

## Resisting The Temptation To Intervene In Burma

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On Sunday night—Monday morning in Burma (or Myanmar)—the Tatmadaw, or military, long noted for its venality and brutality, staged a coup. Troops detained Aung San Suu Kyi, the country's informal head of government, along with other leading members of her party.

Deploying standard State Department-speak, Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced: “The United States stands with the people of Burma in their aspirations for democracy, freedom, peace and development. The military must reverse these actions immediately.”

Then, apparently recognizing that the latter wasn't likely to happen, the White House promised to “take action against those responsible if these steps are not reversed.” This became the first order of business for the Biden administration when Washington got back at work on Monday morning.

In reality, however, there is little that the U.S. can or should do.

The Tatmadaw declared a year-long state of emergency, after which it plans to hold new elections—which no doubt will be rigged. Such democratic retrogression is unfortunate, though many Burmese will barely notice the change.

After a decade of semi-democratic development, the system was going nowhere fast. The military was still in ultimate control of the state and dominated the policies that concerned it most. The civilian authorities, which began with great expectations at home and abroad, lost their humanitarian sheen. Indeed, Nobel Laureate Suu Kyi resolutely defended the military's brutality against its own people. Once seen as a paragon of democracy, she appeared to go over to “the dark side.”

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Thankfully, the situation doesn't matter much to America, though you wouldn't know that from the Biden administration's rhetoric. Blinken warned: “The United States expresses grave concern and alarm.” In truth, virtually nothing in Burma is important enough to cause Americans “grave concern and alarm.” But this was just more State Department boilerplate, since just about every adverse foreign development causes Washington to express “grave concern and alarm.”

For years, even decades, Uncle Sam has mimicked the God of the Bible. Explained Jesus: “not a single sparrow can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it” (Matthew 10:29). Similarly, no country anywhere on earth can do anything without Washington knowing—and trying to do something about it. Hence the administration's reflexive demand that the Tatmadaw reverse course.

Notably, concern for democracy is much greater outside than inside the region. Burma's Southeast Asian neighbors care little about the Tatmadaw's decision to publicly formalize its dominance. Laos is a communist dictatorship. Cambodia is a formerly communist dictatorship. Thailand spent more than six years under a military junta, which rewrote the constitution to ensure that it could continue to rule behind a thin democratic façade.

In fact, Bangkok's military rulers dismissed the developments in Thailand's neighbor. Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan observed: "It's their business. It's their domestic issue." Indeed, Burma's generals may plan to revamp their government along the Thai lines, in which the military manipulates the electoral system to assure control while piously proclaiming its democratic credentials.

Unfortunately, Washington's efforts are likely to be but an exercise in futility. The U.S. already tried once, in an effort that spanned years, to reform Burma. A second round isn't likely to yield better results.

Burma's armed services originally took power in 1962 and ruled unilaterally until 2011. Repression was brutal, as was combat with numerous ethnic groups seeking autonomy. (I spent years working with the largely Christian Karen, or Kayin, in Burma's east.) Then the Tatmadaw began to slowly loosen its controls, allowing elections and a civilian administration.

The junta most likely yielded formal control to end country's pariah status and Western economic sanctions. In particular, the Tatmadaw hoped to reduce Burmese dependence on China, whose embrace became uncomfortable. However, the military retained the security ministries, ignored civilian authorities, and claimed veto power over constitutional changes. Most important, it disqualified Suu Kyi, whose party had won the previous election in 1990 from ever holding the presidency.

Suu Kyi became a global figure after receiving the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize. She suffered through 15 years of house arrest before the military finally stepped aside. In 2015, her National League for Democracy won the election in a landslide. She bypassed the Tatmadaw's rules by creating the position of State Counsellor, allowing her to oversee the country's nominal president. With her rise, Western governments enthusiastically embraced the new Naypyitaw government, dropping sanctions, encouraging commerce, and upgrading relations.

Yet her tenure was marked by great disappointment. Despite her genuinely heroic struggle for democracy, she turned out to be a Burman nationalist with little interest in confronting the military or protecting ethnic minorities.

