

DEMOCRACY AND THE MUSLIM QUESTION IN MYANMAR

Abdul Waheed Parry



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IHH İNSANİ VE SOSYAL ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ
IHH HUMANITARIAN AND SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTER
مركز البحوث الإنسانية و الاجتماعية

To cite this article: Parry, Abdul Waheed. "Democracy and the Muslim Question in Myanmar", INSAMER, 16.03.2021.  Analysis

Myanmar is again on the news. This time it is not for the Rohingya Muslims, who have been escaping ethnic cleansing in recent years. This time the civil leadership, which was hand in glove with the Myanmar army in persecuting Muslims, has been put in jail. The Myanmar army has declared a one-year state-of-emergency on 1 February. It seized the power and put Aung San Suu Kyi of the National League for Democracy (NLD) party under house arrest. The same fate also happened to other NLD leaders.

The coup followed a general election held recently in which Aung San Suu Kyi's NDL party won by a landslide. The country's opposition claimed widespread election fraud and demanded a rerun. The military forces backed the opposition in their claims, though Myanmar's electoral commission said that there was no evidence to prove these claims. The coup was staged at a time when a new session of parliament was set

to start. The military replaced the already ailing democratic government by arresting civilian leaders, shutting off the internet, and cutting off flights. It also took control of the parliament and other state institutions. Suu Kyi, the major figure of civilian leadership was charged with violating an obscure import law. The coup has returned the country to a point following a short span of civil rule in 2011 - when the military, which had been in power since 1962, implemented elections and other reforms.

The power was handed over to Army chief Min Aung Hlaing, the leader of the coup. He has been successfully maintaining the power of Myanmar's army and has long been enjoying political influence because of the country's weak democracy.

The truth is that the military never really lost control. Despite the ostensible democratic reforms in recent years, the



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Tatmadaw—as Myanmar’s armed forces are officially known—retained powerful influence, including control of the defense, border affairs and home affairs ministries. The country’s 2008 constitution guarantees the military 25% of seats in parliament and veto power over any constitutional amendment. (Time, 2021)

The Muslim Question in Myanmar

The Rohingya Muslim minority has been suffering for a long time. They have been facing persecution for years, and the so-called democratic regime led by Suu Kyi proved no exception. The Myanmar army launched a crackdown in 2017 on Rohingya Muslims. They are considered illegal immigrants and are denied citizenship in Myanmar. Over decades, hundreds and thousands of Rohingya Muslims have fled the country to escape persecution. Thousands of them killed, and millions have fled to neighboring Bangladesh in the recent past. Rights activists since 2017 have been vocal about the atrocities unleashed by the Myanmar army against the Rohingya Muslims, who live in the west of the country. Death, threat, and abuse are the new norm for the Muslim population of Myanmar.

Part of why it happens is that the majority of the country belongs to the Bamar ethnicity, which observes Buddhism and dominates the elite governing class. Other ethnic minorities, especially the Rohingya Muslims, face persecution at the hands of the military. The UN investigators have reported that the Myanmar armed forces have waged war against the Rohingyas with clear intentions of genocide. A report published by the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar says that,

“The Mission established consistent patterns of serious human rights violations and abuses in Kachin, Rakhine and Shan States, in addition to serious violations of international humanitarian law. These are principally committed by the Myanmar security forces, particularly the military.

Their operations are based on policies, tactics and conduct that consistently fail to respect international law, including by deliberately targeting civilians. Many violations amount to the gravest crimes under international law.”(HRC, 2018)

The Aung San Suu Kyi administration had been denying its persecution of the Rohingya Muslims. Suu Kyi appeared before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 2019 and denied the allegations that the army had committed genocide on the Rohingya Muslims. Many international human rights forums have blamed Suu Kyi for failing to exercise her “moral authority.” The UN report notes about her administration,

“Through their acts and omissions, the civilian authorities have contributed to the commission of atrocity crimes.”(HRC, 2018)

The Rohingya Muslims neither found support from the civilian government nor the general public of the country. The civilian government not only defended the military in the ICJ hearing in 2019, it also filed objections to the ICJ over the genocide case the Myanmar military officials are facing, two weeks before the coup.

The Military Coup and the Future of Rohingyas

The Myanmar people may have started to realize that the country’s military is the common enemy of the people. Many of them shared on social media that they have realized the fact that the military was involved in grave human rights violations against the Rohingyas. Similarly, the Rohingyas, who have stood up to support the people of Myanmar, hope that this solidarity with their countrymen will help end discrimination against them.

The coup on one hand has given a hope that international pressure may mount on military leadership and the regime will be isolated further. After the coup, the Myanmar people are calling to lobby the International Criminal Court (ICC) to persecute coup leader General

Aung Hlaing for atrocities committed against the Rohingya Muslims. On the other hand, the Rohingya people fear the surge in atrocities by the army.

It's not good news. The thrust of the pushback on the atrocities in Rakhine state came from strong international pressure, which is now squarely focused on the coup. It is unclear what might occur now that the military, which is alleged to have been responsible for genocide there, may do next. It is further worth noting that mobile and internet communications in Rakhine state have been heavily restricted amid accusations from rights groups that the atrocities are ongoing. (Bloomberg, 2021)

The recent coup has killed the hope of Rohingya refugees from returning to their homeland in the near future. Activists all over the world fear that the military could take the matter into their own hands again and continue to kill and persecute the Rohingyas. People who are living in

Myanmar's Rakhine state fear that the military has now gained full control of the government. They are terrified that the military's power grab would only increase violent attacks in the Rakhine state against them. The military, being directly in charge, certainly raises the risks of violence and human rights violations in the future. International human rights forums have already alarmed about Myanmar's military power abuse.

"Military necessity would never justify killing indiscriminately, gang-raping women, assaulting children, and burning entire villages. The Tatmadaw's tactics are consistently and grossly disproportionate to actual security threats." (HRC, 2018)

Many experts believe that the coup - among others - would impose long-term damages on Myanmar's Rohingya Muslims. They fear heightened ethnic tension in the country, which could be used as an excuse by the military to extend the state of emergency.

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