabet soup: starting with the BSPP (Burma Socialist Programme Party) in 1962, the SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) in 1988, the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) in 1997 and now, finally, the SAC (State Administrative Council), Min Aung Hlaing's sad contribution to decades of misrule and under-development. This article explains the factors leading to the coup despite the powerful role of the military in the earlier government.

[There is a theory] according to which people are divided . . . into

raw material and extraordinary individuals, that's to say, the sort of

individuals for whom, because of their exalted position, there is no

law, but who themselves create the laws for the

rest of mankind, the

raw material, the sweepings (Dostoyevsky 1991: 585, 586).

While it may seem unusual to quote Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* in an article about Burma, anyone familiar with the country's modern history knows that the Army-State in that country since 1962 has used the Burmese people, both majority Burmans and ethnic minorities, as "raw material." The coup d'état of February 1, 2021 is only the latest example of this behaviour, which has created, or recreated, a situation in which the State, equivalent to the Tatmadaw, the Burmese armed forces, finds itself at war with society.

According to a report in *The Irrawaddy* magazine, dated March 3, 2021, on that day "soldiers and riot police loyal to the country's military regime killed at least 28 unarmed civilians amid their crackdown on anti-junta protesters in at least four cities." It added: "that number is very likely to increase because there are many who have been seriously injured" ("Another bloody day in Myanmar," 2021)." Later, news reports coming out of Burma said that in fact the death toll on March 3 had been 38, making it the deadliest day since the coup d'état was imposed (Gladstone, 2021). Knowing the Tatmadaw's behaviour in previous periods of unrest, we can expect that the death toll will escalate, remembering the 1988 words of the old dictator Ne Win - "if in future there are mob disturbances, if the army

shoots, it hits – there is no firing in the air to scare” (Seekins, 2017: 37). Although in the days immediately following the coup, the security forces’ reaction to massive popular demonstrations was restrained, at least by 1988 and 2007 standards, it has become increasingly lethal since that time since live bullets as well as rubber bullets, tear gas and firehoses have been utilized.<sup>1</sup> By mid-March 2021, the total had reached 80 fatalities, and keeps rising (Regan, 2021).

The Army-State, which had ruled Burma with an iron fist between Ne Win’s March 1962 coup d’état and the initiation of a hybrid civilian-military government after the General Election of November 2010 and the convening of the Union Parliament (Pyidaungsu Hluttaw) in early 2011, has been resurrected. Burma’s “transition” to democracy is finished, despite the promises of the new junta’s leader, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, to hold new elections in 2022. Burma’s tragic history of military control is a kind of alphabet soup: starting with the BSPP (Burma Socialist Programme Party) in 1962, the SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) in 1988, the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) in 1997 and now, finally, the SAC (State Administrative Council), Min Aung Hlaing’s sad contribution to decades of misrule and under-development. This history has left Burma one of the poorest nations in East or Southeast Asia, despite the short-lived opening of the country to the outside world after Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and members of her National League for Democracy (NLD) were elected to parliament in 2012 and formed a government following the General Election of November 2015. At that time, Burma seemed a heartening exception to the wave of authoritarianism that has been spreading through much of the world in the early twenty-first century, including the Trump Administration in the United States.



**Daw Aung Sang Ssu Kyi and General Min Aung Hlaing**

With all its imperfections, this was springtime for Burma. A time of hope. But it wasn’t fated to last. Following the announcement of the coup on February 1, Aung San Suu Kyi was detained and remains under house arrest at an undisclosed location in Naypyidaw, since 2005 Burma’s capital; she was charged with legally dubious crimes, such as illegally importing walkie-talkies, violating coronavirus social distancing rules and stirring up political unrest, and will be tried secretly. By early March, over 1,700 people had been arrested, including many journalists. Many people were arrested in night time raids carried out by the security forces, and the new military regime proclaimed a general amnesty, clearing jails of prisoners to open up space for a large number of new political prisoners (Seekins 2011: 153).<sup>2</sup>

One development which Burma-watchers have been waiting for, but which does not seem to have occurred, even in 2021, is a split within the Tatmadaw high command, with one faction going over to the pro-democracy side. This has occurred in other Asian nations, most notably the late 1980s in South Korea and 1998 with the fall of President Soeharto from power in Indonesia. During the SLORC/SPDC period, there was ample evidence of strong antagonism between the regular Army under top leaders

Than Shwe and Maung Aye and Military Intelligence under Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt; but he was purged in 2004 and MI, previously described as a “state within a state,” was eviscerated (Seekins 2017: 350). However, the armed forces have remained essentially unified under strong top-down control. Although some police officers have defected to the side of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) after the February power seizure (around 600 officers by early March), officers and men of the regular armed services seem to be remaining loyal to Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, its commander-in-chief.