Five years into her stewardship, Freedom House rated the country as "not free":

Myanmar's transition from military dictatorship to democracy has stalled under the leadership of the National League for Democracy (NLD), which came to power in relatively free elections in 2015. Since then, it has failed to uphold human rights and to prioritize peace and security in areas affected by armed conflict. The military retains significant influence over politics, and the country faces increased international pressure regarding a 2017 military operation that forced around 740,000 members of the Rohingya minority, a mostly Muslim ethnic group, to seek refuge in Bangladesh, where they remain. Journalists, demonstrators, and ordinary people risk legal charges and detention for voicing dissent.

Ironically, Suu Kyi's authoritarian tendencies did not win the Tatmadaw's favor. Relations between the armed forces and civilian leaders have been deteriorating of late. Most recently, the military rejected the NLD's landslide reelection in November as tainted by fraud. The army commander in chief—and thus most powerful person in Burma—Min Aung Hlaing insisted that “if the constitution is not followed, then it should be declared invalid.”

There were legitimate concerns about inappropriate disenfranchisement of ethnic minorities, but the military was not worried about the niceties of democratic governance. After all, the Tatmadaw drafted the constitution to guarantee undemocratic outcomes.

The real issue appears to be the military's frustration that its best efforts at manipulation did not yield a more pliant government. The Tatmadaw expected the 2008 constitution to keep the widely admired Suu Kyi out of power and create a divided parliament in which its appointed members could play a decisive role. Hlaing, set to retire in July, reportedly desired to assume the presidency afterwards.

However, in 2015, the NLD won in a landslide, after which Suu Kyi ran the civilian agencies. The party increased its majority in November and would have won big even using the discarded voter rolls. Indeed, noted the writer Salil Tripathi, “the NLD's astounding performance in the November elections meant the balance of power was tilting towards her.” The military appears to have decided to use the election controversy as an excuse to start over.

Presumably the next ballot will be designed to ensure the preferred military result. Following Thailand's example, the Tatmadaw might disqualify Suu Kyi and the rest of the NLD leadership from even running. Moreover, the military will likely count the votes, ensuring victory for their favored candidates. Or they might impose a new constitution, further changing the rules in the Tatmadaw's favor, again following Thailand.

The situation is terrible, but at least the armed services have so far acted with less brutality than the old junta. Ultimately, the situation in Burma, like so many other conflicts and controversies around the world, isn't Washington's problem to solve. Even if it was, the U.S. has no answers.

Naypyitaw matters to America mostly as a geopolitical battleground with the People's Republic of China, but Burma's geographic position, on China's southern border, gives Beijing an enormous advantage. The humanitarian concerns are real, but there is little Washington can do to rescue a nation that has spent the last 58 years under full or partial military rule. Both India and Japan, with much greater economic investment than America in Burma, are better positioned to compete commercially, and in turn battle for political influence.

The U.S. toolkit is essentially empty. Biden decried the “direct assault on the country's transition to democracy and the rule of law” and said the coup required “an immediate review of our sanction laws and authorities, followed by appropriate action.” Which won't achieve much of anything other than virtue signaling.

Sanctioning coup leaders won't have much economic impact and won't change their behavior. After all, Hlaing probably isn't investing his money in America. Indeed, he and several other military leaders already have been targeted over the mistreatment of the Rohingya—obviously to no effect. Broader penalties would intensify the country's economic stress, but only by hitting the population. That impact didn't bother the previous junta and today's military leaders have

similarly accepted isolation as the price they may have to pay to rule. If necessary, they can turn back to Beijing.

The return to military rule is a tragedy. The consequences could be truly catastrophic if conflict between the Tatmadaw and various ethnic groups flares anew. However, rather than confront Burma, a former British colony, Washington should back allies and friends as they take the lead.

Restoration of democracy might seem to be the obvious objective, but what the Tatmadaw overthrew was not really democracy. Ultimately the country needs even more thorough-going reform, something that can be attained only by the Burmese people.

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