

# Myanmar Economy under the Military's Regime\*

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## Abstract

Myanmar is currently undergoing a political and economic crisis after the military forcefully seized power from the elected civilian government on 1 February 2021. This effectively marked a return to military rule after nearly ten years of civilian rule, halting the economic transformation of the country since 2011. This article provides a brief history

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of the economy in Myanmar. Here why the economy in Myanmar is important to be studied are the basic needs for the survival of human beings: food, and shelter, which depend on the economic situation of the country. This paper also attempted to study the economic and political imbalances of power in Myanmar society under military rule. Since the coup, the economy in Myanmar has been in free fall, with new investments dying up, even the withdrawal of existing investments and western countries' sanctions on the military regime. If the security and economic situation does not stabilize soon, up to 25 million people, 45% of Myanmar's population could be living in poverty by 2022.

**Keywords:** Economy, Military Coup, Politics, and Myanmar

### Introduction

After decades of isolationist military rule left Myanmar in desperate poverty. Since the military coup of 2021, Myanmar's economy has collapsed. Prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Burma was the richest country in Southeast Asia. In 1948, when Myanmar got its independence from the British, observers were optimistic about its economic prospects. Not only did Myanmar possess an abundance of natural resources, such as oil, timber and precious minerals, but Myanmar also had a higher jumping-off point than its neighboring countries in the region: In fact, in 1950, Myanmar's per capita income was on par with or higher than that of Hong Kong, Korea, Malaysia, and Thailand (Wong, 1997). At the coming of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, it was the poorest country in Southeast Asia (Turnell, 2009). Today,

Myanmar remains one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia. Such economic stagnation has coincided with decades of military rule and internal conflict since independence. Beginning in 1962, Myanmar has been under the control of a military regime that has continuously violated human rights. In 2011, under transition from dictatorship rule to partial democratic reform, Myanmar became an interest internationally for economic investment and development in various ways. Even world leaders such as Barack Obama, the President of the United States of America and others visited Myanmar. Despite a transition to quasi-civilian rule in 2010, the military regime seized power again on 1st February 2021, overthrowing an elected civilian government, and taking control of the economy and government. Alongside the Covid-19 pandemic, the economic and political turmoil brought about by the coup is expected to double Myanmar's poverty rate in 2022 (ANI, 2021).

This paper provides an overview of Myanmar's economy, particularly under military rule between 1962-2010. Here, I highlight three key features characterizing the military's control of the economy during this period: (1) the indiscriminate self-enrichment of the generals at the expense of the general population, (2) the pursuit of incoherent and erratic economic policies, and (3) the practice of economic discrimination that disadvantaged ethnic minority groups. Despite the progress

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made during the period of reform between 2010 and 2020, I conclude the paper by offering some sobering considerations on how the 2021 coup will have severe repercussions for Myanmar's economy lasting long into the future.

### **1. Background and Economic Context of Myanmar**

Myanmar's population of 55 million people makes it the largest country in Mainland Southeast Asia. Its population is ethnically diverse, with the government of Myanmar officially recognizing 135 different ethnic groups. During the British colonial period, Burma was annexed to British India in three stages (from 1824, 1852, and 1886). Regions that were predominantly Bamar were directly ruled as part of Ministerial Burma or Burma Proper, while the Scheduled or Excluded Frontier Areas – where most ethnic minorities were located – were indirectly ruled (Melissa Crouch: 2019). Non-Burmese ethnic groups such as the Karen and Kachin were favoured by the British, particularly in the military and police force. In 1941, members of a Burmese anticolonial movement called the "*Thakins*" helped the Japanese invade Burma. Non-Burmese groups such as the Karen and Kachin tended to aid and support the British. World War II increased hostilities between the Burmese and the frontier ethnic groups - hostilities that persist today. Immediately after independence, problems arose between the new government and the Karen, who had opposed

independence from Britain and had no autonomous area. Many Karen were Christians (the Burmese are Buddhist), and anti-Christian massacres of Karen villagers sparked a Karen revolt against the Burmese government (Mirante, 2022).

In 1948, when Myanmar got its independence from the British, parliamentary democracy was introduced. However, in 1958, the democratically elected government voluntarily gave up power to the military for two years due to domestic instability stemming from the civil war beginning in the 1950s. In 1960, the military returned power to the civilian politicians, but just two years later in 1962, Ne Win's military would forcefully depose Prime Minister U Nu and retake control of the country, ending Myanmar's short-lived experiment with parliamentary democracy. It was because the Karen and other ethnic minorities revolted against the Burmese government and the country was in an unstable situation at that time. Ne Win took over power from civilian leaders and Myanmar became directly under the military regime, many ethnic minorities lost their basic human rights, equal rights, government jobs, and opportunities for power-sharing as citizens of Myanmar. In 2011, Myanmar underwent political reforms and reintroduced democratic elections. Despite the various changes in Myanmar's socio-economic and political context since 2014, religious tensions have worsened. With the 2021 military coup, political, healthcare, and socio-economic problems have sharpened.