Looking in from the outside, one of the most surprising things is that there was a coup d'état at all. Daw Suu Kyi had been co-operating with the Tatmadaw on most issues, despite her party's unsuccessful effort to have the 2008 Constitution amended to make it possible for her to become president of Burma and to remove from the country's national- and regional level legislatures the 25 percent military membership which is a cornerstone of the Constitution. Through her defensive and indifferent reaction to the army's persecution of Muslim Rohingyas in Rakhine State in 2017, and her appearance at the International Court of Justice in 2019 to deny that the Tatmadaw had committed genocide against them, she bent over backward, it seems, to please the “men in trousers” who were primarily responsible for the violence against the Rohingyas.<sup>3</sup> The generals, especially Min Aung Hlaing, may not have liked her, but why did they overthrow a system they already had benefited from? It just doesn't seem rational.

By destroying the very political system that the Tatmadaw itself had crafted with the help of loyal advisors, embodied in the 2008 Constitution (which was approved in a highly questionable referendum in May of that year), the Senior General launched the Army-State into uncertain waters. Could he be so confident of the support he would get from neighbouring

Asian countries, especially China but also including Japan, India and ASEAN countries, that he could ignore the criticism and possible sanctions by the rest of the world? Continuation of the SAC will push Burma back into isolation, especially if the junta utilizes new technology to shut down Internet links with the outside world and monitor the population in much more sophisticated ways than Khin Nyunt, the SLORC/SPDC era director of Military Intelligence, was able to do with his army of informers (Beech, 2021). To this question, Tatmadaw officers have answered confidently: “We are used to sanctions,” and “we must learn to walk with only a few friends” (Gladstone, 2021).

In the remainder of this paper, I would like to suggest that in the eyes of Min Aung Hlaing and his fellow officers, Aung San Suu Kyi's landslide election victory in November of 2020 did indeed constitute a threat to their own power monopoly, despite her apparent docility on matters including suppression of the Muslim minority. This is because it showed that their attempts to nurture a constitutionally legitimate alternative, or alternatives, to the National League for Democracy had failed so spectacularly.

Their hopes of undermining Aung San Suu Kyi's immense popularity can be described in terms of three tactics:

1. The Tatmadaw encouraged and openly promoted a militant movement of Buddhist monks, whose most visible member was Ashin Wirathu, who claimed that Daw Suu Kyi and the NLD were pro-Muslim; this was meant to undercut the NLD's popular support by mobilizing anti-Muslim sentiment among, apparently, a majority of the party's supporters;
2. Taking advantage of the open expression of discontent by many ethnic minority

people who had become disillusioned about Daw Suu Kyi and the NLD since the 2015 election and could be expected to vote for ethnic parties at the expense of the NLD; and

3. Continuing to cultivate the largest pro-military party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), as a nationwide alternative to the NLD.

To understand how and why the military's election plan failed, we have to look closely at the outcome of the November 2020 General Election.

### **Aung San Suu Kyi's Third Landslide**

Despite military suppression over a period of some 32 years, the National League for Democracy has been a highly successful political movement. Founded in September 1988 on the eve of the seizure of power by the SLORC, it won almost 60 percent of the vote and 392 out of the 485 contested constituencies (or 81 percent) of the seats in the unicameral Pyithu Hluttaw in the General Election of May 27, 1990, though the parliament was never allowed to convene. Although it did not run in the General Election of November 2010, in the following General Election on November 10, 2015, it won 886 out of 1,150 seats contested (77 percent) in the combined civilian-allocated sections of the bicameral national legislature, the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, and the Hluttaw or legislatures of the fourteen States and Regions.<sup>4</sup> Since she was barred constitutionally from becoming president of the Union of Myanmar, the Union Parliament voted Aung San Suu Kyi a special position as "State Counsellor," which made her de facto leader of the civilian government. This was accomplished despite the military appointees' opposition.<sup>5</sup> Daw Suu Kyi had claimed just before the 2015 election that in making policy she would be

"above" the president (Seekins 2017: 95).

The 2020 election results follow the general contours of the previous voting in the 2015 election and 2017 and 2018 by-elections - only more so. Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD won by a landslide in the Upper and Lower Houses of the Union Parliament and in Regional and State legislatures.<sup>6</sup> The military's "proxy party," the USDP, lost seats, especially in the regional/state Hluttaws, and the possibility that it might evolve into a nationwide political force that can challenge the NLD became more remote than ever. Despite pre-election predictions that the NLD might have to share power with ethnic nationality parties such as the Arakan National Party, the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy or the Mon Unity Party because of the minority nationality peoples' growing disenchantment with the NLD, none of these parties did particularly well (Kyaw Zwa Moe 2020). The ethnic minority parties are still far from their goal of achieving united political action across geographic and ethnic boundaries - or even within their respective homelands.

In the Amyotha Hluttaw (Upper House), the NLD won 138 seats (out of 161 contested, which did not include seven constituencies because of alleged insurgency in those areas), flipping three seats. The USDP lost four seats, retaining a total of only seven seats in the Upper House, and the remaining seven parties which won seats (out of 87 parties putting up candidates) won a total of 16 seats. All of the parties in this category claimed to represent minority communities, save for the National Unity Party, the reincarnated Burma Socialist Programme Party of the Ne Win era, which lost its single seat and most likely will land in the dustbin of history.

