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The Power Struggle Between the Military Junta and Democracy in Myanmar

Amirah Syuhada Binti Shahrudin¹ and Fauziah Fathil²

Abstract: Ever since the first coup by the military forces in 1962, Myanmar has stood out among the Southeast Asian nations due to the prolonged political turmoil between the ever-powerful junta and the rising forces of the people, assisted by the National League for Democracy (NLD) party who demanded democracy. These clashes have profoundly affected the country's socio-economic and politics for decades. Hence, to find the root of this long-ongoing conflict, this paper examines the historical timeline of the friction between the two factions, the military junta (Tatmadaw), and the general population from the post-independent years until now. The study analyses various aspects, including the ethnic tension, the formation of Tatmadaw, the events leading to three military coups, and the people with their multiple uprisings. This paper also sheds light on the leading party, NLD, especially on the central figure, Aung San Suu Kyi, who became the voice of democracy. Overall, this study mainly used the library research method and a content-analysis approach to gather information and assess the dynamic relations between the two forces and how the power struggle remains well into the 21st century.

Keywords: Myanmar, Tatmadaw, Military coup, Democracy in Myanmar, National League for Democracy (NLD), Aung San Suu Kyi.

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Introduction

Located in the intersection between China, India, Bangladesh, Thailand, and Laos, Myanmar, the biggest country in Southeast Asia, has been one of the most conspicuous nations that attracted much apprehension from the watchful eyes of the international community. It is due to the prolonged turmoil and turbulent episodes of power struggle which could be seen as a direct rivalry between the authoritarianism of the military junta as the country's prolonged ruler and the emerging democratic force spearheaded by the citizens. However, as one goes deeper into this study, it can be seen how layers of conflict arose due to various factors and circumstances that led to the long chapter of political struggles there. Thus, this paper investigates and studies how these conflicts are interrelated, leading to a grave rivalry between the military and democratic forces in Myanmar. This article is divided into a few sections, comprised of the chronological history of the power dispute and sequential phases that took place during the Tatmadaw's rule, along with others.

Historically, Myanmar, previously known as Burma, is rich with numerous ethnicities and cultures. Currently, Myanmar consists of around 54 million people, with 135 different ethnic groups recognised by the government, using more than 100 types of languages (World Population Review, 2023). It shows how diverse this country is, and while this is one of its main charms, this diversity, unfortunately, is the catalyst for the constant turbulence in Burma. In the beginning, ancient Burma consisted of a few minor kingdoms, each dominated by certain ethnic groups, which were then united under King Anawrahta of Pagan (1044-1077). After that kingdom fell, the region was again separated into several dynasties until it reunited under the Konbaung Dynasty (1752-1885). Unfortunately, it was short-lived, as their encounter with the British led to a territorial dispute resulting in three wars from 1824 to 1885. The wars ended with Burma being annexed as an Indian province under the British Empire (Smith, 2002) which consequently changed the whole trajectory of Burma from a free nation to one that was under constant suppression by the British. Having experienced many significant changes under British rule, this had indirectly contributed to the political unrest in Myanmar until today.

All in all, British rule has intensified the ethnic division in Burma through their policy of 'divide and rule'. They divided the country into two parts: Lower Burma, dominated by the Bamar/Burman population, and Upper Burma, which consisted of various ethnic minority groups. Usually, the most radical policies were imposed on Lower Burma compared to the upper part, which was not much affected by British rule. Subsequently, these imbalanced rules, along with the abolishment of principal elements of the country, the monarchy, and the monkhood, led to many independence movements, especially from the Burman side (Taylor, 2005). Regarding ethnic division, the early tension intensified further as the British tended to recruit ethnic minorities like the Karen, Chin, and Kachin to become part of the colonial army. These have indirectly led to resentment between the majority group, Burman, and fellow minorities (Walton, 2008).

From this overview, it is clear how ethnic diversity held a significant role in shaping early Burma and the sentiments of the population, and later became the impetus for the military coup, which marked the beginning of the power struggle in Myanmar. It was after this period that Myanmar started to be torn between the authoritarian rule of the military junta and the democratic efforts of the general population. It became a long ongoing struggle between the two factions over the reins of power. The study seeks to demonstrate the chronological history of Myanmar from the early years of independence to the current period, where the nation is still suffering from the third military coup in 2021, and to assess the root cause of the problem and how the power rivalry unfolds.

