

Myanmar's military coup on 1 February had been brewing for some time. One summary perspective is that the transition to elected government in 2015 was conditional as to power and unsatisfactory in effect.

Another view, consistent with the first, is that two strong-willed leaders who were required to share power either refused or were unable to achieve a consensus that would have allowed for a successful democratic transition.

Now we are back where we were in 2012, with the same Senior General – Min Aung Hlaing – sitting at the head of a restored military administration that is promising elections in a year.

At the structural level, the coup triggers are essentially based on the fact that the 2008 Constitution drafted by the military did not allow a complete transition to democratic government. Key portfolios – all of the defence and security ministries – are reserved for military appointments and 25% of the parliament is appointed by the military. The military had also imposed limitations on candidacy that prevented the now arrested former State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from taking the presidency.

A number of observers have pointed out that Myanmar's successful transition required leadership and consensus-building, a rare commodity in nations emerging from what in Myanmar's case was 50 years of mostly harsh and often brutal dominance by military dictatorship. ASSK is no Mandela and the National League for Democracy is, in a popular sense, strongly motivated by its historic opposition to the Tatmadaw, as the military is known. Even so, ASSK has projected her familial affinity with the military, her father having been its founder.

Denied the presidency, ASSK invented the role of State Counsellor which allowed her to control most functions of government. Critics assert that she failed to bring into her administration any of the very many talented people who had returned to Myanmar and some who had been released from its jails, having in some cases served extended sentences.

Perhaps the most vehement domestic critics of ASSK were those who expected urgency in the reform of critical areas, such as land tenure, regulation of bank lending and other factors that would stimulate the country's once-abundant agriculture. ASSK gave the appearance of someone who wanted a hand in everything and who made no great effort to bring expertise and practical capability to a bureaucracy made timid and ineffectual by decades of overbearing authoritarianism.

Outside Myanmar, ASSK's once-stellar status was eroded rapidly when she made no efforts to head off the bigotry that motivated anti-Muslim sentiment and then publicly backed a military sweep through Rakhine State that displaced some 750,000 people and was associated with alleged genocide.

All the while, ASSK had actually distanced herself from the Senior General and the Tatmadaw generally, evidenced in the fact that the formal joint-planning National Security and Defence Council (NSDC) – an 11-member body of which six are military appointees – failed to meet. In fact, the NSDC has over-riding powers under the Constitution and this was one target of

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substantial Constitutional reforms proposed by the NLD but which failed to pass in March 2020. Many of those reforms aimed to reduce military influence and were clearly on the agenda for the new parliament.

The personalities and positioning over time have been another prominent factor in events. ASSK grew her popularity – especially among the Bamar majority – with what must have been a calculated projection of nationalist rhetoric and choices. Her firm defence of the Tatmadaw at the International Court of Justice – starkly contrasting her personal relations – might well have been seen by the military as a threat to its own standing. Then there is the literal head-to-head contest; ASSK at 75 cannot be expected to hold sway for a long period. The Senior General, on the other hand, is 65 and past the formal retirement age for his military role.

Fundamentally, the personal outlooks of ASSK and Min Aung Hlaing are not obviously different. To some considerable extent, the coup and today's uncertainty are inevitable consequences of their inability to achieve common purpose and compromise.

A month before the 2020 election, Human Rights Watch issued a critique of the election environment, citing a wide variety of intrusions, media limitations, disenfranchisement, racist and inflammatory information in official materials, the reservation of seats for the military and the shutdown of so-called “conflict zones” that included the blocking of communications. One independent candidate was jailed for sedition after accusing ASSK of using public funds for electoral purposes.

Since the election, the military has made persistent public complaints about the performance of the Union Election Commission (UEC), which is appointed by the Government. Their primary claim is that the authenticity of over 10 million names on voting rolls was questionable. With no response by the NLD Government, the election allegations became the primary complaint that the Tatmadaw relied on for its coup on the day parliament was set to resume.

