

The military coup in Myanmar ? from resistance to revolution

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For several days now, demonstrations numbering hundreds of thousands have filled the streets of Myanmar?s largest city, Yangon, its second city, Mandalay, the capital, Naypyidaw, and many other cities and towns, chanting "Military dictator, fail, fail; Democracy, win, win", and demanding an end to the coup carried out by a junta under the army?s Commander in Chief Min Aung Hlaing. In the city of Bago, police fired water cannon but failed to disperse the crowds. In the capital, where the military High Command is located, rubber bullets have been used.

The military, known as the Tatmadaw, launched the February 1 coup because they were deeply alarmed by the scale of the victory of Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi?s National League for Democracy, NLD, in the November elections, winning 396 out of 476 seats in the parliament. Their own puppet, the Union Solidarity and Development Party, suffered a crushing humiliation, taking just 33 seats. As a result, State Councillor Suu Kyi and the NLD President, Win Myint, are under house arrest.

The military are claiming, with no evidence whatsoever, that the November election results were fraudulent. In reality, they were afraid that, with such a huge majority in parliament, another NLD government might be tempted to change the 2008 constitution. This gave the armed forces enormous privileges, including 25 percent of the seats in parliament and control of key security ministries. It also protects the military elite?s control of huge swathes of the country?s economy.

Students, civil servants, doctors, teachers and workers from factories, many from companies linked to the military, have launched strikes and work stoppages. To head off demonstrations, the military immediately blocked Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and then connectivity to the entire Internet was reduced to only 16 percent of normal. Nevertheless, they have been unable to quell the demonstrations, which grew to mass proportions over the weekend of the 6/7 February.

Widespread calls for a general strike were heard on the third day of mobilisation. Despite the closedown of social media channels, the mobilisations have generated their own means of spreading the calls for action. From one end of the country to the other, it is increasingly clear that a revolution is developing, which only the most brutal action could quell.

The generals have proved in the past that they are certainly willing to resort to massive violence. Thousands were killed when they crushed the 1988 People Power Uprising and again in 2007 when the army put down the ?saffron revolution?, so-called because of the numbers of Buddhist monks involved in the demonstrations. Since then, however, ten years of a ?democratic opening? and the use of social media have increased the courage and confidence of large numbers of young people.

Thus far, the junta seems hesitant, perhaps fearing to test the morale of their forces should they be asked

to fire on such a massively popular movement. Instead, they have mobilised pro-army groups to demonstrate against the demonstrators. Clearly this crisis cannot go on indefinitely. Two prime actors, the working class and the rank and file soldiers and police, will determine how it evolves. Will an all-out general strike paralyse the country? Can the soldiers be relied on to open fire on their compatriots?

Leadership

The problem facing the movement is the same as during previous revolts, the lack of a leadership with organic roots in the masses. The NLD, whose red banners and shirts are everywhere, is not reported to be the organising force. It is focused totally on the cult of its leader, Aung Sang Suu Kyi, who had previously spent 15 years in detention, and has unrivalled prestige. Her father Aung Sang (1915-1947) was the founder of the then Burmese Armed Forces and has the title 'father of the nation'.

However, abroad, her reputation has been sullied by the shameful way she covered up for the ethnic cleansing and attempted genocide of the Rohingya people in 2017 when 740,000 were forced to flee into Bangladesh where they live in camps in appalling conditions. Despite her failure to support the rights of the minority peoples of Myanmar, some 32 percent of the population, a result of her Burmese (Bamar) nationalism, she is still enormously popular with the mass of the population. If things go badly for the generals, they might even resort to a deal with her to pacify a revolutionary movement. Given her past record, she could well accept this.

Clearly, to halt the progress of the coup, three things are necessary; to continue the mass demonstrations; to launch a full-scale indefinite general strike, which will bring the country to a standstill and, in the process, to win over the rank and file of the armed forces and the police.

In the course of such a general strike, councils of action should be elected in all workplaces and places of education as the leadership of the revolution. Defence groups of workers, youth, soldiers and farmers should be formed out of these mobilisations. If the soldiers come over to the revolution, they, too, need to organise their own councils and replace the officers and commanders by elected ones, loyal to the people.

The very fact that, despite a decade of 'democratic opening' and the NLD's presence in government since 2015, the generals still held on to the real power, economic as well as military, simply reveals that their dictatorship was being hidden behind a façade of civilian rule.

The lesson of the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011 is that, without a political party of the working class and the youth, the revolution will either be crushed, or the masses will be deceived by rearranging the generals and the politicians at the top. A counterrevolutionary leadership from above will fill a vacuum of revolutionary leadership from below. Today, in Egypt, despite the mobilisations in Tahrir Square, Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi is an even more brutal dictator than Hosni Mubarak, who was overthrown by those demonstrations.

