

## OUTCOME DOCUMENT

# MYANMAR: HUNDRED DAYS AFTER THE COUP

13<sup>TH</sup> MAY 2021



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## MYANMAR: HUNDRED DAYS AFTER THE COUP

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Tuesday, May 11, 2021 marks 100 days since the military coup in Myanmar brought a fragile democracy to its knees. The country has navigated through military and civilian leadership, though the Tatmadaw – the Myanmar military - has remained the most powerful institution since the advent of independence in 1948.

**The coup** led to a year-long state of emergency, announced on February 1, 2021, when the military arrested the civilian leaders of the national and state governments, most significantly, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint, and other political leaders in the capital, Naypyidaw. It also detained National League for Democracy (NLD) officials and civil society activists in other parts of Myanmar, and cut telecommunications and the internet.

**The trigger** for the coup was the general election on 8 November 2020, in which the NLD won a landslide victory against the military's proxy, the Union Solidarity and Development Party. The military alleged, without evidence, widespread election and voter irregularities while claiming that the Union Election Commission (UEC) and the NLD government had failed in addressing the concerns of opposition political parties, ethnic groups, and the military, and were unable to conduct a fair and transparent election. The coup has been seen as a last-ditch attempt by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing to hold onto political power as he nears retirement.

**International reaction** was swift. The UN Security Council issued a statement unanimously condemning the situation in Myanmar, although it refrained from labelling the situation as a coup. The western countries began announcing sanctions against the military regime. The United States embassy and diplomatic missions of 15 other countries and the European Union in Yangon issued a joint statement “opposing any attempt to alter the outcome of the elections or impede Myanmar’s democratic transition”. But it remains to be seen how the capitals of these major development partners of Myanmar would approach their continued diplomatic and political engagement with Myanmar.

China and Russia, the main arms suppliers to the Tatmadaw, have since voiced their concerns against the UNSC’s stance on the coup. Russia and China refused to condemn the coup, hoping for ‘a peaceful settlement of the situation through the resumption of political dialogue’. China’s *laissez-faire* approach is consistent with its long-established “non-interference principle” in foreign policy.

**At home**, though, there has been a remarkable outpouring of peaceful protests across Myanmar in defiance of the military takeover. This Civil Disobedience Movement has engulfed major cities like Yangon and Mandalay, as well as towns farther afield from the main centres of power. Youth activists have played a major role in organizing these protests. Myanmar’s youth are one demographic whose lives may be most significantly impacted by the coup and after experiencing increasing freedoms in recent years, their presence on the streets sends a strong signal that they will not tolerate further military rule. A number of Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) began new hostilities against the military. Other ethnic organisations and Buddhist clergy appeared divided on whether to oppose the regime.

**An ASEAN solution?** On April 24, 2021 a special ASEAN Leaders Meeting was called in Jakarta with Senior General Min Aung Hlaing in attendance along with other member- states' heads of government and foreign ministers. ASEAN's chair, the Sultan of Brunei released a five-point consensus calling for 1) the immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar; 2) constructive dialogue among all parties toward a

peaceful solution in the interests of the people; 3) mediation to be facilitated by an envoy of ASEAN's chair, with the assistance of the secretary-general; 4) humanitarian assistance provided by ASEAN's AHA Centre and 5) a visit by the special envoy and delegation to Myanmar to meet all parties concerned. Weeks after the summit ended, ASEAN was yet to name its special envoy and begin its follow-up efforts, partially because Myanmar responded to the ASEAN formula by stating that it would be considered only once the situation became normal.

**India** expressed serious concern and voiced her strong support for democratic transition. New Delhi finds itself in a predicament with its policy of non-interference despite being a proponent of democratic values. Two states in India's northeast have had an influx of refugees from Myanmar – a serious concern. However, the government aims to be pragmatic, astutely balancing principles, values, interests and geopolitical realities. India has since sealed its border with Myanmar, and the paramilitary Assam Rifles, guarding the India-Myanmar border is on heightened vigil. India's Ministry of External Affairs, welcomed the ASEAN initiative and maintained that diplomatic efforts towards resolving the situation in Myanmar, will be aimed at strengthening these ASEAN efforts.

**The UN** continues to be seized of the Myanmar crisis. The Secretary General's special envoy has been touring the region, meeting among others the C-in-C of the Myanmar military. On 30 April, the Security Council again reviewed developments in Myanmar, calling for the release of political leaders and restoration of democratic rule. It also articulated its support for ASEAN's constructive initiative.

This webcast will discuss the conflict in Myanmar, the pulse of the protesters' fight for democracy, the ominous presence of China as well as Russia and multilateral measures that the neighbouring countries including India can take towards restoring democratic processes in Myanmar.

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## AGENDA

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The webcast will focus on the following issues

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### AN OVERVIEW OF THE COUP - TRIGGERS AND GROUND REALITIES

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**Objective:**

The coup has been seen as a last-ditch attempt by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing to hold onto political power as he nears retirement. The coup led to a year-long state of emergency, announced on February 1, 2021, when the military arrested the civilian leaders of the national and state governments, most significantly, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint, and other political leaders in the capital, Naypyidaw. It also detained National League for Democracy (NLD) officials and civil society activists in other parts of Myanmar, and cut telecommunications and the internet.