Literature Review

In dealing with the many events of power conflict that occurred, this paper went through the literature on the general history of Myanmar, followed by the works specifically on the Tatmadaw (military junta), and finally on the people's uprisings. To gather information on the nation's general history, this paper has extensively referred to official reports from outside government agencies and NGOs who work closely in the scene of conflicts. For example, Martin Smith, a Burmese journalist affiliated with Minority Rights Group International (MRG), has written a report entitled 'Burma (Myanmar): The Time

for Change' to raise awareness globally about the issues faced by the people there. This 48-page report describes in great length the historical narrative of Myanmar. The chapters described the country's background, the people, the conflicts, the human legacy, and many more, including some recommendations on how to solve the conflicts there. This report mainly focused on the people themselves instead of solely politics; hence, for beginners, it would be an excellent reading to understand the ongoing problems. Another official report used in this study is the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR) report entitled, "'Time is not on our side": The Failed International Response to the Myanmar Coup' which focused more on the political aspects. Nevertheless, though it is easy to find works that describe the general history of Myanmar, the challenging part of studying this kind of literature is to look for an unbiased work that does not take any side while narrating the history. Either villainise one another or choose the winning side between the forces of Tatmadaw and democracy, one needs to have an objective view in reading them.

Meanwhile, on the military junta or Tatmadaw, some works are useful such as *Building the Tatmadaw: Myanmar Armed Forces Since 1948* by Maung Aung Myoe, an article 'Myanmar in 1989: Tatmadaw V' by James F. Guyot and John Badgley, and another by Konsam Shakila Devi, 'Myanmar under the Military Rule 1962-1988'. Tatmadaw became one of the main focuses as they have been the key players and the core of the political episodes in Myanmar's timeline. Though it is vital to find literature that is not one-sided, in this context, knowing specifically about the Tatmadaw is crucial to understanding the reasons behind the struggles, their actions and motives. For example, in his work, *Building the Tatmadaw: Myanmar Armed Forces Since 1948*, Maung Aung Myoe, an expert on Myanmar's history, exclusively explains the background of Tatmadaw's organisation. The chapters include information on the military doctrine, strategies, structure, training, and welfare of troops. It comprehensively explained the Tatmadaw's viewpoint in detail, thus, providing essential information in understanding this junta.

Lastly, regarding the people's reaction and the development of the democratic movement, until now, there have been three massive people's demonstrations and rebellions; the 8888 Uprising, the Saffron Revolution, and the Spring Revolution. Various works discuss these

incidents which include an article entitled ‘The Role of Students in the 8888 People’s Uprising in Burma’ by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) focusing on the 8888 Uprising, a book chapter by Richard Horsey, ‘The Dramatic Events of 2007 in Myanmar: Domestic and International Implications’ that dwells on the Saffron Revolution, and the most recent by Michal Lubina on the latest rebellion in his work, ‘Myanmar’s Spring Revolution: A People’s Revolution.’

Much of the literature has the same pattern where the authors closely intertwine democratic values with the uprisings. Such instance can be seen in the work of the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), ‘The Role of Students in the 8888 People’s Uprising in Burma.’ From all those uprisings, countless people, including politicians, activists, and more, have been arrested and persecuted by the authorities; hence, to advocate for their release and freedom, some of the former political prisoners have founded the AAPP. Other than being vocal and physically assisting other political prisoners and their families, the association also conducted various research to spread awareness to the public regarding their involvement in Myanmar’s history. Therefore, the mentioned article of the 8888 Uprising comprehensively narrates the history behind the rebellion, the role of the students who initiated the demonstrations, and on behalf of the politicians and activists, this work emphasises their efforts in achieving democracy. It highlighted the sacrifices of the people who fought to gain freedom, equality, human rights, and, most importantly, a democratic country. Various figures are mentioned in this work, including Aung San Suu Kyi and Min Ko Naing.