Permanent Revolution

Only a thoroughgoing democratic political revolution, led by the working class and the youth, which moves on to become a social revolution, can fundamentally change this situation. It needs to be a revolution that will completely disintegrate the power of the caste of generals and break up the repressive machinery of the state for good. It will need to end their economic power, too, seize their ill-gotten gains, establish workers' control in the factories and offices, the schools, hospitals and other workplaces. In the countryside, the farmers need to organise their own councils. Driving out the military government, such a revolution should put a workers' and farmers' government into power.

Given the democratic hopes and aspirations of the people after so many decades of dictatorship, it will

very likely be necessary to raise the demand for elections to a completely sovereign constituent assembly, not simply the installation of another NLD government willing to do a deal with the Tatmadaw. These elections should be conducted under the control of workers', youth and peasants' committees and councils and guarded by their defence organisations. The Assembly should consider the rights not only of the Burmese majority ethnicity but also the right to self-determination of all the country's minority peoples, including the return of the Rohingya refugees.

Last, but not least, during the course of the revolution, a working class revolutionary party needs to be formed that can challenge all attempts by Suu Kyi and the NLD to compromise once again with the military and open up the country to foreign capital whether from the West or from China.

Finally, socialists should fight for any constituent assembly to expropriate all the foreign and native large-scale capitalists and introduce social ownership of the means of production. Thus, even though the revolution in Myanmar is starting as a revolution for democracy, to fully achieve this, it will have to develop into one for workers' power and socialism.

Support and Solidarity ? from whom?

Two imperialist "camps" are looking at the crisis in Myanmar: the United States and its western allies and China and, to a lesser extent, Russia. The NLD, in government since 2015, has tried to open up Myanmar to the West. Trump showed little interest, but the new US president swiftly called for the generals to restore democracy.

His national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, has said the White House was "looking at specific targeted sanctions both on individuals and on entities controlled by the military that enrich the military". These "targeted sanctions", like those directed at Russia or Venezuela, will not help the cause of the working people and youth of all these countries one iota.

Nor will declarations by the UN Security Council which only "expressed deep concern" at the arbitrary detention of members of Myanmar's government and called for their immediate release. Of course, this draft statement had been watered down to prevent a veto by Russia and China. China, however, remains cautious; watching to see who will come out on top. China's foreign ministry spokesman, Wang Wenbin, has stated that Beijing was still "trying to understand the situation" in Myanmar, whilst emphasising that China is Myanmar's "friendly neighbour" and that, "we hope all parties in Myanmar can settle disputes and maintain social and political stability by using the constitution and the laws". China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, had visited the country in mid-January, seeing both Aung Sang Suu Kyi and Min Aung Hlaing.

China has major strategic and economic interests in Myanmar. It is a vital link in the famous "One Belt, One Road" project, which will give Chinese traders direct access to the Indian Ocean. However, as in other countries, there has recently been friction between the military and China over a hydroelectric power project and the Chinese firms' practices in major infrastructure projects. If the West does take serious measures to isolate Myanmar, it will certainly drive it into Beijing's camp, and this may stay its hand.

One thing is sure, neither of these groups of rival imperialist powers is really interested in either the democratic rights or sovereignty of Myanmar and its peoples, let alone support for the struggles of the workers and youth of Myanmar.

In recent years, the country has become the destination for increasing amounts of foreign capital. Chinese garment producers are amongst those who relocated to the country. There are now 350 large scale factories employing 240,000 workers, over 90 percent of whom are women. Most foreign direct investment, however, still comes from within the South East Asia region and was worth \$5.5bn (£4bn) in the 2020 fiscal

year. Singapore was the largest foreign investor, accounting for 34 percent of overall approved investment. Hong Kong was the second largest, with 26 percent. Real estate and manufacturing each accounted for about 20 percent of that figure.

Nevertheless, much of the output of the country's factories goes to Europe. Germany, Spain and the UK top the list of importers of the products of Myanmar's garment and footwear industries. The big clothing chains like H&M could become a target for pickets and protests in solidarity with the country's workers and youth

The Western imperialist democracies, as before, will do nothing to help the masses in Myanmar while China, in particular, will continue to support the generals. It is the working class around the world who should express their solidarity with a general strike and the resistance should the military resort to bloodshed. Socialists should declare their total support for the resistance to military rule in Myanmar and impose a workers' boycott as a signal of our solidarity.

Down with the military Junta

Solidarity with the Resistance

Forward to a democratic and social revolution in Myanmar

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