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BETWEEN CROWN, GUN, AND BALLOT: POLITICAL TRAJECTORIES OF MYANMAR FROM COLONIAL CONQUEST TO THE 2021 COUP

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ABSTRACT

Myanmar's political trajectory presents one of the most striking cases of authoritarian persistence and contested democratisation in Asia. From the fall of the Burmese monarchy in 1885 and British annexation, the seeds of ethnic division and state fragility were planted, particularly through the separate administration of the Burman heartland and frontier minority regions. The parliamentary democracy of 1948–1962 under U Nu was undermined by communist insurgencies, ethnic armed organisations, and disputes over language and religion, culminating in the military coup of 1962 led by General Ne Win. The "Burmese Way to Socialism" entrenched authoritarian rule for nearly three decades, collapsing by 1988 when mass uprisings (the "8888 Movement") called for democracy but was denied. The 2008 Constitution institutionalised military dominance even as quasi-civilian reforms allowed historic elections in 2010 and 2015. The NLD's sweeping victories in 2015 and 2020 indicated popular demand for democratisation, yet the Rohingya crisis (2016–2017) undermined hopes of an international democratic transition. The February 2021 coup, which annulled the NLD mandate and restored full military rule, reignited mass protests and the creation of a parallel civilian government (National Unity Government). This paper analyses Myanmar's political events from colonial conquest to the present coup, highlighting the recurring contest between military centralisation and ethnic demands for autonomy, and assessing the prospects for federal democracy.

Keywords: *Myanmar, Burma, Military Rule, Democratisation, Ethnic Federalism, Panglong Agreement, Coup, Authoritarianism, Aung San Suu Kyi.*

Introduction

Myanmar (formerly Burma) represents one of Southeast Asia's most complex political landscapes. Unlike its regional neighbours, Myanmar's path to independence, nation-building, and governance has been fraught with an extraordinary degree of turbulence. It is a state where postcolonial fragility, deep ethnic diversity, and authoritarian entrenchment have coalesced into cycles of military domination, popular protest, and incomplete reforms (Callahan, 2003; Kipgen, 2016).

This paper situates Myanmar's story as a sequence of political ruptures: colonial conquest (1886), independence (1948), the coup of 1962, the 1988 uprising, the abortive 1990 elections, the adoption of the 2008 Constitution, the first quasi-civilian transition in 2010, the democratic victories of 2015 and 2020, and the devastating coup of February 2021. Through a historical-political lens, it assesses how ethnic disputes, authoritarian logic, and constitutional engineering have sustained militarism while thwarting democracy.

Myanmar under Colonial Rule and the Pre-Independence Era: Colonial Rule and Ethnic Division

The annexation of upper Burma in 1885 and its integration into British India in 1886 destroyed the Burmese monarchy and consolidated colonial control (Donnison, 1953). Yet, the British applied a "divide-and-administer" policy, treating central Burma and the "Frontier Areas" differently. Frontier minorities—including the Shan, Chin, Kachin, and Karen—retained traditional chiefs and cultural autonomy. This sowed enduring mistrust between the Burman majority and minorities, as the minorities were insulated from Burman assimilation but came to depend on British indirect rule (Smith, 1999).

World War II transformed Burma's nationalist landscape. The Burma Independence Army, founded by Aung San and the "Thirty Comrades," initially allied with Japan against Britain in hopes of securing freedom. However, by 1945, disillusioned Burman leaders shifted to support the Allies, while minorities largely retained loyalty to Britain (Bray, 1992). The war intensified Burman-minority tensions, as Karen, Kachin, and Chin units were armed by the British to fight against both Japan and Burman nationalist forces (Fink, 2001).