Besides the above-mentioned topics, namely the general history, the Tatmadaw, and the people’s uprising, this paper also focused on other significant issues like ethnic tension and international responses to the unceasing conflicts. These are crucial for the study to understand the power struggle that happened for decades in Myanmar. This paper also intends to fill in the necessary gaps, focusing on both sides of the opposing parties while trying to delve deeper into each critical event that led to the political division there.

Methodology of Study

This paper mainly used library research and content-analysis approaches to sift through the historical narrative of the political struggle and extract relevant information. It analysed two types of sources, including primary and secondary sources. Among the primary sources is the report by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners. As mentioned, this association was founded by Myanmar's exiled political prisoners involved in the uprisings. They wrote the report to advocate for releasing other prisoners captured during the 8888 uprising. Another valuable source is a documentary by CNA Insider entitled, 'Military in Politics: Myanmar.' This documentary comprised primary interviews with people directly involved with the political crises, like the former Information Minister of Myanmar, NLD's secretary, and the citizens who participated in the uprisings.

In addition, there is a wide range of secondary sources used in this study as references, as this paper focused extensively on the whole power struggle, starting from pre-independence to the confrontation between the Tatmadaw and the democratic force over the past few decades. Multiple books and journal articles discussed the general history, specifically on the Tatmadaw, the uprisings, the democracy, the ethnic tensions and conflict, the international responses, and more. All these sources are significant and crucial in narrating the history of the power struggle and finding the gaps in the history of modern Myanmar.

Independence Years of Burma

After decades of living under the persecution of British rule, there were massive efforts made by many nationalist groups and movements in the country to achieve independence. Aung San led the most prominent one. Starting from his youth, he began to fight for Burma's independence alongside his comrades through various means, including cooperating with Japan, who gave them military training to fight the British. Nevertheless, they betrayed the Japanese authorities once they realised the latter was the same as their old coloniser. They tried to have diplomatic meetings with the winning side, the British, to gain independence. His efforts were not in vain as, at the end of 1946, the British agreed to give Burma independence through Aung San and his party, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL). However,

this came with the condition that Aung San needed to discuss this future independence with the ethnic minorities (Walton, 2008). With 135 officially recognised ethnic groups, the ethnic composition in Burma is relatively very diverse. Thus, in paving the way for the future state of Myanmar, their views were deemed as important.

This density in ethnic composition was influenced by the settlements of various groups from the countries bordering Myanmar, like China, India, Bangladesh, Thailand, and Laos. Of those 135 groups, the majority were Bamar or Burman people, encompassing around 68% of the population. While the others, among the vital minority ethnic groups like Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayah, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan, comprised less than 10% of the total population (Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust, 2021). This ethnic composition was highly crucial for the future government to decide on the new path for the country after independence. In the past, the colonial British practised the ‘divide and rule’ policy, which separated the diverse ethnic groups in Burma hence, consequently causing tension to rise between the dominant group and the minorities. According to Walton (2008), “It was British geographical divisions and colonial policies, however, that would solidify ethnic identity and have the greatest effect on the negotiations at Panglong and future ethnic relations” (p. 893). The ethnic tension was intensified because though Bamar was the majority, they were highly undermined during the British rule. They also viewed other minorities like Karen, Kachin, and Chin as British allies, as these groups were favoured by the British (Walton, 2008). Therefore, to gain independence, the British first gave the condition for the majority and minority ethnic groups to have a fair discussion and agreement to avoid any ethnic conflicts in the future.

To meet the conditions set by the British, in 1946 and 1947, Aung San and a few representatives from the Burmans and colonial government held a conference with some ethnic minority groups to discuss the possibility of a union. These meetings were held at Panglong, and the ethnic groups were the Chin, Kachin, and Shan, while the Karens acted as observers. The first meeting was full of suspicion, but moving to the second conference, the ethnic leaders finally agreed to form the Union of Burma. Their reluctance earlier was reasonable because they were afraid that with Burman’s domination, the ethnic minorities would lose their identity, culture, and freedom (Kipgen, 2011). Hence, the

Burman leaders promised the rest that within the new constitution, the minority would later gain their desired state of autonomy and the right to secession from the Union. Unfortunately, a tragedy happened in 1947 when Aung San was assassinated by his rivals (Walton, 2008). It led to chaos and confusion in the nation, with the Panglong Agreement, left to crumble and become empty promises.