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When it comes to its economy, Myanmar is a predominantly agricultural country (Thawngmung, 2003). About 70% of its population live in the rural areas, engaged mainly in the agricultural, fisheries, and forestry sectors. Every effort is made to encourage rice production to meet the demand of both increasing local consumption and foreign exports (Than, 2006). Before the military rule, Myanmar was also a significant producer and exporter of lead, silver, and zinc within the region. It produced a significant number of precious and semi-precious stones, such as diamonds, jade, sapphires, and rubies, which are exported. When the military took power in 1962 however, gem mining and selling were banned as part of the nationalization of industries. Although the country has large areas of arable land, forestry, minerals of numerous varieties, freshwater and marine resources, and plentiful natural gas reserves, Myanmar remains poor due to isolation and mismanagement by its own people after independence (Bhasin, Ibid).

While Myanmar's ethnic states are blessed with a wealth of natural resources and biodiversity, they have been cursed by the unsustainable extraction and sale of those resources, which has fueled the armed and ethnic conflict. Military offensives into resource-rich ethnic areas have expanded the Myanmar Army's presence in places that were previously controlled by the de-facto ethnic government. Resource projects have collected huge revenues for the army and the central government but have not

benefited local populations, including the marginalization of ethnic minority women in rural areas. Furthermore, such resource extraction projects have brought about environmental destruction, human rights abuses, and loss of livelihoods, with unique impacts on women (My Justice Report, 2017).

## **2. The military of Myanmar**

When the military (*Tatmadaw*) came to power in 1962, army leaders affirmed the self-appointed role of the military as the guardian of the Burma state and the promoter of social revolution (F. Cady, 1966). Under the leadership of general Ne Win, the Union Revolutionary Council introduced the Burmese Way to Socialism. The Burmese Way to Socialism was characterized by isolationism, totalitarianism, superstition, xenophobia, sinophobia, and the rejection of Cold War politics. It has largely been described by scholars as an "abject failure", and as turning one of the most prosperous countries in Asia into one of the world's poorest. Burma experienced greatly increased poverty, inequality, corruption and international isolation, and has been described as "disastrous"(Burmese Way to Socialism: 2022).

Under this regime, Burma became isolated from the outside world. Foreign residents were kept to a minimum and tourists were actively discouraged. Popular writings about Burma were scarce and generally uninformed. Only a few

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journalists were accepted into Burma with limitations placed on where they could travel to (Lintner, 1989). Outsiders wishing to study the country tended to be viewed with suspicion, either as potential challengers to the official version of Burmese history of 'alien cultural influences (Selth, 2015).

They developed their own version of the national ideology. It held that the nation's goal was to build a society free of want with a "politico-economic system based on eternal principles of justice, liberty and equality." Josef Silverstein stresses three types: (1) to restore peace and the rule of law, (2) to build a democratic society and (3) to develop a socialist economy (Silverstein, 1935).

Before the 1988 uprising happened in Myanmar, a regime that has used extreme levels of violence to hold onto power, suddenly found itself facing massive protests over its calamitous mishandling of the economy. The military regime viewed civilians as incapable of holding the country together because, since independence in 1948, there were fighting insurgencies in several parts of Myanmar. The political drama which culminated in the mass rallies of August and September 1988 actually began one year earlier, with Ne Win's sudden decision to demonetize all existing banknotes. This had a catastrophic economic impact, in particular on students who had saved up their tuition fees. It led to the 1988 uprising with the military government escalating the students and civilians. The



military used armed force and killed thousands of civilians and students in 1988 (Rodion Ebbighausen: 2022).

Between 1988 and 2011, political power was concentrated in the hands of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which was later reconstituted as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The SLORC (and the SPDC) was dominated by a small group of senior military officers who sat at the top of the power structure. Thus, a small number of generals in Yangon held complete monopoly over economic and political decision-making authority in the society. There were no formal or informal procedures to check and balance this intensely concentrated nexus of power. The SPDC basically handled the security, political, and executive responsibilities of the government (Thawngmung, 2003).

Although Myanmar underwent reforms in 2011, including in the areas of politics, press freedom, healthcare, economy and society, the military seized power again in February 2021. The country's leader Aung San Suu Kyi and other political leaders were arrested, and more than 1510 people have been killed and thousands were detained (AAPP, 2022). These have been met with massive civilian protests.