The Panglong Agreement and the Forging of the Union

The Panglong Agreement signed on 12 February 1947 symbolised the closest consensus between the Burman leadership and frontier minorities. Negotiated by Aung San, it persuaded Shan, Chin, and Kachin representatives to join a Union of Burma on the promise of autonomy and equality (Kipgen, 2016). Yet the agreement was fragile, more symbolic than structural, and Aung San's assassination undermined its credibility. Subsequent constitutions included formal clauses granting secession rights to certain states (notably Shan and Kayah) but did little to establish federal safeguards. As Smith (1994) and Silverstein (1998) observe, the unfulfilled promises of

Panglong remain a central grievance of ethnic armed groups to this day.

Independence and Parliamentary Experiment (1948–1962)

Burma gained independence on 4 January 1948 under Prime Minister U Nu. His government faced dual insurgencies: communist rebellions seeking regime change (White Flag and Red Flag factions), and ethnic insurgencies demanding autonomy (Karen, Mon, Kachin, and others). By 1949, much of the countryside was under rebel control, demonstrating the state's fragility (Liang, 1990).

Efforts to celebrate unity through Independence Day and Union Day did little to mask tensions. The introduction of Burmese as the official language alienated minorities. In 1961, U Nu further declared Buddhism the state religion—provoking backlash from Christian and Muslim minorities (Silverstein, 1959). Federalist movements, particularly among Shan elites, gained momentum.

Factionalism within the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League worsened political instability, leading U Nu to invite army chief Ne Win to form a caretaker government (1958–1960). Though Ne Win briefly handed power back to civilians after the 1960 election, the military coup of 1962 ended parliamentary democracy.

Military Rule and the Burma Socialist Programme Party

The 1962 Coup and Military Rule under BSPP On 2 March 1962, General Ne Win staged a coup, forming the Revolutionary Council and banning political parties. He established the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), enshrining the "Burmese Way to Socialism" that combined authoritarian control, nationalism, and autarky (Maung, 1989).

The economy deteriorated under nationalisation along with currency demonetisations, and isolationist policies. Discontent grew, particularly after the disastrous 1987 demonetisation, which wiped out citizen savings overnight (Fink, 2001). By 1988, Burma was classified as a "Least Developed Country" by the UN, a humiliation that weakened BSPP legitimacy (Lintner, 1994).

The 8888 Uprising and Emergence of the NLD

The 1988 Uprising (8888 Movement) Student protests in March 1988 escalated into nationwide demonstrations by August. On 8 August (08-08-88), millions demanded democracy. The military responded with brutal force, killing thousands (estimates range between 3,000–10,000 deaths). Amid unrest, Ne Win resigned, but the army retained power under the newly named SLORC (Smith, 2007).

The uprising catalysed the formation of the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Aung San. Suu Kyi's charisma and international recognition—including the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize—became a rallying symbol for democratic resistance.

Denial of Transition: The 1990 Election

In free elections held in 1990, the NLD won 392 of 485 contested seats.

However, SLORC refused to cede power, claiming the election was for a constituent assembly, not government. The junta imprisoned opposition leaders forced many activists into exile, and retained control (Fredholm, 1993). The National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) was formed in exile but lacked effective power.

International condemnation followed, with the US and EU imposing sanctions, while ASEAN adopted a "constructive engagement" approach, culminating in Myanmar's admission into ASEAN in 1997 despite criticism (Acharya, 2001; Ramcharan, 2000).

From SLORC to SPDC: The Struggle for Legitimacy

SPDC Rule, 2003 Roadmap, and the Saffron Revolution Renaming itself the SPDC in 1997, the junta survived through repression and managed engagement. Prime Minister Khin Nyunt unveiled a "Seven Step Roadmap" to democracy in 2003, but progress was slow, and Khin was purged in 2004. The 2007 "Saffron Revolution," led by Buddhist monks protesting fuel price hikes, was violently crushed - yet revealed the enduring tension between society and military rule (Fink, 2001).

The 2008 Constitution and the Quasi-Civilian Transition

In 2008, amid the devastation of Cyclone Nargis, a referendum approved a new constitution allocating 25% of parliamentary seats to the military and barring Suu Kyi from presidency. Nevertheless, it laid the groundwork for controlled elections (HRW, 2008).

