

Myanmar one year after the coup. Interview with Professor Michał Lubina

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Przemysław Gasztold: It has been more than one year since the military took power again in Myanmar and detained the State Counsellor (de facto prime minister), Aung San Suu Kyi, and many of her cabinet members, student leaders, monks, and dissidents. In November 2020, Suu Kyi's party, the National League of Democracy (NLD) won the parliamentary elections by a landslide, as you predicted in your book (Lubina 2021, p. 135), gaining 83% of the seats—an even a better result than in 2015. The coup prevented democratically elected members of parliament from signing their oaths of office. What was the driving force of the putsch—military dissatisfaction with the political status quo or maybe the personal ambitions of general Min Aung Hlaing (International Crisis Group, 2021)? How would you describe the main reasons for the coup and the circumstances in which it took place?

Michał Lubina: I wish I could. Unfortunately, Myanmar is a good example of a rule of thumb in authoritarian countries: “Those who know don't talk, those who don't know, talk.” Burma watchers can only speculate about the reasons without knowing for sure about the origins of decisions; these will only emerge with time, if ever. That said, we do

have certain lines of interpretation. The three most important are the Tatmadaw–NLD institutional fallout, personal rivalries, and factional struggle.

The institutional fallout interpretation cannot be understood without underlining the importance of unity in Burmese political culture. It is religiously associated with harmony. In politics, the ability to move beyond one's interests becomes a moral virtue. And conversely, the inability to do so is strongly condemned as selfish. This explains why reaching a compromise is so challenging and why there has historically been little place for opposition. Those in opposition transgress morally, with loyal opposition becoming an impossibility: Either one is loyal (and morally good) or is in opposition. This originates from the tradition of finite power that cannot be shared or balanced as it may (and often does) mean losing power. This explanation offers insight as to why the Tatmadaw–NLD cohabitation was undermined by distrust and tension, and ultimately ended up in disaster, annihilating the delicate balance between them that had existed since 2015. Simply speaking, power-sharing is next to impossible in cultural circumstances, where there cannot be two suns in the heavens.

The other explanation is the personal conflict between Aung San Suu Kyi and Min Aung Hlaing. It is based on the notion of personalised Burmese institutions based on patron–client relationships (both the Tatmadaw and the NLD certainly are such). Historically speaking, the concepts of authority in Myanmar have been personal, not institutional or legal. Loyalty, the backbone of the patron–client relationship, has also been personal. A leader stands at the apex of a pyramidal patron–client network based on personal loyalty. In these circumstances, Min Aung Hlaing's scheduled retirement from the position of Commander-in-Chief in mid-2021 could have undermined his whole system. Aung San Suu Kyi has done little to appease him; she could have had guaranteed him renewal of his commandership at a minimum. She hadn't and he didn't take chances.

The third interpretation (Moeller, 2022) points to the factional struggle within the Tatmadaw, with an ultra-conservative faction within the army seizing the power in two areas: both within the army (at the expense of more moderate elements) and in the state (at the expense of the civilian government). Seeing events from this angle, this was a sort of ultra-conservative correction that claimed the 2011–2021 reforms went too far and endangered Tatmadaw's core interests. Many generals, with Min Aung Hlaing at the top, feared that continuous rule of the NLD could lead to irreversible changes in civil–militarily relations. Preventing this scenario became a top priority, come what may. These lines of interpretations are naturally non-exclusive.

Gasztold: What are the similarities and differences between the military coups of 1988 and 2021?

Lubina: There are no similarities to 1988. If there are any comparisons to previous coups, it is to the second one in 1962. Back then, the army seized power and jailed civilian leaders too. Then, it introduced full military rule, whereas now it reintroduced it. The 1950s and 2010s can also be compared as these were the two best decades in post-independence Burma/Myanmar. But that's it. There are many more differences, with the 1950s and early 1960s being a parliamentary democracy in Burma torn apart by communist rebellion and ethnic insurgencies (the former is over now, the latter still exist but are unable to endanger the central government), in the middle of the cold war and its regional offshoots (the Second Indochina war). The most important difference, however, is that back then, the Tatmadaw was at the beginning of its march to “eat” the state; now, it has simply reintroduced its full control over “their” domain, their own state.

Gaszold: It seems that the army is less isolated from the society than it was in 1988 (Pedersen, 2021). However, recent events still allow us to look at this country as a “land of praetorians” where the army plays the pivotal role in political life (Egreteau, 2010). After the coup, the regime’s troops brutally repressed any protests killing around 1,500 people, including at least 100 children. How would you describe the role currently played by the military (known as *Tatmadaw*) in Myanmar’s political system?

