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A year on from Myanmar's 'annus horribilis'

Rajiv Bhatia, JANUARY 31, 2022

The road ahead looks dark and New Delhi's outreach needs to be guided by realism and pragmatism

The coup in Myanmar will be a year old tomorrow. On February 1 last year, the military seized power, violating the Constitution. A decade-long experiment with hybrid democracy ended abruptly, paving the way for violence, oppression and instability. The road ahead looks dark, but diplomatic efforts are under way to bring amelioration.

Internal scene

The Opposition camp has called for a nationwide silent strike that ends in mass clapping, an act representing the indignation and the frustration of the people. They are angry with the military that has oppressed them and imprisoned their elected leaders. They are also frustrated with the international community as it failed to show up with a magic wand to restore democracy. Some of their leaders are promising freedom from military rule by the end of 2022. But few believe them.

The military leadership has persisted in marching on the dangerous path it chose last January. It convinced itself that the November 2020 elections were fraudulent, resulting in a landslide victory for the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. It feared that, armed with a strong popular mandate, she would clip their wings and establish full democracy. President Win Myint and Daw Suu Kyi were arrested and there was a brutal clampdown. The result: 1,498 people have been killed and 11,787 imprisoned till January 27, 2022, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners. Besides, a sizeable number of security officials have been killed. An exodus of people seeking refuge in neighbouring countries followed, which included over 15,000 people to Mizoram, India.

After the coup, the Opposition was active in articulating people's anger. A parallel government named the National Unity Government (NUG) was formed. Slowly it lost momentum as Naypyitaw denounced NUG as "terrorists", and used its overwhelming power to subdue the resistance. The military now has an upper hand although normalcy still eludes the nation. Instability has ruined the economy, with the World Bank terming it as "critically weak". The crisis also weakened the Government's efforts to manage the pandemic. In short, Myanmar has just gone through its annus horribilis.

ASEAN's role

Attention has now been focused on mediation by the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). It began well by persuading Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the regime's supremo, to accept the 'Five-Point Consensus' comprising, inter alia, the cessation of violence, national dialogue and mediatory efforts by ASEAN. Insiders recall that Min Aung Hlaing's consent was implicit. This became explicit when Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin formally conveyed Myanmar's "commitment" to the plan last August. But the military resiled from its implementation. With uncharacteristic firmness, ASEAN barred the Senior General's participation in its summits. It offered representation at the non-political level which Myanmar turned down.

In this impasse, Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen, the current ASEAN Chair, has adopted a softer approach which is backed by Thailand and Laos. It aims at adjusting to the military's refusal to compromise on its key requirements such as denial of access to Daw Suu Kyi for ASEAN mediators, and little dilution of the 2008 Constitution. Other ASEAN States led by Indonesia are opposed to Cambodia's diplomacy. But long-time ASEAN watchers believe that through further consultations, the grouping will craft internal consensus and re-adapt its negotiating mandate.

Whether this happens on Cambodia's watch, or later under the Indonesian leadership, remains to be seen. A key person to watch is Noeleen Heyzer, the United Nations Secretary General António Guterres's special envoy, who could help both the UN and ASEAN to craft a *modus vivendi* for Myanmar.

Other players

The West exerts influence in Myanmar, but it has been unable to comprehend the dynamics of power. The United States and the European Union have not accurately assessed the military's resolve and core conviction that without its driving role, national unity and integrity would disappear. The western policy to promote democracy and impose sanctions against the military have produced minimal results.

The media paid huge attention to Russia's endeavours to woo Myanmar by increasing its defence cooperation since the coup. But the principal player is China, not Russia, despite evident coordination between the two. Beijing enjoys enormous leverage in the 'Golden Land' through its control over several ethnic armed organisations, projects covered by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the regime's protection via veto in the Security Council, and a thick cheque book. Whoever wields power in Naypyitaw develops stakes in close partnership with China. But Myanmar's rulers also desire independence and balance in their external policy, provided the international community gives them the means for it. Japan understands this geopolitical reality, but acting by itself, Tokyo cannot make a difference. It should act in coordination with ASEAN and India.

India's policy

As the world's largest democracy, India is always happy to work with fellow democracies, but it has never been in the business of exporting democracy. Nevertheless, it has done much to shape and to strengthen diplomatic efforts at the UN and through its support to ASEAN for putting Myanmar's

transition to democracy back on the rails. This line was reiterated by India's Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla in his interactions with the top military leadership in December 2021. He was given a patient hearing even though his request to meet Daw Suu Kyi was denied, as was expected. Besides, New Delhi provided one million doses of "Made in India" vaccines, and humanitarian assistance to the people of Myanmar.

For India, the well-established two-track policy of supporting democracy and maintaining cordial relations with the Government remains in operation. South Block has to protect the state's interests, guided by realism and pragmatism. It has to discourage a mass influx of refugees; cut the capability of insurgent groups to endanger security in the Northeast from Myanmar soil; safeguard the ongoing projects and investments; and, above all, counter China's growing influence.

Finally, what future awaits Daw Suu Kyi who no longer dominates the political narrative as she did before the coup? Sadly, she faces three choices, all difficult: long imprisonment, foreign exile, or imposed retirement from politics. The last option seems the most likely at present.

Rajiv Bhatia is Distinguished Fellow, Gateway House and former Ambassador to Myanmar. He is also the author of India-Myanmar Relations: Changing Contours