Several non-ethnic parties, formed by discontents who left the NLD and/or members of a largely abortive "third force" movement claiming to represent an alternative both to the

armed forces and Daw Suu Kyi, failed to win any seats in any of the legislatures; groups such as the People's Party, People's Pioneer Party and the Union Betterment Party will probably join the former BSPP in political limbo if not oblivion (Min Zin, 2020).

In the Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House, or House of Representatives), the NLD won 258 seats (out of 315 contested, not including fifteen constituencies where voting was not held because of alleged insurgency), gaining an extra three seats. The USDP lost four seats in the Lower House for a total of 26, and ten ethnic parties won a total of 29 seats. The Mon Unity Party and the Kayah State Democracy Party put in a respectable performance, gaining three seats each.

In the Regional and State Hluttaws, or legislatures, the NLD won 501 seats, including a gain over previous elections of 25 seats. The USDP won a total of 38 seats, but suffered a spectacular loss of 35 seats. A total of 660 seats were contested, although voting was cancelled in 48 constituencies because of insurgency. A long list of ethnic parties, totalling 16, won a total of 71 regional/state seats as well as two independents, with the Mon Unity Party putting in the best performance in this category, winning six seats. In voting for Ethnic Affairs Ministers, the NLD won 23, while ethnic parties and two independents won the remaining six. The USDP won none. Established in the 2008 Constitution, Ethnic Affairs Ministers are supposed to look after the interests of small minority communities in the different regions and states (Seekins 2017: 201).

Glancing at an electoral map of the entire country, a broad red belt (red is customarily the colour of the NLD) runs all the way from the extreme south, through the centre of the country to the southern and central parts of Kachin State. Non-NLD electoral victories are concentrated in the east and west, within the

boundaries of Arakan (Rakhine) and Shan States; constituencies where the Union Election Commission shut down voting because of insurgency are also found inside these states (as mentioned, a total of 22 seats in the bicameral Union Parliament, the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, and 48 in the state legislatures).

In the Amyotha Hluttaw, the National League for Democracy did surprisingly well in ethnic minority states outside of Arakan and Shan States, winning: 12 out of 12 seats in Chin State, 10 out of 12 in Kachin State, seven out of 12 in Kayah State, 11 out of 12 in Kayin (Karen) State, and 9 out of 12 in Mon State. The NLD's success was duplicated in the Pyithu Hluttaw: eight out of nine in Chin State, 12 out of 18 in Kachin State, four out of seven in Kayah State, six out of seven in Kayin (Karen) State, and eight out of ten in Mon State. In Arakan State, it won two out of eight and in Shan State, 11 out of 49. In the seven regions in central Burma, where the ethnic majority Burmans are most concentrated, the sweep for the NLD was 100% for both houses, save for three won by the USDP in Yangon, Mandalay and Sagaing Regions. In Burma's two largest cities (as distinguished from their surrounding regions), Yangon and Mandalay, all constituencies were won by the NLD.

The reasons why the NLD remained highly popular in most ethnic states are unclear. One factor seems to be large-scale migration of majority Burmans into the minority areas. Since the government after 2015 shortened the residency requirement for voters from 180 to 90 days, these newcomers could have decisively tipped the balance away from ethnic parties to the NLD in many constituencies (Min Zin, 2020). Another reason may be that ethnic minority voters themselves might have felt a vote for the NLD was a vote against military intervention in politics, in their own experience, a worst-case scenario.

In conclusion, it seemed that the 2020 General

Election, even more so than the 2015 voting, marked the end of the heroic period in the history of the National League for Democracy. It was no longer an opposition party, the beacon for those who are deeply dissatisfied with the status quo. Now, it was the Establishment, and immediately after the election it seemed that the NLD and the Tatmadaw might peacefully coexist.

### The Buddhist Factor

The huge Thumbs Down which the voters in Burma gave the Union Solidarity and Development Party and the indifference with which minorities supported the ethnic parties, as reflected in the election results described above, were perceived by the Tatmadaw as a major setback. But another dimension of the election was perhaps even more disturbing to the men in trousers: their inability, with the aid of Buddhist militant monks, to stick a pro-Muslim label on Daw Suu Kyi and the NLD.

Over the years, especially since the previous general election in 2015, observers of Burmese politics have noticed a particularly troubling trend: a coalition, or at least a perception of common interests, between the Tatmadaw's more hard-line officers and the Buddhist militants, especially the Mandalay monk, Ashin Wirathu, and the MaBaTha, or the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion. Before the 2015 general election, the MaBaTha and its supporters succeeded in having the Union Parliament pass four laws designed to prevent the spread of Islam inside the country. Wirathu repeatedly claimed that despite the display of the peacock, the Burman national symbol, in its flag, Aung San Suu Kyi's party was an instrument of Muslim interests, a "peacock defending Muslims" (Seekins 2017: 569-571).

Wirathu is a piece of work. Although Buddhist monks are supposed to follow Gotama Buddha's teachings and promote through words and

actions peace and compassion, he has had no compunction about using violent and even obscene language to describe Muslims, especially the Rohingyas of Arakan State, and his critics both inside and outside Burma, including United Nations human rights observer, Ms. Yanghee Lee, whom he described using words that cannot be printed here.

