

Where Myanmar is headed: The Coup, Resistance, and Oppression

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1. Background of the coup d'etat

The coup d'état by the national military occurred in the early morning hours of February 1, 2021, when the national military detained the de facto supreme leader, State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Min and other government officials, as well as officials of the ruling National League for Democracy (NLD). Then, one of the two Vice Presidents from the military, became the Acting President and convened the "National Defense and Security Council" (a meeting body of top military and government officials). After a briefing by General Min Aung Hlaing, Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, the Acting President issued a declaration of a state of emergency under Article 417 of the Constitution, transferring full power of the nation to the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. The reason cited for declaring a state of emergency was that the November 2020 election, in which a quarter of the seats were originally allocated to military representatives but the NLD won an overwhelming majority of the seats, was considered fraudulent and the elected representatives were convoked despite the illegal election results. It is said that the military demanded (1) the replacement of the Election Commission members, (2) an investigation into the election fraud, and (3) the postponement of the parliamentary convocation. As the regime refused and announced the convening of the parliament on January 31, it is believed that the national military made careful preparations to carry out the coup. In fact, the coup was executed in a textbook manner, with senior regime officials being detained simultaneously without a single bullet being fired, and communication facilities being seized before the coup. The military insists that it was not a coup but a declaration of a state of emergency in accordance with the constitution.

2. Why did the coup d'etat take place?

Although the details will not be known until later, why did the military launch the coup d'etat? It is often said that the main reasons for the coup were (1) alleged election fraud, (2) internal political and economic turmoil, (3) violation of the interests of the military, and (4) the presence of China (Chinese support). First of all, with regard to (1), the national military claims that there were more than 10 million cases of fraud in the last election and that more than a quarter of the votes cast were fraudulent. There is no doubt that there were flaws in the voter lists, but this has been an issue for some time. Despite these flaws, preliminary polls showed that Suu Kyi was the most popular candidate, embodying the "good ethics" that Myanmar citizens place the highest priority on when selecting candidates, and the NLD's

victory was assured. In addition, measures to prevent double voting, monitoring of polling stations, and international election monitoring were implemented in this election. It cannot be said that there were any irregularities that could have swayed the outcome of the election. In terms of (2), the domestic politics and economic confusion, there was no signs of growing conflict between pro-Suu Kyi and anti-Suu Kyi factions in society. As for the economy, according to the ADB's forecast before the coup, Myanmar's economic growth rate after the end of the corona pandemic was expected to be 6%, indicating that there was no concern about any economic crisis whatsoever. As for (3), the military's interests, the constitution guarantees the military's independence, and it has the right to veto amendments to the constitution. Economically, the companies affiliated with the national military have not suffered any particular losses. In addition, the military budget has not been excessively reduced since Suu Kyi came to power. With respect to (4), the presence of China, the national military is cautious about China in the first place, and there is a strong anti-Chinese sentiment among the citizens. Also, for the Chinese side, the uncertainty caused by political instability in Myanmar is not desirable either. Thus, it can be said that the four factors mentioned so far do not necessarily explain well as reasons for the military to stage the coup.

Then, what were the reasons? At the moment, it seems that the background is the power struggle between Suu Kyi's side and General Min Aung Hlaing over the "governance structure". Myanmar's constitution advocates a "disciplined and prosperous democracy," and at the heart of this is the national military. The military is recognized by the constitution as a part of the governance of the state, and as an entity that is above and beyond the state. Suu Kyi was opposed to this. Suu Kyi, whose children are British citizens and therefore cannot become president according to the constitution, became the de facto president by assuming the post of State Counselor through legislative measures, and tried to change the military-centered order stipulated by the constitution through measures such as not holding the National Defense and Security Council meetings and submitting a bill to amend the constitution. On the military side, mistrust was growing over Suu Kyi's ideological stance, deteriorating relations with ethnic minorities, stalled peace with armed groups, weak stance on the Rohingya issue, the Election Commission being close to Suu Kyi, and the delay in implementing measures against the spread of coronavirus. In addition, General Min Aung Hlaing seemed to have had an ambition of becoming the president, and had wrongly perceived that the USDP, a party close to the national military, would put up a good fight in the recent elections, and had hoped that the USDP would be able to win majority of the seats together with those of the national military. However, they lost heavily. This power struggle with increased suspicions over the electoral fraud may have led to the coup.

3. Civil resistance

What is the national military trying to achieve through this coup? For one thing, they want to wipe out the Suu Kyi faction and dissolve the NLD. Since the coup, it has conducted prosecution and trial procedures against Suu Kyi and other NLD officials, replaced the election commission, investigated election fraud, and removed not only ministers but also village chiefs from the NLD side. Also, at the center, a State Administrative Council (SAC) was established, led by six senior military officers. And it has set up agencies in local governments staffed with military officers and other officials from liaison office of federal ministries and agencies. Furthermore, economic development, promotion of peace with ethnic minority armed groups, and countermeasures against the COVID-19 have been undertaken. The military is also trying to consolidate the administrative structure by reappointing people with experience from the Thein Sein administration, the first government of the civilian regime. It seems that the junta wants to hold general elections after the declaration of a state of emergency, which is expected to last for two more years, and hand over power to a government that is more favorable to the military. It is also believed that the NLD's registration as a political party will be denied for the next election.

