

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

Updated March 18, 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 I. 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. An informal civil disobedience movement has grown that has staged large protests across the country as well as general strikes. The military [declared martial law](#) in parts of Yangon on March 15, and has used lethal force against protestors on several occasions. The United Nations Human Rights Office reported that as of March 17, [over 2,000 have been arrested and 149 killed](#).

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Background

In statements following the coup, acting President Myint Swe and the Tatmadaw [claimed](#) they had evidence of election fraud perpetrated by the NLD and Burma's Union Election Commission (UEC). 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.

Figure 2. Map of Burma



Source: CRS.

The Tatmadaw has effectively taken over the Union Government. The administrative capital, Nay Pyi Taw, [is under Tatmadaw control](#), as are most regional capitals, although sizable protests continue, which have sometimes been met with lethal force. Internet connectivity is being [blocked](#), with mobile internet access shut off and WiFi in public places increasingly inaccessible. The Tatmadaw [has appointed](#) a State Administrative Council, chaired by Min Aung Hlaing, to govern until new elections are held. It [said new elections will be held](#) in a year, after changes are made in the 2008 constitution and the UEC.

Protests 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,” have arisen across the country, including in ethnic minority areas. The CDM staged a general strike on February 22, and called for the imposition of economic sanctions on coup leaders and military-controlled businesses.

Members of Parliament from the NLD and other parties have formed a “shadow cabinet” called the Committee Representing the National Parliament (CRNP). Small numbers of police officers reportedly have joined the CDM or fled to India, several diplomats at Burma’s Washington, DC, Embassy have issued a statement of support, and Burma’s U.N. Permanent Representative has called on the international community to use “any means necessary” to oppose the coup. Some ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) have issued statements opposing the coup.

Biden Administration Response

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 sanctions against Burmese “military leaders who directed the coup, their business interests, as well as close family members.” The President signed Executive Order (E.O.) 14014 on the same day, authorizing new sanctions and export-control restrictions on Burma, in addition to freezing assets in the amount of roughly \$1 billion dollars. President Biden announced that the United States would maintain its support for programs that directly benefit the people of Burma. 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 E.O. 14014, the U.S. Department of the Treasury announced that it was “designating 10 current and former military officials responsible for the February 1 coup or associated with the Burmese military regime.” Additionally, E.O. 14014 designated three entities operating in Burma’s gem industry that are “owned or controlled by” the Tatmadaw. Subsequently, the Treasury Department designated two more military officials on February 22.

On March 8, the Commerce Department added four Burmese entities to its Entity List, strengthening export restrictions. On March 12, Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas designated Burma for Temporary Protected Status so that “Burmese nationals and habitual residents may remain temporarily in the United States.”

International Responses

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 UNSC 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. On March 10, the UNSC issued another statement that it “strongly condemns the violence against peaceful protestors, including against women, youth and children.”

Burma’s neighbors have had divergent reactions on how to address the coup. Following a March 2 meeting of Foreign Ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), of which Burma is a member, officials urged a halt to violence, but the group reportedly remained divided on further responses, and pressure is growing on ASEAN’s members to take stronger action against their neighbor.

Meanwhile, protesters have [targeted Chinese-owned factories](#) in Burma, prompting China to call on authorities to stop all acts of violence and urge protesters to express their demands lawfully. China’s Ambassador to Burma [said](#) on February 15 that Beijing maintains “friendly relations” with both the Tatmadaw and the NLD, and that the coup is “absolutely not what China wants to see.”

Author Information

Ben Dolven
Specialist in Asian Affairs

Kirt Smith
Research Assistant

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