Lubina: I find the praetorian interpretation a methodologically excellent avenue to pursue. For a while, in 2016–2021, it seemed that this way of looking at Burmese politics was no longer that attractive, but the coup made it up to date again. As for the Tatmadaw, it is trying to restore its praetorian position. Comparatively speaking, if Myanmar is indeed a 20th- and 21st-century equivalent of Prussia where “most states have an army but the Burmese army has a state,” then the army reacts every time its omnipresence is endangered. The NLD’s 2016–2021 rule was one threat; the post-coup resistance movement is another, current one. If the Tatmadaw succeeds, it will reintroduce full praetorian rule disguised in a quasi-democratic decorum along the lines of Thailand (excluding the King).

Gaszold: The reputation of Ms. Suu Kyi suffered greatly after the Tatmadaw’s brutal treatment of the Rohingya minority (Lubina, 2021, pp. 115–128). When she appeared before the International Court of Justice in 2019, she defended the military and denied allegations of genocide committed by Burmese troops on the Rohingya. Once perceived as an icon of democracy, she lost much support and popularity that she earlier gained in the West. In your book, you describe Suu Kyi as a “hybrid politician” (Lubina, 2021). Can you explain how the concept of “hybridity” can shed new light on Suu Kyi’s political decisions, for example in the framework of her policy towards the Rohingya minority?

Lubina: I use the term hybridity from postcolonial studies (from Homi Bhabha to be exact), not in the popular, under theorised usage (e.g. “hybrid regime” or “hybrid war”). For Bhabha, hybridity is something more than just the effect of mixing two cultures: upon the point of contact of two cultures, a third one comes into existence, with its own structures, objects, and practices. But it is not a simple result of mixing these two cultures, it is a new entity, new quality, a creative, yet ambivalent one. Suu Kyi, an epigone of postcolonial Burmese elites, is exactly such a politician. She understands the way the western world operates and wants to implement some—but not all—of its civilisational achievements in Burma. But she is not western, or westernised, she is a hybrid politician, meaning someone in-between worlds, in-between Burma and the West. The fundamental misunderstanding between the western perception of her role and policies and the reality had much to do with the fact that Suu Kyi had socialised in England, speaks excellent English and knows Anglo-Saxon culture very well. This “external” similarity led many people in the West to take for granted that she shared the West’s values. Yet, the similarity was only surface level—in phraseology, declarations, [and] slogans. Deeper inside, it was more eclectic, more hybrid, as western (or universal if you want) values such as human rights, democracy, rule of law, etc., are understood differently by westerners and the Burmese (and other peoples in the world). Suu Kyi understands western values as ways to improve Myanmar. Since the beginning of her career, she looked for external ideas to reform Burma: to use what was needed and leave out the rest. So, when the Rohingya crisis of 2017 came and universalist values clashed with domestic (personal) interests, she chose the latter. The Rohingya crisis spectacularly showed that, for Suu Kyi, human rights had their limits when Myanmar’s and Barmars’ (and her personal) interests were at stake. Burma, and Suu Kyi’s conviction that she was indispensable to it, was much more important than improving the world. If the Rohingya had to be sacrificed for Myanmar’s greater good, so be it. Throughout her political career, Suu Kyi was able to give up her

husband, children, and so many friends and loyal supporters for her cause. In 2017, she did the same to a million of unwanted foreigners (the Rohingya were, and are still to a great extent, considered as foreigners in Myanmar, including by Suu Kyi).

Gasztold: Aung San Suu Kyi was often equated with democracy, but your book shows that this correlation is not so simple. How would you describe her role in Myanmar's politics before and after the 2021 coup?