Following the assassination of Aung San, his closest ally, U Nu, took over the power, and finally, Burma declared its independence in January 1948. At first, U Nu tried to honour the Panglong Agreement and did not interfere with the internal affairs of the ethnic minorities. Nonetheless, he later tried implementing some Burmanisation policies, like enforcing the Burmese and Buddhism as the official language and religion. The minorities were firmly against this as they felt threatened by Burman's domination, which was against the spirit of the Panglong Agreement (Kipgen, 2011). Thus, this period was full of insurgent movements by ethnic groups and communists who opposed the democratic government. Among the ethnic minorities involved in the armed conflicts were the Karens, Mon, Pao, Rakhine, and others. Their strength was so strong that, in a short period, many towns fell into the insurgents' forces (Smith, 2002).

Meanwhile, the AFPFL also faced an internal rivalry issue, leading to the party's split into two factions. Hence, in preparing for the general election, U Nu asked Tatmadaw, the military force, to form a caretaker government. Under the rule of the army's Chief of Staff, General Ne Win, Tatmadaw successfully handled the election and reduced many issues in the country. Thus, when U Nu's faction won the election and formed another weak government that could not handle the insurgency, Ne Win led a military coup, ending the government in 1962 (Devi, 2014).

Tatmadaw: First Military Coup & Rule in Burma (1962-1988)

Tatmadaw is another name for the Myanmar Armed Forces, and since the beginning, this military sector has been one of the most critical elements of the country. Founded by Aung San to achieve independence, the power of this military junta was further strengthened during the early years of independence. According to Myoe (2009), Tatmadaw helped

to restore law and order in the country in the age of civil war, thereby suppressing all the communist and separatist insurgencies and further maintaining peace and stability. Under Ne Win's rule, they handled the situation with such brutality by using a 'four-cuts' strategy where they cut off the food supply, funds, intelligence, and any support to the ethnic armed organisation. They also created free-fire zones where the soldiers could freely fire toward the insurgents without distinctions (ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights [APHR], 2022). All these had emboldened the Tatmadaw's reputation, who considered themselves as the guardians of the nation who made great sacrifices to avoid the possible collapse of the country to the insurgents.

Therefore, when another weak civilian government under U Nu was formed after the general election of 1960, Ne Win initiated a military coup to end the government. This action could be seen as necessary since the situation in Burma at the time was chaotic, to the point that even Rangoon, the capital city, was under threat (Kipgen, 2011). As a patriotic soldier who accompanied Aung San, one of the 30 commanders who fought for Burma's independence, Ne Win felt responsible for saving the nation (Kipgen, 2011). However, once he suppressed the insurgents and established military rule, it led to a long episode of power struggle in Myanmar. Beginning with ethnic divisions and insurgencies, the situation now has elevated even further. Instead of ruling the nation temporarily while waiting for it to become stable, the military junta now tried to hold on to its power as long as possible on the justification to protect the nation from the rebels. But, as this paper will demonstrate, Tatmadaw's actions created more trouble and political uncertainty, sometimes leading to huge people's uprisings demanding democracy.

Summarily, the Tatmadaw's rule after the first military coup can be divided into two phases: direct military rule (1962-1974) and Constitutional Dictatorship (1974-1988). In the first phase, Ne Win enforced direct military rule through the Revolutionary Council (RC) by dissolving the parliament, suspending the constitution, banning all the political parties, and putting all the powers under the Council. He also reformed Burma into a one-party state by establishing a new military-dominated party, the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). Through this party and the Council, Ne Win's goal was to shape the country to become socialist, with an ideology called the 'Burmese Way

of Socialism' (Devi, 2014). Many changes took place during this period, which continued into the second phase, the Constitutional Dictatorship. Later, in 1974, the military suddenly dissolved the Revolutionary Council to introduce a new constitution and held the first election to select a new leader. Nevertheless, it was quite a sly movement from them because, as mentioned before, BSPP was the only eligible party, and they only held this election due to the promise that the military would transfer the power to the newly elected government. Hence, it can be seen as purely an act legitimising Ne Win's rule as Burma's legal president after winning the election through BSPP (Devi, 2014). The country continued under strict direct military rule until 1988 and this came to a halt when a tumultuous event occurred.