In 2010, the military-backed Union and Solidarity Party (USDP) declared victory in elections boycotted by the NLD. However, from 2011, President Thein Sein initiated limited reforms: freeing some political prisoners, liberalising the press, and engaging internationally.

The 2015 Elections and Democratic Optimism

In 2015, the NLD swept nationwide elections, capturing nearly 80% of contested seats (ICG, 2015). Suu Kyi became State Counsellor, effectively the civilian leader. Yet the military retained control over defence, home affairs, and border affairs, ensuring real power was shared unequally.

Despite optimism, cracks appeared. Suu Kyi's failure to resolve ethnic conflicts and her defence of the military during the International Court of Justice (ICJ) genocide hearings on the Rohingya crisis (2019) tarnished her global reputation. Yet domestically, she remained widely respected.

The Rohingya Crisis (2016–2017) and International Fallout

The Rohingya, a Muslim minority in Rakhine State, faced decades of systematic exclusion. In 2016–17, military offensives—described by the UN as a "textbook case of ethnic cleansing"—displaced over 700,000 refugees to Bangladesh, where conditions remain precarious (BBC, 2020). The ICJ case filed by The Gambia in 2019 accuses Myanmar of genocide. The crisis deepened

international isolation, even under an NLD government.

The 2020 Election and 2021 Military Coup

Despite reputational damage abroad, Suu Kyi's NLD won a stronger mandate in November 2020, securing 920 of 1,117 seats (Kipgen, 2021). The military-backed USDP cried fraud, allegations the Election Commission rejected. On 1 February 2021, the military detained Suu Kyi and other leaders, annulled election results, and declared a state of emergency.

Mass protests erupted, creating a Civil Disobedience Movement. By April, ousted MPs and activists declared a National Unity Government (NUG), vowing to pursue federal democracy. An armed wing, the People's Defence Force (PDF), engaged junta forces. Violence has since escalated, creating a nationwide civil war-like situation (Indian Express, 2022).

Military Dominance and Prospects for Democracy Myanmar's trajectory reflects structural dilemmas:

A military institution that sees itself as the "guardian" of national unity. Ethnic minority groups that deem federal autonomy essential for self-determination. Civilian leaders constrained by constitutional barriers and authoritarian resilience. Comparatively, Myanmar illustrates the "praetorian trap," where militaries justify intervention to preserve national unity (Nordlinger, 1977). Unless the 2008 Constitution is restructured, prospects for federal democracy remain distant. Yet civil resistance since 2021 suggests that Myanmar's people increasingly reject permanent military guardianship.

Conclusion

From colonial conquest to the coup of 2021, Myanmar's history has been defined by military dominance, unfulfilled federal promises, and cycles of fragile democratisation.

Myanmar's political history demonstrates the resilience of public democratic aspirations but also the entrenched supremacy of the Tatmadaw. The failure to institutionalise federal democracy since Panglong (1947) remains the root of ethnic insurgency. The cycles of 1962, 1988, 2008, and 2021 illustrate continuity: political openings are repeatedly neutralised by military dominance.

For Myanmar to break the cycle, two historical obstacles must be addressed:

1. Structural dismantling of military supremacy entrenched since 1962, and
2. A genuine federal settlement delivering autonomy to ethnic minorities.

Until then, Myanmar's democratic future remains perpetually destabilised, trapped between fleeting civilian hope and repeated coups.

The Panglong spirit remains unfulfilled, ethnic wars persist, and the military's constitutional grip thwarts civilian supremacy. Yet the resilience of democratic movements and ethnic federalist visions affirms that the struggle for freedom

endures. Myanmar's eventual future will depend on balancing the twin imperatives of federal autonomy and central stability, dismantling entrenched militarism, and nurturing inclusive political institutions.

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