However, various forms of resistance to these national forces have continued. First of all, the NLD formed the Committee of Representatives of the Federal Parliament (CRPH), organized its own parliament, appointed ministers, designated the national military as a terrorist entity, organized a national unity government on April 1, announced its own charter, and made clear its stance that it does not recognize the current constitution of 2008. The movement itself is basically online and non-violent, but it has taken a more in-depth policy than past pro-democracy movements, allowing people to arm themselves for the purpose of self-defense against the national military. There has also been a civil disobedience movement (CDM) among citizens, not directly related to the NLD. Healthcare workers at the Ministry of Health have declared a halt to government-related operations, and this has also spread to government agencies, medical institutions, universities, banks, and other industries. On February 22, the "22222 Revolution" took place with the participation of about one million people in the entire country. These movements are led by the younger generation, known as Generation Z, who were born after the mid-1990's and have enjoyed freedom of expression and association, especially after the transition to civilian rule in 2011. This movement led by Generation Z is characterized by the spontaneous participation of various organizations and groups, diverse tactics, and rapid expansion, not necessarily in support of Suu Kyi, but in opposition to the actions of the national military. They are also using smartphones and social networking services to gain know-hows on resistance methods from anti-government movements, especially in Thailand and Hong Kong. For example, the pose of holding up three

fingers during a demonstration is something that was done in the Thai resistance movement.

4. Oppression by the national military

In spite of the resistance described above, the national military has not relaxed its efforts to wipe out the NLD members, and the arrests, prosecutions, and trials of Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders, ministers, and local officials have continued and expanded, and businessmen close to the NLD have been detained. In addition, the CRPH has been issued a strong warning and top officials are on a wanted list. In addition, the government has taken a hardline stance against the demonstrators since the final weekend of February, and has used deadly weapons since March, resulting in 739 casualties as of April 11. A breakdown of the casualties shows that about 80% are men, and more than 300 are young people up to the age of 35. So why is the national military pointing guns at civilians in this way? For one thing, the military understands this action against the junta as a struggle among political factions regarding Suu Kyi and the followers. For another, the military, which considers itself the defender of the nation, sees any disturbance to its desired order, even if it is a peaceful demonstration, as a threat to its security. Furthermore, since the country's independence, the national military has been fighting in civil wars where combatants and civilians are indistinguishable, and this has become customary. In addition, Myanmar was ruled by a military regime from 1962 to 2011, and the influence of the judiciary and civilian officials, not to mention civilian control, has been extremely weak, and there is no mechanism in place to control the actions of military.

So what will the future hold? The struggle for power between the military and the NLD has already shifted to a conflict between the military and the NLD/citizens. For the military, it is highly likely that they will stick to their policy of wiping out the Suu Kyi faction and transitioning the regime even in the face of unexpected resistance. In that case, the number of civilian casualties will continue to rise, and the fighting between the national military and the ethnic minority armed forces will intensify, possibly leading to a humanitarian crisis. If the civilian population submits to the national military to some extent, the humanitarian crisis may not reach its peak, but the new government that emerges will have no legitimacy at all, and internal conflicts are likely to continue.

5. The role of the international society

So what is the international community's response to this situation in Myanmar? First of all, the United Nations has taken a strong stance by issuing a statement by the President of the Security Council on March 11, a condemnation resolution by the Human Rights Council on March 24, and a condemnation statement by the Secretary-General on

March 28, but the Security Council resolution has not been realized due to opposition from China and Russia. In addition, the Myanmar military has long been distrustful of the United Nations, and no UN envoy has been allowed to enter the country. The U.S. has added military officials and companies to the Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons (SDN) list, frozen \$1 billion in Myanmar government assets, suspended \$42 million in aid, and imposed import and export restrictions. However, Myanmar is a country that has been under economic sanctions for a long time, and it is unclear to what extent those sanctions will be effective. China is hesitant to approve the movement of Myanmar's national military, and is also discouraging other nations from interfering in the country's internal affairs. China has made it clear that it will provide Myanmar with "three forms of support": (1) Myanmar's domestic stakeholders seeking political stability within the legal framework, (2) ASEAN's "non-interference" in Myanmar's internal affairs, and (3) holding a special ASEAN summit. Furthermore, as the "three avoidances," it has stated that it will prevent (1) further civilian casualties, (2) inappropriate intervention by the UN Security Council, and (3) intervention by outside forces seeking to gain personal benefits. Among ASEAN countries, Indonesia and Singapore have been lobbying Myanmar, but they have not been able to unite ASEAN because of the failure to coordinate with neighboring countries such as Thailand. In this context, Japan is in a unique position of having been trusted by both the military and the Suu Kyi faction. While expressing concern about the situation in Myanmar, Japan has taken an independent diplomatic course that is distinct from the United Nations and the West. Japan has requested three things from the Myanmar military side: (1) cessation of violence against civilians, (2) release of Suu Kyi and others, and (3) return to a democratic system. However, as the release of Suu Kyi and others is unacceptable to the military, Japan has not been able to respond effectively.

Therefore, at present, the diplomatic influence of any country is limited, and more time is still needed to engage Myanmar for its medium-term stability. However, if we just wait, the casualties will continue to increase and domestic and international criticism will grow. At this stage, there is an international consensus on the need to stop violence against civilians, and the most important task at the moment is to find a way to realize it. In addition, Japan will need to work with ASEAN countries to exert pressure on Myanmar's military, as it refuses to cooperate with the UN and Western countries.

This is an English translation of an outline of the lecture delivered by NAKANISHI Yoshihiro, Associate Professor of the Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University, at the 87th Policy Plenary Meeting of CEAC on April 12, 2021.