To understand the cause of the subsequent event, government policies need to be looked into. As many changes happened due to the socialist policies, some notable effects could be seen in the economic sector. For instance, the Burmanisation policy has nationalised many parts of the country, including lands, trade, banks, industries, and schools. It significantly impacted the people and worsened the economy, so many were penniless when Ne Win demonetised certain banknotes as he pleased. Throughout the two decades, many riots and demonstrations happened inside the country to protest the policies that caused food shortages and a declining economy. However, none of the riots was able to change the leadership until the breaking point in 1988. During that time, the government abruptly demonetised a few banknotes currency like 25, 35, and 75 kyat by replacing them with 45- and 90-kyat notes (Devi, 2014). This sudden decision caused one of the most significant uprisings against the military government.

The uprising was famously known as the 8888 Uprising as the peak of the demonstrations happened on 8th August 1988. As mentioned earlier, one of the triggers of this revolt was the demonetisation of the banknotes, and interestingly, the primary key player that spearheaded this movement was the university students. It is because money demonetisation usually wipes out people's savings as the banknotes would be useless, and this caused a massive burden to the students in paying their fees. Combined with the use of excessive force by the junta, it has triggered them to demonstrate in the street, demanding the end of mistreatment by the government (Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, 2014) starting in the early months of 1988. After the news

of the students' demonstrations spread and with encouragement from foreign media like the BBC, it started to attract the public's attention. Finally, as planned by the student leaders, the largest nationwide uprising, joined by hundreds of thousands of citizens, including monks, teachers, government and hospital workers, broke out on the prearranged date, 8th August 1988 (AAPP, 2014). The people intended to get some solutions from the government for the problems facing them and to demand an end to military rule so that the move towards a democratic nation could start again. Regrettably, the end of this uprising did not turn out well as it quickly turned bloody due to the brutal and excessive reaction by the military junta, who injured and persecuted a vast number of demonstrators involved in the rally. From the very first night, the peaceful demonstrators had to face a vast number of soldiers who were under the instruction to fire directly at the demonstrators instead of shooting upwards. The death toll kept increasing till it reached more than 3,000 deaths in just five days (AAPP, 2014). Even so, the protest continued for over a month until another historic event happened.

Significantly, despite the heavy casualties, the 8888 uprising had successfully ended Ne Win's rule, who resigned from all his positions at the end of this eventful incident. Though it could not end the nation's power struggle, this uprising brought about two significant outcomes that became a game-changer to the power dynamic in Myanmar. The first one is the emergence of a new military coup by another general. Ironically, in contrast to that, second is the new rise of democracy with the founding of the most famous political party in Burma to date, that is, the National League for Democracy.

The Second Military Coup in 1988

The power struggle in Burma took another turn in 1988 when another military sector led a second coup against the ruling government, intending to stop the people's uprising by absolute force. Under the leadership of General Saw Maung, the junta seized control of the government, enforced martial law, and brutally suppressed all the demonstrations. Thousands of civilians and protestors died, and the rest were put under the rule of a new military institution called the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which then changed to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) (Steinberg et al., 2023).

The name Burma also changed to Myanmar in this era. After the coup, the military claimed their rule would be temporary while preparing for a new general election in 1990. Fatefully, this 1990 election marked its place in Myanmar's history as an eventful election that witnessed a confrontation between the military junta and a newly emerged and soon-to-be powerful party, NLD. Both continued to be the leading key players in Myanmar's power struggle until today.

National League for Democracy or NLD fought for democracy and an end to military authoritarianism. It was co-founded by Aung San Suu Kyi, one of the most prominent political figures in Myanmar. She had just returned to her home country and as she witnessed the 1988 demonstrations, she was so moved to the extent that she dedicated her life to fighting for democratic rule. As the daughter of the late Aung San, combined with her great dedication and fighting spirit, the crowd became automatically drawn to her, and most of the people gave their trust and loyalty to her new party (AAPP, 2014). Unfortunately, she had been put under house arrest since 1989. Still, her spirit and voice helped to lead a majority win for NLD in the 1990 election, where they won four-fifths of the contested seats (Steinberg et al., 2023). However, SLORC refused to accept the result and continued to rule the country for the next decades while leaving Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest for 15 years (APHR, 2022).