One of the initial impressions this writer has had of the CDM (Civil Disobedience Movement) protests in Burma today is that while Buddhist monks have participated in small numbers, there is not the massive turnout of members of the Sangha evident in the earlier protests of 1988 and, especially, the "Saffron Revolution" protests of 2007. Nor is monks' participation comparable to that of the "Overturning the Offering Bowl" protests of summer 1990 in Mandalay, Yangon and other cities. This may reflect the power which the Tatmadaw exercises over senior members of the monkhood, who are supposed to impose discipline on younger monks, and also flagging enthusiasm for Aung San Suu Kyi because of the influence of Wirathu and the anti-NLD MaBaTha movement. However, it may be possible that the participations of monks will increase as the CDM continues.

Daw Suu Kyi apparently earned renewed respect among the Burmese Buddhist majority for her testimony before the International Court of Justice in The Hague in 2019. In that sense, her allegedly amoral "pragmatism" reaped rich rewards for her during the 2020 general election. Not only did the USDP lose seats, but no candidates from (other) extremist or ultra-nationalist parties won seats in the national-level or regional/state legislatures (Min Zin, 2020).

The more Daw Suu Kyi is silent on the treatment of Burmese Muslims, especially the Rohingyas, the more it seems she is esteemed among Burman Buddhists as a "mother figure," in Min Zin's words. Indeed, during the

campaign in 2020 and the post-coup CDM protests she has often been described by her supporters as “Mother” Suu Kyi, a compassionate figure who deserves the gratitude of Burmese, or Burman, people for her life of self-sacrifice for her nation (ibid.). But this self-sacrifice and compassion has, or had, borders, reinforcing the separation of In-groups and Out-groups inside Burma, which reflects deep contradictions within Burma’s newly “democratic” politics. However, in the February coup d’état, the Tatmadaw has tried to smother this infant democracy in its crib.

Speaking in Mandalay on February 19th, the chairman of the State Supreme Sangha Council, or MaHaNa, issued a call for the Tatmadaw and the NLD “not to have grudges against each other and seek each other’s devastation, but to have love and sympathy and negotiate as soon as possible to solve the ongoing crisis” (“Chairman of Myanmar’s Buddhist authority . . .” 2021). One of Burma’s most revered monks, the Sitagu Sayadaw, has mildly criticized the military for violence against protesters but is known for his closeness to Min Aung Hlaing (“Criticized, Burma’s influential monk . . .” 2021). At this time of crisis, it appears that the Sangha hierarchy prefers to keep a low profile.

### **The “Stolen Election”**

Claims that the general election was “stolen” from the USDP and other parties because of fraud and intimidation have not been taken seriously by either domestic or international observers. Election monitoring organisations such as the Carter Centre verified its fairness. According to the Centre: “On November 8, 2020, the people of Myanmar reaffirmed their commitment to democracy by turning out to vote despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although important aspects of the electoral process were impacted by restrictions imposed to combat the

pandemic, the Carter Centre’s international election observation mission found that voters were enthusiastic and able to freely express their will at the polls and choose their elected representatives (Carter Centre, 2021). According to a Burma specialist based in Japan, the highly influential Sasagawa Yohei, the Japanese government’s “special envoy” to Burma in charge of “national reconciliation,” admitted that no serious irregularities in the election took place. Although final figures were not available, a high percentage of Burma’s 37 million eligible voters (out of a total population of 54 million) turned out to vote for 5,639 candidates belonging to 87 parties, as well as a handful of independents (“Myanmar’s 2020 Election Results in Numbers,” 2020).

Even before the voting, Min Aung Hlaing expressed scepticism about the election. This seemed to echo Trump’s playbook in the American presidential election (his logic being: “if I don’t win, the election was a fraud”), though there is no evidence that the generals were directly inspired by America’s ex-chief executive. On the eve of the election, the Senior General warned that the alleged mishandling of the voting by the Union Election Commission (UEC) imperilled the legitimacy of the outcome, and that the military could not stand idly by while this occurred (“Myanmar Military Chief’s Warnings . . .” 2020). Many feared that in the aftermath of the voting, a confrontation might occur between the Tatmadaw and the civilian politicians loyal to Daw Suu Kyi; but in the weeks after November 8, nothing seemed to happen, and global observers were impressed by the peacefulness of the voting, in great contrast to the near-anarchic aftermath of the presidential election in the United States including the pro-Trump “riot” in the US Capitol building on January 6, 2021.

Complaints about the UEC were genuine, and represented a variety of views other than those of the Tatmadaw’s leader. The organisation was

under the control of the civilian government, which chose its members, and previously had been criticised for its lack of transparency. This became especially controversial after the UEC decreed that seven constituencies in the Amyotha Hluttaw, 15 in the Pyithu Hluttaw and 48 in the State and Regional Hluttaws could not hold elections, allegedly because of unrest and insurgency. These areas were found in Rakhine and Shan States where support for the NLD was lower than in other areas. Moreover, the UEC partially shut down other constituencies in Bago (Pegu), Chin, Kachin, Kayin (Karen) and Mon States/Regions. It is estimated that because of this action, some 1.5 million voters could not participate in the election (Beech and Saw Nang, 2020).