Lubina: I have dedicated another, separate book to Suu Kyi's political democracy, called *The Moral Democracy* (Lubina, 2018), where I use the titular expression to name Suu Kyi's understanding of democracy. This approach was well received by Burmese scholars and the book was even translated into Burmese (just before the coup, so it was a truly last-minute publication). I claim that Suu Kyi's "moral democracy" is an eclectic set. It originates from two traditions: the local Burmese one, the Theravāda Buddhism heritage of Burmese political thought; and the international one, western rights-based democracy. The former is much more important, the latter is only selectively assimilated. Suu Kyi placed democracy within moral, Buddhist reasoning about politics and she presented democracy in a very Burmese Buddhist way as a moral value. Her vision, a vague, or even utopian, quintessentially moral vision of democracy, is built on internal, inward-based moral qualities of individuals, and not on external solutions, or concrete issues such as mechanisms or institutions, as in the West. Building democracy understood in this way necessitates a disciplinarian approach based on unity and responsibilities. It is a Buddhist-inspired vision of conscious individuals who are able to improve themselves, to see by themselves that democracy is the only system that enables individuals to develop; consequently, they choose it. In doing so, they help themselves and, equally important, they help others, too, as democracy with its benign features establishes an environment that serves each and every one. This democracy is built on inward-based qualities: morality which leads to correct behaviour, responsible usage of rights and—in its ultimate ideal—to unity in reaching common goal and reaping its fruits. In this vision, technical, external aspects like systemic framework, legislative matters, institutional and administrative reforms, economic plans, or electoral systems are of secondary importance. For Suu Kyi, moral people make good systems. Little else matters.

As for her political role, it had already been said in the 2000s that Aung San Suu Kyi played "a critical role" in Burmese politics (Hlaing, 2007, p. 374) and nothing changed until the coup. Between 1988 and 2011, she kept struggling with the military on what I call a "non-level playing field" (Lubina, 2021). If we compare political competition in Burma to a football match, Suu Kyi's team (her party, NLD) was the better one, one supported by almost all fans (the Burmese society); but the army was the opposing team and the referee at the same time. In such conditions, it was almost impossible to win. The only way was to buy (bribe) the referee but Suu Kyi proved unable and/or unwilling to do that. However, she managed to stay in the game which—judging by the asymmetry of power—was a big achievement. Although the regime was winning politically, it could not defeat her fully. Suu Kyi was losing, but never lost. This had long-term consequences. Being unable to win and being too strong to lose, she had to believe that time was on her side. The generals believed the same. As a result, the political stalemate in Burma extended for two decades.

In 2011, when the generals started reforming the country and the world supported them, these new political circumstances presented Suu Kyi with roughly two alternative options. The first was the continuation of the moral high ground approach: rejecting the reforms as fake and remaining in total opposition. Political marginalisation would have been the result accompanied by keeping her iconic position within and outside the country.

Or she could have risked everything, finally unhappily accepted the “non-level playing field” and making a political U-turn. To restart the political game with the regime in a much weaker political position and with no guarantee that the generals would have not changed the rules anytime, as they pleased. She risked everything and chose the latter. She manoeuvred her way up to the top and was beating the generals on their field by winning the 2015 and 2020 elections and ruling between 2016 and 2021. But finally, the dishonest political referee—the army—intervened and nullified everything.

She was arrested, convicted again, and politically marginalised. What is happening now marks the end of her career (though not the end of her myth inside Myanmar). If the army wins—and this is unfortunately more probable—Suu Kyi is politically doomed. She will spend the rest of her life under house arrest or in jail (they may perhaps release her once it would be certain that her days are numbered). If the PDFs win, they would win without her and against her tactics (she always advocated peaceful nonviolent means). Either way, we are most probably witnessing the end of Aung San Suu Kyi’s political career.

Gasztold: Some pundits claim that the coup will bring Myanmar closer to China, while others indicate that military leaders are rather cloistered and xenophobic, which means that the junta would rather try to counterbalance its total dependence on Beijing (McLaughlin, 2021). How would you describe current Myanmar–Chinese relations?

Lubina: Myanmar–China relations are hardly a *pauk phaw* (in Burmese this means siblings from the same mother) as the Chinese love to portray it; “with siblings like these, who needs enemies” the Burmese might say. From a Burmese perspective, Myanmar remains “a tender gourd among cactuses” and the biggest cactus is China (the other one is India; these two are traditional sources of threats). The giant influence of China produces a reality where every Burmese leader has to be on working terms with China, while struggling not to fall into Hambantota-style dependency. In other words, China offers development (Kyaukhpyu SEZ, regional connectivity, transportation, and many other things), but it can also mean debt trap and subordination, as in Laos and Cambodia. This all forces the Burmese to balance China delicately. Suu Kyi did that. Would the generals be able to do the same? They would certainly try hard—here I agree with the “xenophobic” interpretation. Contrary to Suu Kyi, they see China much more as a threat than as a threat-cum-developmental force that could be used for the good of Myanmar. However, wanting is one thing, while reality is another. If the generals win the current stage of the civil war, then given the consequences of their atrocities (rejection of the military government in the West and in many Asian countries as well, e.g. Indonesia) their position vis-à-vis China would be much weakened. They simply won’t have an alternative.