Overall, nothing much changed under the new rule, as it was still authoritarian and similar to Ne Win's administration, which followed the goal of socialism. Some of the only changes were the creation of a free-market economy, which benefitted the leading military families in doing business, then a few joint ventures, and more open foreign policies (Guyot & Badgley, 1990). These policies brought little changes to people's lives, and in many ways, the economy worsened, and people suffered. The international responses to the 8888 Uprising also had detrimental effects on the economy of Myanmar. Guyot and Badgley (1990) described the response as outright condemnation, where the outside powers condemned Myanmar's government for their harsh suppression of the democratic uprising. The United States was among the international powers that suspended their aid, enforced trade bans, and charged the government with severe human rights abuse. The allies of the United States joined this international boycott, like the European Economic Community (EEC), Japan, Taiwan, Canada, and others, which

curtailed their assistance to Myanmar. However, a few countries, like China and Southeast Asian nations, ignored the restrictive policy and continued their economic relations with Myanmar. Still, the economy and welfare of Myanmar continued to suffer during those years under military rule.

Hence, like the 8888 Uprising, another demonstration emerged due to the economic problems and became another highlighted event in Myanmar's history in finding a democratic solution. It was named the Saffron Revolution based on the saffron robe colour worn by the monks who joined the civilian demonstrations in 2007, opposing the hike in fuel prices. The fuel prices first increased from 160 to 1500 kyat per gallon (diesel) and 180 to 1500 kyat per litre (petrol) in 2005, and then again jumped to 3000 kyat per gallon (diesel) and 2500 kyat per litre (petrol) in 2007. This surge greatly affected the people until they could not afford essential commodities like public transportation fares (Horsey, 2008). The military was first reluctant to respond to this demonstration due to the involvement of the monks. The monks' role was significant in this protest because, at first, they only joined the street protests along with the others, including the '88 Generation leaders. However, as one of the demonstrations happened at Pakokku, the primary centre of Buddhism in Myanmar, the number of monks who joined increased significantly.

As a result, many monks were injured during the suppression of the protests. Henceforth, the military government, represented by senior local officials, came to the monastery to apologise and request the monks to stop joining any demonstrations to avoid more religious conflict, which could create massive chaos in Myanmar. Regardless, the monks responded by taking the officials as hostages for a few hours. From here, the situation quickly escalated. As the monks continued to protest against the government, and as represented by a new group, All Burma Monks Alliance, they made demands to the authorities, which included the release of Aung San Suu Kyi (Horsey, 2008). When the demands were not fulfilled, many monks continued to protest in the streets for days. The climax of the uprising happened when the monks gave respect and asked for support from Aung San Suu Kyi; hence, the junta responded by brutally suppressing these revolutions, which caused a high number of killings and arrests of the monks and civilians.

This event showed the significant friction between the junta and Aung San Suu Kyi, who continued to rival in the power struggle there.

Road to Democracy: Tatmadaw's Civilian Government and NLD

Overall, the nation's constitution was the most significant thing missing during the early rule of SPDC. Hence, in 2003, the junta finally started planning the new constitution as a part of the seven-step roadmap to achieve a "discipline-flourishing democracy." This road map can be understood as steps the military wanted to take before releasing their power to a new civilian government, which was finally approved in 2008 (APHR, 2022). Henceforth, the nation started planning a new general election in 2010. Immediately, it seemed like history repeated itself when this new election was also won by the military-dominated party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), and the dissolution of NLD before the election. However, the new president elected in February 2011, Thein Sein, has proved otherwise. Under this former general's reign, he directed a lot of democratic and liberalised reforms in many sectors, especially in politics and society; for example, he allowed peaceful demonstrations, eased press restrictions, pardoned thousands of political prisoners, and many more (Steinberg et al., 2023). Thein Sein also allowed NLD to re-register as a political party and held the fairest election in 2015 without imposing military control and tactics as in the old times. These changes marked a turning point in the constant power struggle and friction between the military junta and the democratic force.