In late October 2020, New York-based Human Rights Watch published a report criticising the UEC for closing down constituencies without revealing objective criteria for doing so. According to an HRW official: “the Union Election Commission is making decisions affecting people’s right to choose their representatives without an iota of transparency” (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Criticism of the UEC also came from what might be considered an unlikely source, Sasagawa Yohei, chairman of the Nippon Foundation and, as mentioned, Japanese government-designated “special envoy” for national reconciliation in Myanmar. In early December 2020, he said in an interview with *The Irrawaddy* magazine that in talks with the chairman of the Commission, U Hla Thein, the latter confirmed that voting would be held in constituencies in northern Rakhine State if conditions were peaceful. Sasagawa had visited the area beforehand, and said there was no fighting between the Tatmadaw and the insurgent Arakan Army (AA) and the voting ban wasn’t justified (Nan Lwin, 2020).

However, as mentioned above, Sasagawa admitted that the general election was fair,

overall, although he refrained from repeating this comment after the February 1 coup d’état.

A second issue related to the general election was the role of single-seat constituencies in producing a “super majority” for the largest party in the legislatures. In other words, the system of “first past the post” voting creates a sometimes large disparity between the number of seats won by the majority party and the actual percentage of voters who chose that party. Unlike the system in other democracies, such as Germany and Japan, there is in Burma no system of proportional representation in which voters cast their ballots both for a single candidate and for a list of candidates submitted by each party. In other words, the system (unfairly) “locks in” the largest party.

Since the single seat constituency system was enshrined in election laws in accordance with the 2008 Constitution, which the military oversaw, it is odd that this point would be enlisted by military spokesmen as justification for the power seizure. In early March, a new Tatmadaw-appointed Union Election Commission recommended that a proportional representation system be established. However, a member of the NLD central executive committee pointed out that her party, which won 83 percent of the total votes on November 8, could not approve such a change (“Myanmar’s NLD rejects . . .” 2021).

While problems with the pre-coup electoral system certainly exist, it is hard to see how they could justify an overthrow of the entire system or the cancelling of an election which observers, including Sasagawa, overwhelmingly declared was fair.





### Conclusions: Burma's Very Uncertain Future

Recalling the massive popular demonstrations which took place in Yangon and other cities in summer of 1988, almost 33 years ago, this writer is struck by the differences as well as the similarities between then and now. On one hand, in both cases huge numbers of ordinary people have turned out to confront the regime, and have encountered deadly force, though the present uprising has not yet become as sanguinary as that of 1988's "Democracy Summer." The protesters were, and are, a cross section of Burmese society, especially urban society, embracing workers, street vendors and shopkeepers as well as doctors, nurses, civil servants, lawyers, students and teachers. On the other hand, the protesters of today seem to reflect the ways Burma has changed, especially since the "opening" of the country following the implementation of the 2008 Constitution in 2011. They seem more globalised, show a great sense of humour at times, and seem also more prosperous. Today's demonstrators wear hard hats or bike helmets, use cell phones, fashion improvised shields for themselves copied from

those carried by the police and carry out appealing political theatre. They seem to be inspired in large measure by the pro-democracy "umbrella movement" protesters in Hong Kong. They carry a variety of colourful signs that are digitally printed, including large banners. Women are especially prominent among them (Beech, 2021a). Some of the young women have worn formal ball gowns as they marched down the streets of Yangon or Mandalay.

Modes of protest not found in earlier decades include pasting copies of portraits of Min Aung Hlaing onto the street so that in "pacifying" the city streets, security forces would have to step on them; and using women's sarongs (known in Burmese as htamein) as flags or hanging them on clotheslines around protesters, to protect them. Common Burmese belief is that exposure to htamein or women's underclothes drains a male of his masculine power.

But the CDM shares with earlier protesters remarkable courage in facing down the security forces, armed with lethal force.

The future for Burma is extremely uncertain. As mentioned above, there is no evidence that the Tatmadaw will split, with one fraction going over to the people's side. Another way in which the situation in Burma is likely to be the same as in 1988 is the poor prospects for the protesters in central Burma to link up with ethnic minority insurgents in the border areas. The regime over the decades has been extremely successful in keeping the ethnic minority groups divided both against themselves and isolated from its Burman opponents, although attempts were made after 1988 for the Burmans and the ethnic fighters to establish a united front, such as the Democratic Alliance of Burma, formed in November of that year. What was true in 1988 seems to be still true, that Burma consists of two political systems: (1) central Burma and (2) the ethnic minority states. In both, the Tatmadaw

exercises decisive power.