There has been a remarkable outpouring of peaceful protests across Myanmar with major cities like Yangon and Mandalay engulfed in this Civil Disobedience Movement. Youth activists have played a major role in organizing these protests. A number of Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) began new hostilities against the military. Other ethnic organisations and Buddhist clergy appeared divided on whether to oppose the regime.

Tuesday, May 11, 2021 marks 100 days since the military coup in Myanmar which brought a fragile democracy to its knees. What triggered the Tatmadaw's takeover and how has the nation of Myanmar reacted to it?

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### RESPONSES TO THE COUP - MULTILATERAL AND NEIGHBOURING

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**Objective:**

The UN Security Council issued a statement unanimously condemning the situation in Myanmar, although it refrained from labelling the situation as a coup. The western countries began announcing sanctions against the military regime. On April 24, 2021 a special ASEAN Leaders Meeting was called in Jakarta with Senior General Min Aung Hlaing in attendance along with other member- states' heads of government and foreign ministers. ASEAN's chair, the Sultan of Brunei released a five-point consensus aimed at restoring peace and democratic processes to Myanmar.

China and Russia, the main arms suppliers to the Tatmadaw, have since voiced their concerns against the UNSC's stance on the coup. Russia and China refused to condemn the coup, hoping for 'a peaceful settlement of the situation through the resumption of political dialogue'. China's *laissez-faire* approach is consistent with its long-established "non-interference principle" in foreign policy.

India expressed serious concern and voiced her strong support for democratic transition. New Delhi finds itself in a predicament with its policy of non-interference despite being a proponent of democratic values. Two states in India's northeast have had an influx of refugees from Myanmar – a serious concern. However, the government aims to be pragmatic, astutely balancing principles, values, interests and geopolitical realities

What is the role of China in the military takeover in Myanmar? How has the coup in Myanmar affected its neighbours and what are the multilateral measures taken towards restoring the rule of law?

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### FLOW OF WEBCAST

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Date: 13 May 2021

Time: 1 hour 10 minutes (5:30pm IST to 6:40pm IST)



## OPENING REMARKS

**Time:** 5:30pm – 5:36pm

Welcome remarks from Gateway House (3 mins)	<b>Manjeet Kripalani</b> , Executive Director and Co-founder, Gateway House
Opening remarks from KAS (3 mins)	<b>Peter Rimmele</b> , Resident Representative to India, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

## MODERATED PARTICIPANTS DISCUSSION

**Time:** 5:36pm – 6:19pm

Moderator	<b>Rajiv Bhatia</b> , Distinguished Fellow, Foreign Policy Studies Programme, Gateway House
Panellists	<b>Kavi Chongkittavorn</b> , Senior Fellow, Chulalongkorn University's Institute of Security and International Studies <b>Min Zin</b> , Executive Director, Institute for Strategy and Policy, Myanmar <b>Patricia Mukhim</b> , Editor, Shillong Times

## AUDIENCE Q&A

**Time:** 6:19pm – 6:34pm

Moderator	<b>Rajiv Bhatia</b> , Distinguished Fellow, Foreign Policy Studies Programme, Gateway House
Panellists	<b>Kavi Chongkittavorn</b> , Senior Fellow, Chulalongkorn University's Institute of Security and International Studies <b>Min Zin</b> , Executive Director, Institute for Strategy and Policy, Myanmar <b>Patricia Mukhim</b> , Editor, Shillong Times

## CLOSING COMMENTS BY PANELISTS

**Time:** 6:34pm – 6:37pm

## SUMMATION OF DISCUSSION & CLOSING REMARKS

**Time:** 6:37pm – 6:40pm

Closing remarks from Gateway House	<b>Sameer Patil</b> , Fellow, International Security Studies Programme, Gateway House
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## HOUSE RULES AND INTERVENTION GUIDELINES

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### FLOW OF DISCUSSION

Time: 1 hour 10 minutes

Welcome remarks	3 mins	Welcome remarks by Manjeet Kripalani, Gateway House. Moderator informs participants about flow of the session and house rules
Opening remarks	3 mins	Opening Remarks by Peter Rimmele, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
Moderated discussion	43 mins	Moderator informs participants about flow of the session and house rules. Discussion begins; questions asked to each of the experts on the subject by the Chair
Q&A	15 mins	Audience Q&A
Closing Comment by each panellist	3 mins	Panellists
Closing Remarks	3 mins	Closing remarks by Sameer Patil, Gateway House.

Note:

- Time will be strictly adhered to.
- No Power Point slides, audio or videos permitted.
- Bios will be shared in advance. There will be no formal introductions.

### SPEAKING GUIDELINES

Participants in each session must address the policy question presented for discussion. It helps keep the discussion focused and facilitates documenting specific assessments and policy recommendations.

- Designated speakers: Responsible for giving introductory remarks to launch the discussion
- All session participants and delegates: Encouraged to participate during the roundtable discussion.
- We encourage evidence-based interventions.
- We discourage generalized assessments and repetition of facts that are already well-known.
- Please use the raise hand option on Zoom when seeking the Chair's attention to make an intervention.