### **3. An overview of Myanmar's economic history**

#### **3.1 Myanmar's economy during the colonial era**

Under colonial rule, there were both constructive and destructive impacts on the local economy and population in Myanmar. On one hand, the colonial rulers introduced a system of currency alongside infrastructure development. But on the other hand, they also imposed a colonial capitalist system on the local population for their own interests.

##### **3.1.1 Transformation of Myanmar's subsistence economy into an export-based economy**

While rice has been cultivated since prehistoric periods, it was only about a century ago that Myanmar began to develop into a rice exporting country. During the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Common Era (CE), rice was cultivated principally for domestic consumption and for a small irregular internal trade (Siok-Hwa, 1968). The growth of trade brought the British to Rangoon (Yangon), even as British rule in India expanded until it reached the borders of modern-day Burma. In 1926 under British rule East India Company annexed two provinces: Arakan (Rakhine) and Tenasserim (Tanintharyi), which were rich in teak and valued as a trade route to Siam (Thailand) and China (Furnivall, 1941).

In their bid to encourage trade between Burma and India, the British introduced the use of currency in Rakhine and

Taninthayi in 1835, in Lower Burma in 1852 and in Upper Burma in 1886. Until 1935, when Burma was still a province of British India, the government of India continued to print banknotes and mint the coins that circulated in both India and Burma. The British colonial rulers also invested in processing industries and infrastructure developments, such as railways, roads and other modern communications (Karlsson, 2010). They effectively developed the jungle and swamp region into cultivated land by encouraging migration, financing public networks and transpiration, building railroads, canals, and irrigation, processing industries and providing capital and tax exemption for the newly occupied lands. This policy expanded sown areas and promoted agricultural production and growth, making Burma one of the rice exporters in the world. Besides the milling and selling of rice, three other major profit-making activities under British rule were (1) the extraction of oil and of mining resources, (2) timber and (3) domestic marine transport (Odaka, 2016).

### **3.1.2 Transformation of state-societal relationships**

Despite the positive developments of expanded agricultural production and trade, British colonial policy brought about the destruction of the self-reliant peasantry by subjecting it to market fluctuation, land taxation, competition for tenancy, indebtedness, and labor contracts (Thawngmung,

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2004). For example, before the British conquest, Burma economically consisted of more or less self-sufficient units (Htin Aung, 1965). With the advent of British colonialism, however, local farmers now had to hand over their rice harvest to the colonial rulers for export.

The nature of state-societal relationships in the countryside was also changed under the British. Burma Proper was developed into a “three-tiered pyramid” with “a small British group of civil servants, soldiers and businessmen” at the top. The middle class from which many student activists and nationalist politicians came “was composed of Burmese, Indians, and Anglo-Burmans, as well as a few Chinese and Europeans” (Maung Than, 2007). The colonial state essentially imposed a colonial capitalist system in Myanmar, which did not benefit the local population but the interests of the British merchant class and the colonial rulers. The colonial capitalist system-generated profit only for the colonial rulers who did not spend on local administration/government. Their aim was to buy cheap raw materials in Asia and sell them in Europe for profits. Burma for instance, was rich in rice, timber, oil, and minerals, with particularly valuable oil sources at Yenangyaung and a wolfram mine at Mauchi in the Karen hills that produced one-third of the world's wolfram. Between 1914 and 1942 the British investment in Burma tripled in oil, timber, mining, and rubber (McLynn, 2011). However, these industries tended to employ

Indian and Chinese workers, with the profits ending up in the hands of the British rather than in the hands of Burmese people (Odaka, 2016).

### **3.2 Economy after Colonial Rule**

Since independence, politics has continuously played a critical role in economic policy formulation and implementation in Myanmar. From 1948 to 1958, the country was a parliamentary democracy based on British inspired constitution. Under the parliamentary rule, U Nu embarked upon a policy of nationalization. And he attempted to make Myanmar a welfare state by adopting central planning measures (Internet 2022). From 1962 to 1988, the country was ruled by Ne Win, who followed a socialist path featuring nationalization, isolation, and repressions. From 1992 to 2011, the country was ruled by Than Shwe, who restored a market-based economy, strengthened the balance of payments by exporting natural gas to Thailand and moved the country along a seven-step roadmap to a “discipline-flourishing democracy (Rieffel, 2012)”.

#### **3.2.1 Myanmar’s Economy under Parliamentary Rule (1948-1958)**

Right after independence, Myanmar was one of the largest rice producers in the world. From 1950 to 1964, the country shipped an average of 1.52 million tons of milled rice

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overseas annually, accounting for a quarter of the world's rice exports. The country's prosperity in the 1950s was not limited to agriculture. Post-independence, government investment was essential to restarting the newly independent country's economy and transforming its agriculture-based economy into an industrial one (Maung Than, *Ibid*). Additionally, Myanmar's first Prime Minister U Nu launched a four-year plan to convert the country into a welfare state. The goals included improvements in education, public health, subsidized housing, easy credit and debt relief. The early emphasis of the economic program targeted rural development rather than industrialization (Topich & Leitich, 2013).