As for now, China is doing what is in Chinese called *zou shan guan hu dou*, “sitting on a hill watching the tigers fight.” China waits for one side—the army or the PDFs to win and then Beijing will steadily descend from the hill and return economically to Myanmar. If the army wins, it will be significantly weakened vis-à-vis China, so it will be easier for the Chinese to enforce their projects, perhaps even resurrect the Myitsone Dam. If the PDFs win, they would have to take China into account as well (just as Suu Kyi did). Either way, China’s position in Myanmar will not be seriously challenged.

Gasztold: There are around twenty ethnic armed groups and several hundred militias loosely aligned with the Tatmadaw. Recently, in some areas, People’s Defence Forces were established to fight the junta’s troops. How did the coup influence the peace process initiated in 2011, which, to some extent, limited the world’s longest civil war that began with independence in 1948?

Lubina: The peace process was already in decline from 2015 and the coup just made the situation worse. Currently, in Myanmar, we have a two front civil war:

- (1) The junta/central Bamar government against ethnic non-Bamar rebels (EAOs, Ethnic Arms Organisations, their number being between 15 and 22; this is this longest running civil war in the world that you mentioned).
- (2) The junta against Bamar PDFs (or the armed resistance to the coup, comprising of loosely organised groups, or bands, their number is over 100).

While analytically we can divide it into a two-front civil war, the situation on the ground is increasingly becoming a Burmese version of Hobbes' "war of all against all." The junta wants to annihilate the PDFs, break the popular resistance at all cost, and then strike a deal with EAOs from a position of force; the PDFs and some (though not all) EAOs want to overstretch the junta in order to make some generals turn against the current leadership, stage a countercoup and break the junta. This is a Leninist "whom will beat whom" with no chance for compromise. Until one side breaks the other—currently it seems the junta is stronger—Myanmar will spiral down, the creeping anarchy will continue, and the people will suffer.

Gasztold: Since 2011, Myanmar has benefited from more freedoms, foreign investments, economic growth, and international connections. Half of the population is under the age of 30 and many took part in the anti-junta protests, often using the Internet as a way of communication. How has a decade of relative openness and the recent brutal crackdown on protests influenced the young generation and their views of political participation in Myanmar?

Lubina: The reforms brought forward the best decade since the 1950s. Throughout the country roads were improved, infrastructure developed, connectivity enhanced, cyber revolution enabled and progress (*albeit* modest) in education and health care achieved. Socio-political space expanded significantly in the country. Most importantly, after decades of brutal dictatorship, poverty and stagnation, the people of Myanmar were revived and unleashed unprecedented energy. They opened up to the world, to external commercial influences, global connectivity, and cyber revolution. Thanks to the latter, a Burmese "generation Z" was born, with social media, online work, and high-tech reality being their natural habitus. For the young, the Burmese Internet became obvious just like air.

The protests showed a profound societal change. Opening the country up transformed the (semi)isolated Myanmar into a society where many got to know the external world and understand its codes and patterns. The Burmese feel at ease in the current globalised world, skilfully using new media to struggle with the junta. Facebook (and to lesser extent Twitter and Instagram) were widely used as communication and coordination channels, both in the country and outside. The Internet is also the key source of information for the outside world. Social media has also been important as a way of shaming and boycotting families of the army and police and for disseminating the photos and videos of the Tatmadaw's atrocities. For all these reasons, the regime has constantly been trying to turn the Internet off (as a result, temporary cuts became the norm, though a complete cut hasn't happened yet). Various forms of strikes and boycotts—from the CDM (civil disobedience movement) to "silent strikes"—use the know-how gained from the veterans of the 8888 Uprising and historical knowledge from three decades of behind-the-scenes activism.

Culturally speaking, the aesthetic aspect of the protests showed the reintegration of Myanmar with the global village (although the trend may now be reversed if the junta wins).

The codes used by protestors to demand universal wants (freedom, rights, dignity, etc.) are both Burmese and international at the same time. Films, memes, graphics, and posters, all utilising global pop/cultural codes for the good of the Spring Revolution, became the symbols of this anti-regime movement. Thanks to all these actions, Myanmar's struggle is much better known and publicised worldwide than it could otherwise have been (or than it was in 1988). It increased the stakes for the junta's brutal pacification but eventually did not produce a victory, at least not yet.