At this stage, about 220 people are said to have been arrested, including ASSK and her Ministers, a variety of public figures, activists and UEC officials across the country. At least one foreign adviser – the Australian, Sean Turnell – has been jailed.

Internationally, Myanmar's reversion probably suits no one. The US has acted as expected in imposing personal sanctions on Tatmadaw leadership, their Government appointees and companies related to them. But the US will presumably try hard to avoid driving Myanmar back to the situation where only China, Russia and few other foreign interests were able to invest or do business there.

China, on the other hand, can't assume that the Tatmadaw will turn to Myanmar's northern neighbour. The military has reason to mistrust Chinese intentions and has a strong cultural commitment to Myanmar's independence – notably, Senior Minister Min Aung Hlaing has only recently offered public criticism of China's support for ethnic militants inside Myanmar. In contrast, it was ASSK who appeared to embrace Chinese patronage in response to harsh criticism of her inaction on the Rohingya issue from her former friends overseas. China has offered no substantial comfort for the military, providing only a block (with Russia) of a UN Security Council resolution. Japan's response has been restrained, though Kirin was moved to withdraw from its brewing joint venture with a military-owned company.

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Myanmar's neighbours have been largely muted in response. With US prompting, a few have issued guarded statements of concern while others simply observed that this is a domestic matter. ASEAN's official position was a guarded statement of concern. India, the other large power sharing Myanmar's borders, maintained its longstanding policy of pragmatism, which has been highlighted by regular efforts to promote mutual defence ties. India's self-interest is considerable, tangible in the benefit of Tatmadaw support for Indian suppression of separatist militants in its north east and more broadly in Myanmar's potential to progress as a stable independent neighbour.

At this stage, there are signs that military appointments to key ministerial roles have been credible, effective people. Some had roles during the Thein Sein administration, which set up the transition to the 2015 election. According to people close to Myanmar's power plays, there is potential for the installed government to make progress. But in times of rapid social media reaction, Myanmar is highly vulnerable to a popular global backlash. Already, major clothing firms have flagged reviews of sourcing that has seen the value of Myanmar's textile exports grow fifteen fold in recent years.

As the commercially-targeted sanctions suggest, Myanmar's past military regimes were characteristically kleptocratic and in the short term that tendency is the most immediate threat to foreign investors. So far, the Senior General has gone to some pains to provide comfort and assure continuity.

Over recent nights, social media has been full of videos taken in the streets of major cities, the images purporting to show bands of thugs setting fires and beating citizens in what are presumed to be efforts by the military to foment violence and so justify heavier interventions. In each video, the overwhelming sound effect is that of hundreds of pots and pans being drummed in a nightly public protest against the coup.

Those who accept that Min Aung Hlaing's commitment to an election is credible suggest that he is serious about the claims of electoral fraud. But the rocky road ahead is signalled by a belief that the NLD has refused to work with the military and evinced clear intent to replace the Tatmadaw as the recognised champion of Myanmar's nationalism. The Tatmadaw has supplanted the elected government, but cannot expect to win over an electorate that overwhelmingly prefers an ineffective NLD – even allowing for alleged electoral fakery.

If the military's intent is reform of the NLD itself, it is hard to see how this can avoid creating a high degree of volatility and possibly a return to the harsh measures of years past. In which case, the way is open for more hard line elements in the Tatmadaw to take control. The alternative is a rapid and voluntary effort in the NLD to bring forward a capable, inclusive leader. On the evidence to date, a sense of personal entitlement in the NLD hierarchy has left no room for capable leaders and none has emerged elsewhere.

As ever, Myanmar's politics are byzantine. There are people – including the NLD spokesman who was in negotiations with the military just before the coup – who have served both the last military government of U Thein Sein and the elected NLD administration. And there may be grounds for compromise and restoration of the elected government. But that would appear to require that both ASSK and Min Aung Hlaing give up the one thing both want; the presidency – and that seems unlikely.

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