Burma's early economic planning was also strongly influenced by international socialist trends. Democratic socialism was not only internationally fashionable at that time; it was generally viewed in Burma as necessary to get the economy back under Burmese control. The shift from colonial capitalism to socialism highlighted the dominance of a centralized system of control. Among the first acts of the U Nu government upon taking power was to nationalize the leases of the European firms that dominated Burma's teak industry in colonial times (L. Bryant, 2002). At that time, teak was one of Myanmar's major resources productions. U Nu compromised with the army over the commercial ventures of the Department of Special Investigations (DSI), which was initially established

by the military in 1951 to supply consumer goods at inexpensive prices to military personnel. Over the years, its economic activities expanded and became a model of the kind of efficiency that civil branches of the U Nu government lacked (Charney, 2009).

### **3.2.2 Myanmar's Economy under Ne Win's Military Regime (1962-1988)**

After the 1962 military coup, as part of the “Burmese Way to Socialism”, the military regime nationalized all of the country's major industries into state-run enterprises, enacted strict government control and central planning, and subjected the country to economic isolation (Combs, 2021). All banks were nationalized, along with the transportation system, wholesale trade, retail trade, and foreign-owned companies. This led to a progressive breakdown of the formal firm type sector of the economy. Consequently, the country suffered mismanagement of resources, low productivity, high inflation, large budget deficits, an overvalued currency, total government control of financial institutions, little room for private enterprise, poor infrastructure and rampant corruption. The Burmese economy continued to deteriorate in the mid-1980s. Between 1981-1986, the national debt doubled to US\$ 2.8 billion. By 1986, the net debt burden was 650% of foreign exchange earnings, with a debt-service ratio of almost 60% of foreign exchange earnings.

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At the same time, the World Bank estimated that the value of Burma's export delinked by half, having dropped by 15% in 1985 alone, while rice ceased to be the major export item (Charney, *Ibid*). Myanmar's rice exports, which were at levels of 3 million tons annually under the British government, rose to a peak of 3.4 million tons in 1934, declining to barely 1 million tons under successive military regimes (Thawngmung, 2003). At the time of Ne Win's coup in 1962, official rice exports were up to some two million tons per annum. In 1988, despite a doubling in production, they were virtually nil (Smith, 1991). The continued economic problems due to increasing rice prices and demonetization of the currency would eventually lead to nationwide anti-government riots by mid-1988, which resulted in the collapse of the BSPP. In September 1988, a military government took power under the name of the SLORC following much political unrest.

### **3.3. Myanmar Economy (1988-2011)**

After 1988, the regime retreated from a command economy. It permitted modest expansion of the private sector, allowed some foreign investment, and received much needed foreign exchange. All fundamental market institutions are suppressed. Private enterprises are co-owned or indirectly owned by the state. In 2007 Myanmar ranked the most corrupt country in the world. The market rate was around two hundred



times below the government-set rate in 2006. In 2011, the Burmese government enlisted the aid of the International Monetary Fund to evaluate options to reform the current exchange rate system, stabilize the domestic foreign exchange trading market and create economic distortions (Wikipedia: 2022).

General Than Shwe's military was demanding life out of the economy and the people. The general also had spent some \$ 4 billion on their new capital in Naypyidaw, where they could live like kings in splendid isolation. Most people lived on less than 1USD per day. In June 2007, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) took the unprecedented step of publicly rebuking the regime for the "immense suffering" it was causing people. The price of natural gas went up 500% and there were protests against the regime across the country.

The military government that brought Myanmar's long-suffering citizens into the streets was the shambolic and fast deteriorating state of the national economy by 1987, bringing the country to the brink of domestic and international bankruptcy. The Economy was mismanaged by the military regime in the country for almost 70 years. It had seen Myanmar decline from a country once regarded as amongst the most fertile and mineral-rich in Asia to one of the world's ten poorest nations. Since 1987, Myanmar became the Least Developed Country status at the United Nations (Smith, 1991).

#### **4. Characteristics of the Economy under Military Rule**

In the nearly half a century of military rule, its control of the military can be distinguished by three key features: first, the military's enrichment of itself and its generals at the expense of the population; second, the lack of economic orthodoxy in their enactment of economic policies, and finally, widespread economic discrimination under military rule.