By doing all these reforms and loosening restrictions on NLD, this democratic manoeuvre by the Tatmadaw's civilian government led by Thein Sein can be seen as an effort by the military to create a transition where they would release their power slowly before ceding it entirely to other's rule. Not to be misunderstood, Tatmadaw still held great control over any new government through the constitution, where 25 per cent of the parliamentary seats were reserved for the soldiers (APHR, 2022) to intervene in the law-and-order system. Still, it was a significant progress towards democracy and relaxed the power struggles, especially when NLD won the 2015 election and formed its own government. It was indeed a massive change for the country and could be seen as a win for democracy, although it did not last for too long. At the same time, NLD

had to deal with another problem regarding the presidency. Undeniably, Aung San Suu Kyi was the obvious choice due to her significant influence and reputation. However, the 2008 Constitution specifically single-pointed her background, for example, being a mother of two British or non-Myanmar nationals, thus, rendering her unqualified as the new president. Therefore, NLD created another position for her as the State Counsellor, who acted as the *de facto* leader (APHR, 2022).

Nevertheless, from 2011 until the rule of NLD as the government, the massive change and transition helped Myanmar become a democratic country. According to Lubina (2021), these years can be considered the best decade since the independence with all the changes and improvements made:

Throughout the country roads were improved, infrastructure developed (with access to the electricity grid reaching 70 per cent of the population), connectivity enhanced, a cyber revolution enabled and modest progress achieved in education and healthcare. Socio-political space expanded significantly: corruption decreased, transparency increased, the Tatmadaw's grip weakened, and CSOs strengthened, empowering people. Most of the political prisoners were released; exile dissidents were welcomed home; civil society and grassroots organizations, including humanitarian, educational and religious institutions sprouted in big cities; political parties were re-legalised. (p.2)

Indeed, it was the best decade for the Myanmar people having experienced all the improvements and values, though it did not involve all as in the case of the Rohingya Muslims who suffered ethnic cleansing and persecution at the hands of the Myanmar government and Buddhist nationalists.

Rohingya is the name of the Muslim minority ethnic group living in the Rakhine State of Myanmar, bordering Bangladesh. They were once named the most persecuted ethnic minority in the world by the United Nations due to the constant violence enforced on them and the increasing number of Rohingya refugees who escaped seeking haven (Kipgen, 2020). For so long, they have been harshly persecuted by the military junta, who denied their existence. Furthermore, in the 21st

century, the issues became worse and caused a high number of refugees escaping from Myanmar.

The Rohingyas had to face a lot of discrimination and human abuse as they were seen as illegal immigrants. It caused them great hardship living in Myanmar having to worry about getting killed or expelled. From the citizenship issue to other issues like the killing of a Rakhine woman in 2012 that caused a massive outbreak of violence between the Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine Buddhists, to the fight between the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and military who consequently did massive clearance operations in 2017 (Kipgen, 2020), all these Rohingya problems constantly drew concern from the world. Therefore, even though Myanmar was on the right track to becoming a democratic government under Thein Sein and NLD, the international platform demanded that they solve this Rohingya issue. Those two governments, however, failed to meet the expectations. Thein Sein organised a 16-member committee to investigate the matter (Kipgen, 2020), but nothing changed.

Even Aung San Suu Kyi's outstanding reputation was tainted by this issue as she could be seen in defence of the army's actions, for example, when she had to face the International Court of Justice in 2019, answering to the genocide accusations by the military towards the Rohingyas (United Nations, 2019). These caused adverse reactions worldwide as many lost their trust in democratic values fought by the NLD party, as what happened to the Rohingya is far from what they have been preaching. Myanmar has also strongly avoided intervention from international bodies and foreign powers for years to justify its force. This situation became worse when there was another new military coup took over the country in 2021, causing the Rohingya issue to be put aside and remain unsolved.

2021 Military Coup

As mentioned before, the rule under the Tatmadaw's civilian government and NLD's democratic government from 2011 to 2021 produced the best decade of Myanmar that the people immensely enjoyed. Aside from the Rohingya issue, all other sectors and infrastructures vastly improved. Therefore, when the Tatmadaw did another coup during the NLD's rule

in 2021, it overturned all the situations back to the authoritarian era causing the power struggle to re-emerge as the people strived for true freedom and genuine leadership to rule the country. Ye Htut, the former Information Minister of Myanmar, described this coup as the result of mutual distrust between the NLD and the military. He pointed out the clash of principles between the two and how NLD viewed the military as a power-hungry institution and an obstacle, for which reason the democratic party tried to amend the constitution and isolate the army from the political arena in Myanmar. These actions by NLD triggered more tension with the military junta which led to a state of emergency (CNA Insider, 2021).