Much attention is being paid to the question of what the international community can do about the shutdown of Burma's democracy. It is not an easy one to answer. During the SLORC/SPDC period, Western countries imposed strict economic and other sanctions on Burma, which intensified after Daw Suu Kyi and members of her party were attacked by pro-regime thugs in central Burma in May 2003, the so-called "Black Friday" incident. These sanctions became controversial. Although Aung San Suu Kyi initially approved of sanctions, as well as a boycott of the junta's mid-1990s "Visit Myanmar Year" tourism campaign, many of her compatriots did not, including a former associate of Daw Suu Kyi, Ma Thanegi, who wrote a piece in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* in 1998 ("The Burmese Fairy Tale"), which criticized sanctions as hurting ordinary Burmese people while failing to have any impact on the junta or its cronies (Ma Thanegi, 1998). If western countries are to reimpose sanctions, it is clear from the experience of the SLORC/SPDC period that they should do so in such a way as will not impoverish local people while trying to punish the military. They should be precisely "targeted," and if they cannot be implemented without collateral damage to ordinary people, then save for an embargo on arms and military-related technology, they should not be imposed at all.

The costs of sanctions imposed on ordinary Burmese in the past were not insignificant. The 2003 Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act, passed by the US Congress and signed by President Bush after the Black Friday Incident, embargoed trade and financial transactions between the US and Burma, including exports of textiles to the States valued at around US\$300-400 million. The factories were closed, and one US official reported that thousands of women were thrown out of work, and, lacking any alternatives in the impoverished economy,

were forced to work in the sex industry (Seekins 2017: 471, 472).

There is both continuity and change in the role of the People's Republic of China in the political crisis. At both times, now and in 1988, Beijing supported the military on the principle of non-intervention in the domestic affairs of a sovereign state, but also because Chinese business interests could take advantage of rich economic opportunities in the country, especially the exploitation of Burma's abundant natural resources. This is still true in 2021, as pronouncements from Beijing on non-intervention show, but the difference is that China has gotten much more powerful than it was three decades ago, emerging as a very credible rival of the post-Cold War world's only "Superpower," the United States. Chinese leader Xi Jinping is far more willing to exert China's new muscle than his predecessors, proudly proclaiming that "the East is Rising." A strong stance against China because of its support for the SAC by the United States and its European allies could have truly global implications, affecting not only Burma but other countries in Asia and even beyond.

The intentions of the Chinese government following the coup are unclear. But, above all, it wants political stability in Burma, so that it can continue to exploit its natural resources and draw the country into its "Belt and Road" Initiative. In January of this year, just before the coup d'état and the scheduled beginning of a new parliament under Aung San Suu Kyi, the Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi went to Burma to co-sign an agreement with the State Counsellor for the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, a US\$100 billion dollar scheme to construct infrastructure in central Burma, linking the Indian Ocean with landlocked Yunnan Province. Daw Suu Kyi has been careful to cultivate friendly relations with China, and one observer has even suggested that the warmth of Suu Kyi-Beijing ties before the coup may have left the Tatmadaw generals

feeling overlooked (Macan-Markar 2021).

Thus, the military takeover was probably not received warmly by the Chinese leadership. This may be reflected in China's decision to abstain rather than vote against the U.N. Human Rights Council's resolution on the coup d'état, which allowed it to be passed (Ibid.). However, China's ability to resolve the crisis in a gesture of goodwill is impeded by two factors: first, its reluctance to challenge the physically powerful Tatmadaw when it seemingly now holds the upper hand, and secondly because the Burmese people, especially the most visible protesters in the CDM, have become bitterly anti-Chinese and view Beijing as the Army-State's chief enabler.

However, China's influence in Burma exists on many levels. In Shan State in the northeast part of the country, China rather than Burma wields dominant influence inside the region controlled by the United Wa State Army (UWSA). The UWSA's soldiers number 20,000-25,000 and are well-trained and well-equipped, mostly with Chinese arms. It has become rich through the international drug trade, and in areas under its control, especially the UWSA "capital" of Panghsang, the Chinese language rather than Burmese is spoken widely and renminbi rather than Burmese kyat circulates. This narco-army is the only ethnic minority armed force that could give the Tatmadaw a hard time in any military confrontation (Seekins 2017: 424, 558, 559).

The other East Asian country with extensive interests in Burma is Japan, whose government seems – a month after the coup d'état – unsure of how its policy of engagement toward the country should be changed, if it is changed at all. Even before 2011 and the "Burma spring," Tokyo was Burma's largest aid donor, concentrating especially on infrastructure projects, humanitarian aid and technical training of Burmese people in Japan. During the Ne Win period, Japan was the only country

to enjoy close relations with his isolationist regime, which can be explained partly in terms of Japan's ties with the country reaching back to the Pacific War: aid given to the Burmese independence movement by the Imperial Japanese Army and the establishment of a pro-Japanese "independent" regime in Burma in 1943. Like China and members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Japan wishes to benefit from economic opportunities inside the country, and since 2012 Burma has alternated with Vietnam as Japan's largest donor recipient. Described positively, Tokyo's long-standing policy of "quiet dialogue" (J. shizuka na taiwa) is a productively different approach to the Burma crisis than the moralistic and often counterproductive sanctions of the United States and the European Union. At the same time, there is considerable scepticism that Japan will ever assertively intervene to support Burma's democratisation (Seekins 2017: 273-277; Morris, 2021).