The military has been adept at institutionalizing its involvement in the business. There are two prominent Enterprises/Corporations that are strangely under the Ministry of Defence- the Union of Myanmar Economic Holding Ltd (UMEH) and Myanmar Economic Corporation. The first is jointly owned by the Directorate of Defence Procurement and serving and retired military personnel. All major foreign investments are done only through this corporation and so far, it is reported that as many as 47 joint ventures have been entered into through its auspices. Its range of business interests are rather large and include gem production and marketing, garment factories, wood industries, goods and beverages and other trading companies, supermarket, banking, hotels, tourism, transportation, construction and real estate, computers, telecommunications, electronics and equipment and steel and cement industry. With no public transparency in its finances,

UMEH is reported to give business opportunities to the military leadership (Neihhsial, 2022).

#### **4.1. Enriching itself via the Economy**

While the Myanmar economy collapsed, the army continued to grow in size and strength (Chowdhury, 2008). Even as they did little in the way of implementing policies to support households and businesses, the military government spent heavily on itself. In 1988, for a country with no external enemies, defence spending was generally estimated to be sapping up some 40 percent of the national budget. The military government blamed economic difficulties on the crippling cost of long-running wars with various communist and ethnic insurgents, which had continued virtually uninterrupted since 1948. These wars also legitimized the military's hold on power and contributed to the siege mentality of successive governments in Yangon.

Furthermore, the junta delegated the day-to-day administration of the country to its regional commanders. The regional commanders supervised the construction of roads, housing, suburbs, and markets, rearranged and displaced urban and rural populations to accommodate tourism, military expansion, and other state priorities, and expanded surveillance and crowd control capabilities. This has allowed regional commanders to amass enormous wealth and power along the

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way, especially if they are posted to the commands flanking Burma's borders. There they oversee formal and informal trade, investment, transport and border crossings all of which provide ample opportunities for personal and institutional enrichment (Callahan, 2007).

Such personal enrichment was not only limited to regional commanders stationed at border regions. Whenever the military regime privatized state-owned enterprises, this appeared to be intended to provide members of the junta and their business associates with the opportunity to gain control of formerly state-owned assets, rather than to introduce genuine competition. Corruption was pervasive, with little transparency in the issuance of business licenses and permits. Instead, the military personnel and their associated business elites thrived on monopolies and cronyism. Big business conglomerates in Burma owned by these military-linked business elites operated as near-monopolies in a wide range of industries from agriculture to telecommunication (Kyaw, 2017). As an institution, the military also expanded its own economic and industrial base and set up profitable military corporate ventures, such as agricultural plantations, banks, and holding companies like the Myanmar Economic Corporation and the Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings, Ltd.

#### **4.2. Erratic and poorly conceived economic policies**

Throughout their reign, the Myanmar military also enacted erratic economic policies that did not adhere to orthodox economic principles. Although Myanmar was one of the richest Southeast Asian nations with its vast natural resources, under the military regime the economic situation of the people hardly improved. Even people working for the military, in politics or as members of the economic elite were reliant on the black market. In order to stop inflation and put an end to unregulated Chinese businesses active in the black market, the government decided overnight to devalue the country's currency kyat notes 25, 35 and 75 (Ebbighausen, 2022).

Another example of a policy that defied conventional wisdom was the decision to declare the Chin state as the "Tea State" in 2002. Farmers have no choice but to plant tea, with the military seizing land near towns to create its own tea plantations or selling off concessions to wealthy families to do the same. Many small farmers were hesitant to plant tea because tea requires more water, fertilizer and labour inputs than they could afford. The "tea state" policy disrupted what had been for years a very effective, traditional land management and tenure system. By giving priority to farmers willing to plant tea, the SLORC undermined the authority of village leaders. As a result, village collective life was characterized by greater conflict resulting from the difference between traditional management institutions

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and SLORC mandated tenure. Financial capital is particularly uncommon in Chin State. Sources of credit are insufficient. Poor families cannot readily access resources and most depend on informal borrowing from and economic relations with the better-off families in the locality. Moneylenders operate mostly in towns but cannot satisfy the high demand for credit in this fragile economy. Consequently, such poorly thought-through policies were not only detrimental to the economy of an already impoverished region, but also to the social landscape of the community.

### **4.3. Economic Discrimination under Military Regime**

Discrimination is defined as any distinction, exclusion or preference made on the basis of a particular characteristic (such as race, sex, religion) that impairs the equality of opportunity and treatment (such as in employment or occupation). In the case of Myanmar, this has resulted in non-Bamar minorities being denied equal opportunities as the majority Bamars. Since 1962, authoritarian rule under Ne Win saw an emphasis on unity under the primacy of Bamar identity. The post-1962 regime unambiguously rejected the claim to nationhood by non-Bamar groups, and the military government nationalized the Bamar culture, religion, and language from the grassroots level to the Union level. The official discrimination against non-Bamar speakers also put the ethnic minorities at a grave practical

disadvantage, as those who could not become fluent in Burmese were excluded from any official jobs in a country where the Burmese speaking, Bamar-dominated state was by some way the largest employer (Cockett, 2015). Although the 2008 Constitution purports to protect the right of all citizens to choose their occupations (Article 349), many fields are dominated by the Bamar ethnic group in the country as a result of the military government's longstanding discrimination against ethnic minority groups. Today, few ethnic minorities are owners of large businesses in Myanmar.

