

## Asia-Ready Webinar Series

### What's Developing in Myanmar and What are You(th)s Concerned About?

The Asia-Ready Webinar Series is co-curated with various partners to allow youth to gain a better appreciation of the regional developments and a greater awareness of Singapore's interconnectivity with the regional markets.

Sat, 10 Apr 2021

11:00 AM - 12:00 PM

Online Event



### About the Webinar

#### Speakers

Mr San Nay Thway – Second Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Myanmar

Ms Kayla Wong – Assistant Editor, Mothership.sg

#### Synopsis

Googling “Myanmar” recently would bring up search results of news on the political developments of the country – where Aung San Suu Kyi, a Nobel Laureate almost synonymous with democracy and human rights of Myanmar, and other leaders of the National Leader for Democracy (NLD) were detained as the military seized power on 1

February and declared a state of emergency for a year. The military intervention prompted civil disobedience, street protests and violence, all of which are escalating.

As a Singaporean youth, what are you concerned about with regard to Myanmar's development, political and/or otherwise? This webinar will dive into a young Burmese's perspective on the fast-moving and build situation, and also discuss the Singapore conversation regarding Myanmar.

*This webinar was brought to you by the National Youth Council (NYC) and the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA).*

## What We've Learnt

### **Political crisis in Myanmar**

On 1 February 2021, the Myanmar military seized control of the country, detaining Aung San Suu Kyi and other top leaders of the National League for Democracy (NLD). A state of emergency was declared for one year, after which the military promised to hold "free and fair elections". In the interim, a new administration known as the State Administration Council (SAC) was appointed to run the country.

The military has justified its actions based on allegations of widespread voter fraud in the 2020 national elections. The NLD, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, won 80 per cent of contested seats while the military-affiliated Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) won less than 7 per cent. The election commission of Myanmar has issued a statement stating there is no evidence of widespread fraud.

Many Myanmar locals see the military as having subverted the will of the people and have poured onto the streets in protest. The situation has since grown increasingly tense, with the military taking aggressive action to maintain their grip on power. As of 8 April, the civilian death toll in Myanmar has exceeded 600. Many more have been arrested, charged or sentenced. A compromise between opposing sides does not seem likely in the near term, as the military still believes it is operating from a position of strength and has shown no signs of stepping back. In a poll conducted during the webinar, most participants think that the coup will not succeed or fail, creating a protracted crisis.

### **Role and Response of International Actors**

International action has been urged by both domestic and foreign players to help resolve the crisis. The UN and several countries have strongly condemned the military's atrocities. Notably, four ASEAN members – Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore – have called for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other detainees. Brunei, which heads ASEAN this year, issued its own chairman's statement that expressed concern on the situation and called for all parties to refrain from violence.

Currently, the U.S. has imposed sanctions on Myanmar's top military brass and two of Myanmar's military-owned companies. This means that their assets in the U.S. have been

frozen, and American individuals and businesses have been banned from dealing with them. However, it remains to be seen if the Tatmadaw will respond to such pressure as past sanctions on Myanmar have not deterred them. The military has continued to rule the country on its path of isolation for decades under heavy embargoes and sanctions, before it started opening the economy in 2011.

As for ASEAN, there is a lot of backchannel diplomacy it can undertake to hold the junta to its promised trajectory of returning to a constitutional democracy after one year. While the role of external players is limited in this crisis, ASEAN provides a channel for members to come together and talk things out.

### **Youth Involvement and Perspective**

Youths have been one of the most active demographics in the pro-democracy movement as they have lived most of their lives under a country that was progressive and making strides towards democracy. Many are concerned about their future and fear that the improvements of the last decade will be lost.

Social media has helped protestors rally support and coordinate acts of protest, and the younger generation have been particularly adept at using social media to organise themselves. Compared to the past when internet penetration was low and few people in the country used mobile phones, today both the young and old are all plugged into mobile devices. In a poll conducted during the webinar, most participants correctly identified Facebook as the most popular social media app in Myanmar. Photos and video footages of military brutality are widely shared on the platform, creating anger that fuels the movement. Social media has also helped facilitate the boycotting of military related products and services. Even as the junta cuts down on mobile internet and WIFI access in the country, youths are turning to traditional media such as radios and paper publications to keep the pro-democracy movement going.

## **Questions Answered**

*By Mr San Nay Thway and Ms Kayla Wong*

### **How has Singapore been involved in addressing issues in Myanmar?**

Singapore has condemned the violent military crackdown on protestors, with Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan calling it “the height of national shame for the armed forces of any country to turn its arms against its own people”. Singapore is also active in backchannel diplomacy efforts with other ASEAN countries to facilitate a resolution to the crisis.

### **What does the military hope to achieve with this coup?**

It is believed that the military were feeling increasingly threatened by the immense popularity of the NLD, especially given their landslide in the 2020 elections. They conducted

the coup to assert their power and control over the country. As a result, it might be difficult for the military to allow the civilian government to wield as much influence as they did in the past.

**What do you think is the likely future of Myanmar in the coming months or years?**

The situation is extremely complex and it is hard to tell where the future for the country lies. It is difficult to see any end to the crisis in the near term, with violence and bloodshed likely to continue. Protests are unlikely to stop and the military will respond with harsher measures. Judging from the military's uncompromising stance thus far, any opportunity for a compromise seems slim at the moment.

**Can international organisations like the United Nations (UN) be obliged to step in and interfere with Myanmar's politics?**

It will be difficult to coordinate any international response. Russia and China, two prominent members of the UN Security Council, are likely to veto any resolutions on Myanmar. In addition, the UN also has no enforcing body. Even if a resolution is passed, there is no way for the UN to enforce the implementation of its recommendations by domestic actors in Myanmar.

**What is the role of minority ethnic groups in the movement? Is there greater awareness of the heightened disadvantage faced by specific communities within Myanmar like the Rohingya?**

The current crisis has united the people of Myanmar like never before. Individuals of the Bamar ethnic majority have expressed regret and empathy for the treatment of the Rohingyas and other ethnic minorities in Myanmar. The Committee Representing Pyitaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), a parallel parliament formed by former members of the NLD, recently announced the abolishment of the 2008 constitution. It outlined a charter to establish a democratic federal union, guaranteeing democracy, freedom, equal rights and justice for all. These are demands that have long been pushed for by ethnic armed groups.