Gasztold: How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect Myanmar's population and what kind of impact has the disease had on anti-government protests?

Lubina: Initially, COVID-19 mostly spared Myanmar and the first waves largely bypassed the country. COVID[-19] also influenced the 2020 elections and Suu Kyi skillfully used it politically: Her videos where she taught the Burmese how to wash their hands and keep social distance were very popular on Facebook. Suu Kyi knows Burmese cultural patterns and their expectations of the leaders being moral, giving a good example and skilfully used the role of the "mother of the nation" based on care and provision of goods (Lubina, 2018). Qualities very much needed during a pandemic. She also declared that the elections were more important than COVID[-19] and voting continued despite it. She won, but the army later staged the coup.

Since then, medical staff became one of the first groups to protest the coup, and the army responded with indiscriminate repressions against physicians, nurses, etc. Coupled with the failing economy, both COVID[-19] and the coup hit Myanmar hard and this devastated Burmese health care (it used to be dramatically bad during the previous military administration only to improve during Suu Kyi and again fail[ed]). This had dramatic effects in the summer of 2021, especially during July when COVID[-19] finally hit Myanmar really hard. The mix of a new wave of the pandemic and a health care system on its knees officially killed almost thousand people (though the real number is probably much higher), while the number of infected rose to 300,000 (60,000 since the beginning of the pandemic). July 2021 was the worst month when people desperately struggled to get oxygen from anywhere as the hospitals were full and dysfunctional. Since then it has improved a bit.

COVID[-19] didn't have a major impact on the protests. For the people, the Tatmadaw's incompetence and brutality made the dire consequences of COVID[-19] worse, yet this was little surprise: they already knew it and expected the worst from the army (which indeed came). For the Burmese, COVID[-19] and the coup are twin catastrophes. Most, however, believe the coup and its consequences (the army's return to full power) were (and still are) worse.

Gasztold: The US imposed a ban on arms exports to Myanmar in 1988 and the EU also introduced many sanctions, but the junta can still buy weapons from Russia or from China. If sanctions can't harm the military, what tools should be used by foreign powers to influence the regime in Naypyidaw?

Lubina: Historically speaking, pre-2011 sanctions failed to bring down the regime for two structural reasons. First, the sanctions were porous, introduced by western countries only, while trade, including illegal trade, with Asian partners, especially with China, saved the generals, and second, because of the inward-looking nature of the Tatmadaw. Sanctions irritated the generals as they questioned their legitimacy, but they could not overthrow them. Now the sanctions are stronger than before but still don't change these two structural factors. As long as it remains so, the Tatmadaw can survive it.

On the other hand, I see little else that the West can do. Unless it engages in regime change (meaning supplying PDFs with serious arms), which is unlikely if not outright impossible, the West cannot do much more. Asia is the key. As long as important Asian countries such as China, India, Vietnam, and Thailand do not join the sanctions, this will not topple the regime. The Burmese army will win or lose by itself. The West can help and is helping the opposition diplomatically but there are limits to it. Unfortunately for the Burmese, the West needs its resources and energy elsewhere.

Gasztold: Thank you very much for the interview.

Michał Lubina, PhD, is associate professor of Political Science at the Institute of the Middle and Far East, Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland. His research interests include contemporary Burma/Myanmar and Russia–China relations. He has an MA in Russian Studies (2008) and in Far Eastern Studies (2012). He also studied at universities in Saint Petersburg, Moscow, and Minsk (under Jagiellonian University (JU) exchange programmes) and was on scholarship at Beijing International Studies University (2009–2010). He has PhD (2014) and habilitation (2020) in political science. Since 2011, he has been working at the Institute of Middle and Far East, Jagiellonian University, and since 2022 as an associate professor. In 2016, he served as the first director of Sejong Institute in Krakow, Poland. In 2018, he was a visiting professor at the Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. Recently, he received the Taiwan Fellowship at the National Chengchi University in Taipei for 2022. He is the author of eight books (three in English), including *A Political Biography of Aung San Suu Kyi* (Routledge: New York, 2020); *Russia and China. A Political Marriage of Convenience* (Budrich: Berlin, Germany, 2017), and *The Moral Democracy: The Political Thought of Aung San Suu Kyi* (Scholar: Warsaw, Poland, 2018), translated into Burmese and published in Yangon in 2020. He also has to his credit pioneer works on Burma/Myanmar in Polish.

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