### **5. Reform in Myanmar (2010-2021)**

Since 2010, Myanmar has transitioned into a quasi-democratic country after almost 60 years of brutal dictatorship. There were various social, political, and economic changes. Political power was transferred to a civilian government in 2011, albeit one that was backed by the military under the leadership of President Thein Sein, with the military still holding major political and economic influence in the country. The new government has also carried out a series of economic reforms in various ways, with air-conditioned buses, shopping malls, and various developments popping up all over Myanmar. The country also opened up further to foreign tourists, bringing opportunities for development within the hotel and tourism industry.

### 5.1. Political Reforms

Perhaps the most significant changes have been in the political sphere in 2011 when the military implemented the 2008 military-drafted constitution that allows features of civilian-led limited politics alongside the unelected authoritarian power of the *Tatmadaw*. This conditional regime change would now situate Myanmar as a form of a hybrid regime, rather than a military government (Huang, 2021). In 2010 then, the SPDC held a general election in which the military-aligned Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) won election. In March 2011, the military government officially transferred power to the quasi-civilian regime and Myanmar's political system was transformed from a military government into a parliamentary democracy. That same year, the parliamentary democratic government enacted a series of political, economic, and administrative reforms in Myanmar.

President Thein Sein's inaugural address in March 2011 reached out to critics of the military junta and emphasized the need to put aside differences and collaborate for the good of the country. Long-time political prisoner Aung San Suu Kyi was also released from house arrest. In January 2012, Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) became a legally registered political party and in April contested the by-election where it won 43 out of 45 seats – a result the military accepted



Chalk, 2013). Myanmar quickly became the darling of the world. Not only did the world's top leaders such as President Barack Obama visit Myanmar, popular film stars such as Jackie Chan, Angelina Jolie and others also visited the country.

## **5.2. Economic Reforms**

In the early 2010s, Myanmar was in the midst of an astonishing transformation as it moved towards a more market-oriented economy. The government moved away from a centrally planned economy and towards a competitive private market that is integrated with the rest of the world (Robertson & Phyu, 2013; Bhasin, *Ibid.*). After decades of isolation from the western nations and limited interaction with its eastern neighbours, Myanmar embarked on a series of socio-economic reforms across all sectors (Howson & Lall, 2019). Trade embargos were rolled back and billions of dollars in aid were promised to make up for a lost time, paving the way for greater inclusion in the global economy. Top businessmen looked to invest in Myanmar. As new industries emerged and greater foreign direct investment entered the country, urbanization and rising incomes also led to greater opportunities for rural populations to seek out income diversification (online accessed 2021). The share of the manufacturing industry expanded from 20.4% of GDP in 2007 to 32.1% in 2012 (UNIDO: 013). By 2014, Myanmar's economy was the fastest growing economy in

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the world (Myint-U, 2019). Such optimism for positive change continued when Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party came into government in Myanmar in 2016. Between 2011 and 2016, an average of 46 reforms were implemented annually to make setting up a business easier (DFAT 2016). As a result, Myanmar improved from a ranking of 182 out of 189 countries for ease of doing business in 2014, to 170 out of 190 countries in 2017.

### **6. The Military Coup (2021)**

On 8 November 2020, general elections were held in Myanmar. The NLD won more than 60 percent of the vote and were set to consolidate their hold over Burmese politics, vowing to push for constitutional changes that would further limit the army's powers. However, the opponents, the pro-army USDP, claimed massive electoral fraud. While there were serious problems with the elections, including the cancelling of polls in several constituencies with large ethnic minority populations and the disenfranchisement of more than a million people, including Rohingya Muslim refugees in Bangladesh (Mynt-U, 2021). On January 29, the country's independent election commission – the Union Election Commission (UEC) – rejected allegations by the military that the election was fraudulent, saying there was no evidence to support the claims. Consequently, in the early morning of 1 February 2021, the opening day of the Union Parliament, Min Aung Hlaing,

commander-in-chief of the Myanmar Armed Forces, launched a coup overthrowing the country's democratically elected government. The military declared a newly formed "State Administration Council" on 2 February 2021 as the interim governing body, reserving for the Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief the exercise of legislative power.