As a sign of the high priority which Tokyo accorded Burma, in 2013 the government appointed Sasagawa Yohei as Japan's "special envoy for national reconciliation" in the country. Sasakawa is son of notorious wartime rightist Sasagawa Ryoichi, who was designated a war criminal by the Allied occupation but was acquitted and went on to head the immensely lucrative Japan Boat Racing Association. The younger Sasagawa has cultivated close ties both with the Tatmadaw leaders and Aung San Suu Kyi, and, as mentioned above, complained publicly about the alleged abuses of the Union Election Commission in closing down elections in northern Rakhine State. Despite his criticism of the UEC with its lack of transparency, Sasagawa's own operations inside the country have been far from transparent, and Japanese officials are notably reticent to describe them in detail.

Other Asian countries, such as India and the members of ASEAN, are unlikely to pressure

the new military regime to return the country to civilian rule, for both economic and strategic reasons. Only Indonesia, which arguably is the only remaining democracy in Southeast Asia, has been directly critical. Ms. Retno Marsudi, Indonesia's foreign minister, gave eloquent support for the Burmese people's renewed struggle for democracy at an ASEAN conference. Thus, we return to a scenario that is familiar from 1988 to 2012: a split between western countries claiming to be motivated by democratic values in imposing sanctions and Asian countries continuing to advocate pragmatic and often self-serving "constructive engagement."

While, thanks to the split between east and west, the military regime, the State Administrative Council, has its cake and eats it, too.

In this writer's opinion, it is hard to see any good coming out of the coup d'état or its aftermath, at least in the short or medium term. One possible good outcome might be the formation of a new pro-democratic movement embracing a larger variety of individuals and groups, including "Generation Z" activist youth and ethnic minorities, as Aung San Suu Kyi remains under confinement. The post-coup era could be a time when younger leaders come to the fore. The flaws of Daw Suu's own leadership during her time as State Counsellor, especially her tone-deaf distancing from the federalist aspirations of the ethnic minorities and determination to run the NLD and the government in a top-down manner, indicate that it probably is time for the post-Suu Kyi generation to occupy centre-stage in a new political system.

During the SLORC/SPDC period, the Army-State's heavy-handed suppression of dissent created conditions that seemed ripe for "terrorist" movements similar to those which have taken place in the Middle East. Between 1988 and 2011, there were random bombing

incidents, including an attempted mail-bomb assassination of the junta's Secretary-2, General Tin Oo, in 1997, which left his daughter dead, and a series of bombings in civilian areas, the worst being in Rangoon during May 2005, which left at least 23 people dead and 160 injured, with the actual figures likely to be higher. However, many believe that the latter incident might have been instigated by Military Intelligence personnel loyal to the purged Khin Nyunt (Seekins 2017: 114, 115).

What is really surprising about the 1988-2011 period is the adherence of the great majority of oppositionists to non-violent methods of protest, as called for by Aung San Suu Kyi. While some observers might attribute this to the prevalence of Buddhist values in Burma, it seems likely to this writer that if the SAC is successful in wearing down the opposition over the months and years following the coup, arresting and jailing first its leaders and then ordinary citizens in huge numbers and perhaps causing an incident of mass shootings like in 1988, the commitment to non-violence might weaken, and a genuine "terrorist" movement might emerge.<sup>7</sup>

As mentioned, China's role as the chief backer of the junta is very well known among the CDM protesters, and demonstrations have taken place with huge crowds in front of the Chinese embassy in Yangon. A violent movement could target Chinese business people, or project sites like the China-funded Myitsone Dam in Kachin State (if it is restarted) and the oil and gas pipeline across Burma from Kyaukphyu in Rakhine State to the China-Burma border in Shan State, which was constructed to export energy to China's Yunnan Province. In the end, many innocent people of Chinese ancestry could suffer if anti-Chinese sentiment rises significantly among Burmese, as happened during the Anti-Chinese riots of June 1967 in Yangon when Chinese shops and residences were attacked by local rioters. At least fifty people were killed, and many Chinese left

Burma for other countries (Seekins 2017: 73).

Nothing is permanent, Buddhists teach us. Burma, too, will change, but the process of change will probably take a heartbreakingly long period of time.

## References:

“Another Bloody Day in Myanmar: at least 28 protesters slain by Military.” 2021. [The Irrawaddy](#), March 3, accessed 03-04-2021.

Beech, Hannah. 2021. “Myanmar’s Military deploys digital arsenal of repression in crackdown.” [The New York Times](#), March 1, accessed 03-03-2021.

Beech, Hannah. 2021a. “‘She is a hero’: in Myanmar’s Protests, women are on the front lines.” [The New York Times](#), March 4, accessed on 03-05-2021.

Beech, Hannah and Saw Nang. 2020. “This is not democracy: Myanmar prepares for a troubled election.” [The New York Times](#), November 6, accessed 11-20-2020.

