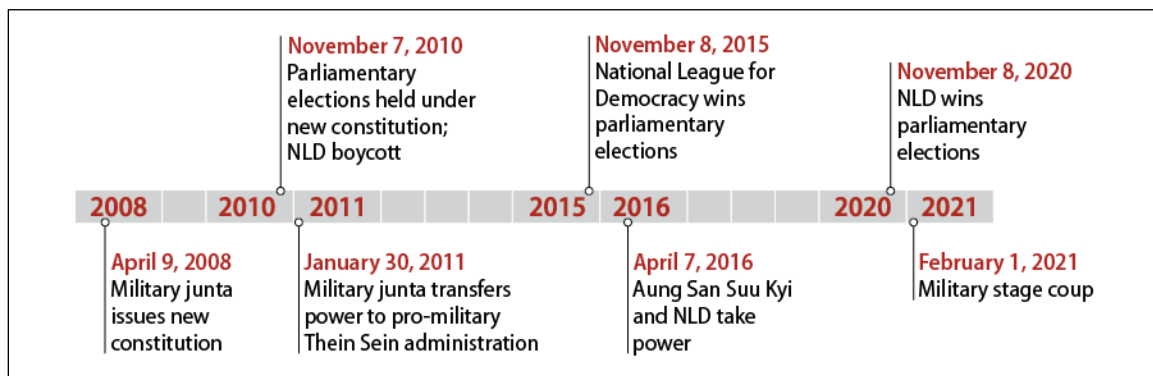


# Coup in Burma (Myanmar): Issues for U.S. Policy

Updated February 23, 2021

On February 1, 2021, Burma’s military, known as the Tatmadaw, seized control of Burma’s Union Government and detained State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi (the country’s de facto civilian leader) and members of her political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD). The NLD had won parliamentary elections held in November 2020, and the coup came as the country’s Union Parliament was preparing for its initial session.

**Figure 1. Burma’s Political Transition: 2008–February 2021**



Source: CRS.

The military’s action was widely condemned internationally as a blow to Burma’s partial transition from military rule to democracy (see **Figure 1**). The Biden Administration has redirected some U.S. assistance to Burma, as required by law, and imposed sanctions against the coup’s leaders (see below). Any U.S. effort to coordinate a multilateral response to events in Burma may be complicated by the reluctance of China, India, and Thailand to interfere in the internal affairs of their neighbor.

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## Why did the military stage a coup?

In statements following the coup, acting President Myint Swe and the Tatmadaw [claimed](#) that they had evidence of parliamentary election fraud perpetrated by the NLD and Burma's Union Election Commission (UEC). [According to the Tatmadaw](#), it acted in accordance with the 2008 constitution to protect democracy in Burma, to prevent an illegitimate Union Parliament taking office. Several independent election monitoring organizations in Burma, however, [indicated](#) that the electoral process and outcome were credible despite minor irregularities.

[Other sources posit](#) that the coup occurred after the military's Commander in Chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, [failed to convince Aung San Suu Kyi](#) and the NLD to select him as the next President. Under the 2008 constitution, [the president is appointed](#) by the Union Parliament. The NLD's victory in the parliamentary elections made his selection as President unlikely.

**Figure 2. Map of Burma**



Source: CRS.

Another possibly significant factor may have been the deteriorating security and economic situation. The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has [caused a severe recession](#). The country's long-running civil war has worsened over the last two years, with major fighting in the states of Kayin (Karen), Rakhine, and Shan between the Tatmadaw and several ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) (see **Figure 2**). The Tatmadaw [hope the coup will obtain popular support](#) if it can restore political, social, and economic order.

## Who is in control of Burma?

The Tatmadaw have effectively taken over the Union Government. The administrative capital, Nay Pyi Taw, is under Tatmadaw control, as are most regional capitals. Tatmadaw soldiers and Myanmar Police officers are patrolling the streets of Yangon (Rangoon) and other major cities. Nearly 700 protesters have been arrested; at least 3 protesters have been killed. The Tatmadaw has appointed a State Administrative Council, chaired by Min Aung Hlaing, which is to govern until new elections are held. The Tatmadaw said new elections will be held in a year, after changes are made in the 2008 constitution and the Union Election Commission. The Tatmadaw also announced a unilateral, one-month ceasefire for the entire nation, hoping for a break in the fighting with the EAOs.

## What has been the reaction in Burma?

An informal, leaderless civil disobedience movement (CDM) has emerged based on existing civil society organizations and utilizing social media to coordinate opposition to the coup. Peaceful demonstrations, dubbed the “22222 Popular Uprising,” reportedly have arisen across the country, including in the nation’s ethnic minority areas. The CDM called for a general strike on February 22, and the imposition of economic sanctions on the coup leaders and military-controlled businesses. Some opposition groups are also calling for the replacement of the 2008 constitution. Some EAOs have issued statements opposing the coup.

## How has the Biden Administration responded?

On February 1, President Biden called for nations around the world to unite in support of defending Burma’s democracy. On February 2, the State Department announced that the recent events constituted a “coup d’état” under §7008 of annual foreign aid appropriations measures (most recently, Division K of P.L. 116-260), triggering certain restrictions on U.S. aid to the government. (See CRS In Focus IF11267, *Coup-Related Restrictions in U.S. Foreign Aid Appropriations*.)

On February 10, President Biden announced targeted sanctions against Burmese “military leaders who directed the coup, their business interests, as well as close family members.” The President signed Executive Order 14014 on the same day, authorizing new sanctions and export-control restrictions on Burma, in addition to “freezing U.S. assets that benefit the Burmese government” in the amount of roughly \$1 billion dollars. President Biden also announced that the United States would maintain its “support for healthcare, civil society groups, and other areas that benefit the people of Burma directly.” On February 11, the United States Agency for International Development announced that it immediately redirected \$42.4 million of assistance towards programs “to support and strengthen civil society.”

Pursuant to the Executive Order, the U.S. Department of the Treasury announced that it was “designating 10 current and former military officials responsible for the February 1, 2021 coup or associated with the Burmese military regime.” Additionally, the Executive Order designated three entities operating in Burma’s gem industry that are “owned or controlled by” the Tatmadaw.

## How have other governments responded?

On February 1, U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres “strongly condemn[ed]” the military’s actions, which “represent a serious blow to democratic reforms in Myanmar.” The U.N. Security Council issued a statement on February 4 that “stressed the need to uphold democratic institutions and processes, refrain from violence, and fully respect human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law,” and called for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and NLD colleagues.

Senior European officials have condemned the coup. Officials in Japan, Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, among others, expressed concern. China’s Ambassador to Burma said Beijing maintains

“friendly relations” with both the Tatmadaw and the NLD, and that the coup is “absolutely not what China wants to see.” Some members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), of which Burma is a member, have sought a foreign ministers meeting to consider possible ASEAN action.

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