The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) started in Myanmar two days after the junta's February 1 coup. Refusing to work under military rule, doctors left their hospitals, railway staff stayed at home, banks and schools were closed, and other government employees stayed home. Medical workers across Myanmar began protesting the coup, wearing red ribbons and declaring they would not work for the new military government. Health workers in government hospitals and facilities issued statements opposing the coup. Photos were shared on social media showing workers with red ribbons pinned to their clothes or holding printed photos of red ribbons. Others used a three-finger salute as a symbol of pro-democracy protests. The CDM movement had an impact on the life of Myanmar, both constructive and destructive. Because the CDM movement has made life difficult for the people of Myanmar during the COVID-19 third wave where civilians are dying, there are limited healthcare workers to save civilians' lives. (It is because they do not want to work under the military government.) In another way, because of the CDM movement, the military

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government cannot run any government and other works across the country. Even if they want to do without the participation of civilians, they cannot run anything. They can run only in some cities, and township areas. In particular, in Chin State, the military cannot do anything even if they are afraid to leave township administration areas. All villages in Chin state are right now controlled by EAOs and CDF. At the same time, a parallel government composed mostly of elected legislators – the National Unity Government (NUG) – was created as a legitimate alternative to the military regime. Its armed wing, the People's Defense Force (PDF) was later launched as part of an armed movement against the military.

### **6.1. Economic Impacts of the Coup**

Before the November election in 2020, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank predicted that Myanmar would bounce back strongly from the economic impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic, with the economy set to grow at around 6 percent in 2021. In the aftermath of the military's February 1 coup, junta leaders sought to keep the economy on track by presenting themselves as business-friendly and saying that economic policies would remain unchanged during the state of emergency. The junta even appointed some individuals to Myanmar's key economic ministries who were well connected and well known to the international community. With the coup,

however, the World Bank's latest forecast reveals that Myanmar's economy is in dire jeopardy and is projected to contract by 10 percent this year due to the impact of the military takeover.

Within 80 days of the coup, there were already many signs that the economy was in free fall with the drying up of new investment, the withdrawal of existing investment and the halting of key international-backed infrastructure projects, as western countries reimposed sanctions on the military regime. Western business groups including the American, British, European, Italian and French chambers of commerce rejected the regime's invitation to meet with its cabinet members in March 2021. The impact of the coup has been to reverse the country's economic reforms and the economic progress made during the last decade. The coup has pushed Myanmar—previously one of the region's fastest-growing economies – back into dire poverty and left the economy on the brink of collapse (The Irrawaddy, 2021). The general strike called by the civil disobedience campaign has paralyzed government business, crippled the banking system and stifled output in what under the democratic rule was one of Southeast Asia's fastest-growing economies. International trade has stopped with tens of thousands of workers in logistics, transport, ports, customs, and clearance and government agencies observing the strike call.

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Factories have closed. Long lines have formed at bank ATMs caused by a shortage of cash delivered by the central bank.

In their attempt to control the opposition movement, the military has also enacted internet blackouts after the coup. These internet blackouts have affected everything from mobile money services to e-commerce and online food delivery services. Access to mobile money services including Wave money and KBZ pay has been crippled since March when the regime blocked mobile internet and broadband services. E-commerce business is down by 75 per cent, while online food delivery services nationwide are down 80 percent following the coup, according to reports. The result is that thousands of young people are now out of work (The Irrawaddy, 2021).

Myanmar's banking system has also been paralyzed since the coup as hundreds of branches of at least 31 local banks and 13 foreign ones have closed their doors due to staff strikes. All banking services have been halted in the country except for mobile banking and ATM services. As a result, almost all trading companies, especially those engaged in sea-bound trade, have been forced to halt operations, as the banks are unable to issue the documents needed to import and export goods. Companies struggle to pay salaries, as banks are not providing payroll services, and businesses suffer from cash shortages as bank branches have closed and the regime has ordered limits on

cash withdrawals for both individuals and companies (The Irrawaddy, 2021).

It is important to note as well, that all of these were happening at a time of the covid-19 pandemic. Lockdowns and containment measures disturbed supply chains, severely affecting businesses, especially in the retail, manufacturing and exports sectors, alongside smaller businesses such as market sellers, hairdressers and tailors. If the security and economic situation does not stabilize soon, up to 25 million people, or 48 percent of Myanmar's population could be living in poverty by 2022. Rising food costs, significant losses of income and wages, the crumbling of basic services such as banking and health care and an inadequate social safety net is likely to push millions of vulnerable people below the poverty line of USD 1.10 per day (Regan, 2021). Myanmar's currency, the kyat, has lost half its value since the coup, dramatically increasing the cost of imports, such as cooking oil or refined petroleum products, which has a knock-on effect on the price of all goods.