[Carter Centre](#). 2021. “Election Observation Mission: the Myanmar General Election.” November 8, accessed on 12-08-2020.

“Chairman of Myanmar’s Buddhist Authority urges negotiations to end post-Coup crisis.” 2021. [The Irrawaddy](#), February 19, accessed on 03-01-2021.

“Criticized, Myanmar’s Influential Monk close to coup leader breaks his silence on killing protesters.” 2021. [The Irrawaddy](#), March 5, accessed on 03-07-2021.

Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. 1991. *Crime and Punishment*. London: Penguin Classics.

Gladstone, Rick. 2021. “U.N. says 38 people

killed in ‘bloodiest day’ since Coup began.” [The New York Times](#), March 3, accessed on 03-04-2021.

[Human Rights Watch](#). 2020. “Myanmar Election Commission lacks transparency: safeguard minority voters’ rights.” October 28, accessed on 12-10-2021.

Kyaw Zwa Moe. 2020. “A Few Predictions for Myanmar’s Upcoming Election.” [The Irrawaddy](#), October 9, accessed 11-22-2020.

Ma Thanegi. 1998. “The Burmese Fairytale.” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, February 19.

Macan-Markar, Marwaan. 2021. “China treads lightly on Myanmar coup with billions at stake.” [Nikkei Asia](#), March 5, accessed on 03-11-2021.

Min Zin. 2020. “Myanmar still loves Aung San Suu Kyi, but not why you think.” [The New York Times](#), November 23, at accessed on 12-01-2020.

Morris, Peter. 2021. “Japan struggles to have it both ways on Myanmar.” [Asia Times](#), March 2, at accessed on 03-07-2021.

“Myanmar Military Chief’s warnings raise spectre of post-election chaos.” 2020. [The Irrawaddy](#), November 4, accessed on 03-04-2021.

“Myanmar’s 2020 Election Results in Numbers.” 2020. [The Irrawaddy](#), November 11, accessed on 11-20-2020.

“Myanmar’s NLD rejects Military’s call for Proportional Representation System.” 2021. [The Irrawaddy](#), March 4, accessed on 03-08-2021.

Nan Lwin. 2020. “‘I can see the UEC does not want elections in Rakhine,’ Japanese envoy to Myanmar says.” [The Irrawaddy](#), December 4, accessed on 12-10-2020.

Regan, Helen. 2021. “Streets of Blood in

Myanmar town as UN fears ‘crimes against humanity.’” [CNN](#), March 12 accessed on 03-13-2021.

San Yamin Aung. 2021. “Woman shot by Myanmar police during anti-coup protest declared brain dead.” [The Irrawaddy](#), February 10, accessed on 02-11-2021.

Seekins, Donald M. 2011. *State and Society in Modern Rangoon*. London: Routledge.

Seekins, Donald M. 2017. *Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar)*. 2nd edition. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

**Donald M. Seekins** is Emeritus Professor of Southeast Asian Studies in the College of International Studies of Meio University in Okinawa, Japan. Receiving a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Chicago. He has done extensive research and writing on the history, politics and society of Burma, making frequent visits to the country for fieldwork. His publications include [Historical Dictionary of Burma](#), [State and Society in Modern Rangoon](#), [Burma and Japan since 1940: from ‘Co-Prosperity’ to ‘Quiet Dialogue’](#), and [The Disorder in Order: the Army-State in Burma since 1962](#).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The first fatality was a 20 year-old woman, Ma Mya Thwate Thwate Khaing, who was shot in the head with a live bullet during a demonstration in the Myanmar capital of Naypyidaw on February 9th. Doctors said she was brain dead, and she was taken off life support a few days later (San Yamin Aung, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> A similar release of often dangerous criminal offenders took place in 1988 (though not a formal amnesty), which had two purposes. First was to clear out the prisoners to make cells available to confine dissenters, and the second was to sow fear among the general population, as often violent offenders were then at large (Seekins 2011: 153).

<sup>3</sup> “Men is trousers” is a common term used to denote the military in Burma, since the traditional male dress in the country has been the *longyi*, or sarong.

<sup>4</sup> As mentioned, under the 2008 Constitution, 25 percent of all national and region/state level legislatures must be composed of serving Tatmadaw personnel nominated by the commander-in-chief. Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters tried to have this changed.

<sup>5</sup> Under the constitution, the fact that Daw Suu Kyi’s deceased husband and two sons were foreign nationals barred her from eligibility for the office of president.

<sup>6</sup> Burma is divided into fifteen regional-level jurisdictions: seven *regions* (formerly known as “divisions”) with majority Burman populations and seven *states* where ethnic minorities traditionally have lived. However, after the establishment of the new capital of Naypyidaw after 2005, an additional jurisdiction, the Naypyidaw Union Territory, was set up. It does not

possess a democratically elected *hluttaw* or legislature (Seekins 2017: 396).

<sup>7</sup> I put the term “terror” and “terrorists” in quotes because the use of this term is highly controversial. In fact, in some contexts, I would object to the label being used, e.g., attacks on certain property rather than people.