This latest historical coup happened after the recent general election in November 2020. NLD won another majority of the contested seats, which made it the next ruling government. The problem arose when the military junta vehemently opposed this election result. The USDP refused to accept it and asked for a rerun as they accused the earlier votes of massive fraud. This claim was rejected by the electoral commission, which was tasked to handle this voting. So, Tatmadaw made another demand to the government, asking for a delay in reopening the parliament, which NLD rejected (Steinberg et al., 2023). Stemming from these accusations, dissatisfaction, and rejections, the Tatmadaw began to attack the government. Under the instruction of General Min Aung Hlaing, they started the coup on the evening of 31st January 2021 by capturing the renowned Aung San Suu Kyi and the president, U Win Myint (Thein-Lemelson, 2021). They were put under arrest by the military even until the present day. Not just these two leaders, but the Tatmadaw arrested almost all the elected parliamentary members from the NLD government just before the reopening of the parliament (Thein-Lemelson, 2021).

In public, the army general justified his seizing of the democratic government as only temporary while they recounted the votes and set up a rightful government. However, until today, all the captured politicians are still under arrest, and Tatmadaw is still clinging firmly to power. As expected, this military coup gained a massive reaction from the international community, mainly against the unlawful act, while very few nations that were close to the junta supported it. Among the allies were Russia and China. Russia, for one, has always been the Tatmadaw's most prominent backer, and they have deep military

connections; China did not have one absolute stance, but still, due to them being the most significant source of weapons to Tatmadaw, they were also seen as the enabler of the coup. Meanwhile, the number of international communities against this coup exceeded the allies. For example, countries that previously put economic sanctions on Myanmar, like the United States and the European Union, reinstall their sanctions. The situation is more complicated for the United Nations and ASEAN. However, regardless of that, ASEAN strongly opposed the coup through the 'Five-Point Consensus,' where they tried to solve the issue peacefully and effectively (APHR, 2022).

Lastly, other than the international responses, it is only wise for the paper to discuss the people's reaction to the coup in their own country. This coup led to another massive uprising, the Spring Revolution. Just like the previous two upheavals, this revolution also used the same approach in demanding the end of military rule to take on the road. However, this Spring Revolution had a different twist as the people were now more exposed to the outside world. Hence, they used this knowledge to organise more systematic and practical rebellions. According to Kyaw Wunna, the Research Team Secretary from NLD, "The 21st century is the age of Information Technology. The UN general secretary declared there is no place for any kind of military dictatorship... In other words, the Myanmar people will never surrender to a military dictatorship again" (CNA Insider, 2021, 12:53). More than one million people have filled the Myanmar cities' streets, uniting members of the society from all walks of life. They also used social media to communicate with each other and to alert the outside world. The people held many strikes, most significantly the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and many more (Lubina, 2021). Expectedly, all these rebellions have been brutally responded to by the junta like in the old days. Nevertheless, instead of giving up, the people are getting more desperate to convey their suffering to the world and to stop the military rule for now and forever to this day.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is clear how, throughout the past few decades until today, Myanmar has faced a lot of power struggle episodes that led to

a long, turbulent, and troubled history. The conflict started from the ethnic division, which led to the outbreak of insurgencies in the early independence period, to the first military coup in 1962, which from hereupon has set the nation to face more trouble and suffering under military rule. It continued with the direct power struggle between the Tatmadaw and democratic force in the country, notably led by Aung San Suu Kyi and NLD after the second coup, to a brief, peaceful transition between the two in the 2010s before getting into the conflict once again with the recent third military coup in 2021. Myanmar has undoubtedly been surrounded by a complicated and complex series of events that caused political unrest and power struggles. It is certainly hoped that one day, Myanmar could find the desired peace and an end to the people's sufferings who, more than anyone, wanted to be free from the military's firm control and find their state of freedom regardless of all the power struggles happening there.

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