## **6.2. Social and Political Impacts of the Coup**

In addition to the collective economic impacts of both the pandemic and the coup, the twin tragedies have also had an impact on society. During the CDM, health workers on strike against the military regime started to volunteer at charity health clinics. However, many of these clinics were shut down as a

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precaution against a surge in Covid-19 cases. The shortage of medical staff was also problematic when it came to Myanmar's vaccination program. Although India donated 1.5 million doses of a two-shot vaccine, many civilians feared vaccinations because they did not trust the military coup or did not want anything to do with the military regime. Many civilians are afraid to vaccinate against Covid-19 because of distrust of the military coup and even some people are not doing anything under the military regime. Some say that the Covid-19 vaccine donated by India was only vaccinated only by military families and the rest have already expired without vaccinating their own people. It is not only the military government (SAC) have manipulated the Covid-19 third wave impact on the life of the people badly in Myanmar society but also the parallel government (NUG) have also manipulated the life of civilians to fear and distrust the SAC in the country. In this, both parties have responsibility for the life of civilians in Myanmar.

Violence has also increased in the period after the coup. On the one hand, thefts and looting are becoming prevalent as the people's desperation grows. On the other hand, large-scale violent events are also on the rise. As of 16 November 2021, more than 1,200 people have been killed by the military, and thousands more arrested and imprisoned. The military has also engaged in the indiscriminate burning of villages and churches, forcing thousands of ordinary citizens to flee their homes. The



perpetrators of such violence are not limited to the military. Resistance groups have also targeted economic, communications and transport infrastructure deemed important to the regime. They have sabotaged more than 120 cell phone towers since June, most of which were used by MyTel, a company partly owned by the military. These affected not only the military's economic interests but also those of civilians. In addition, the resistance force has killed several people each day in recent months, including regime appointed local administrators, USDP members, security force personnel and alleged informants (known as *Dalan* in Burmese).

The ongoing armed conflict between the military and the PDF as well as other Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) have created difficulties for vulnerable communities. Not only are people now afraid of getting caught in the crossfire when leaving their homes, but the war between the military, PDF and EAOs has also led to food insecurity, shortage of medicines and other necessities. This precarity is especially acute in the border areas where ethnic minority groups are mostly located. Critical health, education, and business services have been disrupted. Together with ongoing protests, conflict, and insecurity, these shocks have weakened consumption, investment, and trade, and constrained businesses operations and the supply of labor and inputs. This economic deterioration will be hugely damaging to livelihoods, which for many were already under severe strain.

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Around one million jobs could be lost, and many other workers will experience a decline in their incomes due to reduced hours or wages. There is an urgent need to “save lives, protect livelihoods, and reduce hunger and malnutrition (Global Report on Food Crises 2018: 2021)”. However, restricted humanitarian access to several areas hampers the ability of international aid organizations to provide crucial assistance to people in need.

Myanmar's political chaos and the resulting violence are taking place against a backdrop of a grave economic crisis, a sharp rise in poverty and food insecurity, a collapsed health system, and a serious Covid-19 outbreak. The junta may be able to insulate itself and its security apparatus from major hardship, but the implications for the population will be devastating.

### **7. Conclusion**

Over the past 70 years, many Myanmar citizens, especially ethnic minorities, have suffered greatly under military rule and military control of the economy. Despite the various reforms that took place during the short-lived period of civilian rule, the 2021 coup and the ensuing political instability has set the country back for decades. In such conditions, the people of Myanmar have been faced with socio-politico-economic crises one after another with the Covid-19 pandemic and the military coup in 2021. They have suffered throughout different historical periods after Burma gained independence from Britain. For almost more than

70 years under military rule, many ethnic minorities have lost their basic human right, equality, government job, and power-sharing as citizens of Myanmar. The military takeover in 1958, 1962, 1988 and the present crisis in 2021 is not the same in the history of Myanmar. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the world has become a global village with modern information and technology and internet etc., which has not been used in the past 70 years under military rule in Myanmar. Civilians, military, and other opponent parties link each other in socio-economic, political ideology, social media in a domestic and global context. Therefore, there is insecurity and instability. All Myanmar citizens are going to suffer worse than before from civil wars. It is a hard time for the military (SAC) and NUG to control everything. Instead, civilians are losing their life by armed resistance to the military coup. There is more hatred between civilians, particularly towards the military and their relative families. One year after the military coup on 1 February 2021 to present 2022 the military government the so-called State Administration Council (SAC) cannot control the country smoothly. All ethnic areas and some regions are controlled by PDF/CDF and EAOs. Only cities and townships areas are controlled by the SAC and the rest of the villages are controlled by CDF/PDF and EAOs in most of the states and regions. Therefore, it is necessary to talk to both opponents at peace with dialogue. Without dialogue, there is no peace and reconciliation.

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We all know that now more than thousands of people are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance such as shelters, food, and clothes. There is more and more internal displacement (IDPs) within Myanmar and some are further fleeing to neighbouring countries. It is because of conflict between EAOs, CDF/PDF and Tatmadaw. Civil war brings nothing good to the people of Myanmar instead of killing its own citizens.

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