### INFORMATION DISCLOSURE POLICY

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This meeting is open to the public.

## PARTICIPANTS

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### **Rajiv Bhatia**

*Distinguished Fellow, Foreign Policy Studies Programme, Gateway House*



Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia is Distinguished Fellow, Foreign Policy Studies Programme at Gateway House. He is a member of CII's International Advisory Council, Trade Policy Council and Africa Committee. He is the Chair of FICCI's Task Force on Blue Economy, and served as Chair of Core Group of Experts on BIMSTEC. During a 37-year innings in the Indian Foreign Service (IFS), he served as Ambassador to Myanmar and Mexico and as High Commissioner to Kenya, South Africa and Lesotho. He dealt with a part of South Asia, while posted as Joint Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs. He holds a master's degree in political science from Allahabad University. His first book *India in Global Affairs: Perspectives from Sapru House* (KW Publishers, 2015) presented a sober and insightful view of India's contemporary foreign policy. His second book *India-Myanmar Relations: Changing contours* (Routledge, 2016) received critical acclaim.

### **Kavi Chongkittavorn**

*Senior Fellow, Chulalongkorn University's Institute of Security and International Studies*



Kavi Chongkittavorn is a senior fellow at Chulalongkorn University's Institute of Security and International Studies. He has been a journalist for over three decades with the Bangkok-based English-language newspaper, *The Nation*, first as correspondent in Phnom Penh and Hanoi and later as lead writer and editor. He serves as a special assistant to the secretary general of ASEAN from 1995 to 1996 before returning to journalism. Kavi was a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University from 2001 to 2002 and president of the UNESCO Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize jury from 2004 to 2007. He is the current affairs commentator of Nation News Channel's One World Program. Kavi's column, *Regional Perspectives*, is in its 30<sup>th</sup> Year.



### **Manjeet Kripalani**

*Executive Director and Co-founder, Gateway House*



Manjeet Kripalani was India bureau chief of *Businessweek* magazine from 1996 to 2009. She holds two bachelor's degrees – in law, and English and history – from Bombay University and a master's degree in international affairs from Columbia University, New York. Her political career includes being deputy press secretary to Steve Forbes during his first run in 1995-1996 as Republican candidate for U.S. President in New Jersey and press secretary for independent candidate Meera Sanyal's Lok Sabha election campaign in 2008 and 2014 in Mumbai. She is currently a member of the Center for American Progress' U.S.-India Task Force, a member of the Asian advisory board of the International Centre for Journalists and the Overseas Press Club, and sits on the executive board of Gateway House, the Indian Liberal Group and Emancipation, all non-profit organisations.

### **Patricia Mukhim**

*Editor, Shillong Times*



Patricia Mukhim is currently editor, The Shillong Times, Meghalaya's oldest and largest selling English daily. She has served as Member, National Security Advisory Board for two terms. She also served in the governing body of the Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC). Patricia writes regular columns for national and regional newspapers and news web portals. She has written extensively on the horrors of rat-hole coal mining in her state of Meghalaya which has resulted in several deaths on account of flooding of mines. Patricia Mukhim is a recipient of several awards on journalism and the Padmashri in 2000.

### **Sameer Patil**

*Fellow, International Security Studies Programme*



Sameer Patil is Fellow, International Security Studies Programme, Gateway House. Prior to this, he was Assistant Director at the National Security Council Secretariat in Prime Minister's Office, New Delhi, where he handled counter-terrorism and regional security desks. Sameer has written extensively on various aspects of national security including counter-terrorism, cyber security, Kashmir issue, India-Pakistan and India-China relations. He is also a dissertation advisor at the Naval War College, Goa. In 2019, he was a recipient of the Canberra Fellowship, awarded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia.

### **Peter Rimmele**

*Resident Representative to India, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung*



Peter Max Rimmele is currently the Resident Representative of Konrad Adenauer-Stiftung Office, India. He has a First Law Degree from Freiburg University, as well as a Second Law Degree from the Ministry of Justice Baden-Württemberg, Germany and a M.A. in Geography. After working as a jurist, judge and lecturer, he took public office as Ministerialrat, Head of Division at the State Ministry of the Interior in Saxony, Germany, from November 1991 on until 2000. There he first served in the Police and Security and later in the Local Government Department. On behalf of the German Foreign Ministry he served in East Timor as Registrar General, Head of Civil Registry and Notary Services (UNTAET), and became later the principal Advisor for Governance Reform for GIZ (German International Cooperation) to the Ministry of Administrative Reform and the Anti-Corruption-Commission of the Republic of Indonesia, where he served for 7 years. He then moved to Rwanda, also as Principal Advisor Good Governance/Justice Program. Earlier he was Resident Representative Lebanon, Director of Rule of Law Program Middle East North Africa, Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung.

### **Min Zin**

*Executive Director, Institute for Strategy and Policy,  
Myanmar*



Min Zin is a founding member and the executive director of the Institute for Strategy and Policy, Myanmar, an independent, and non-governmental think tank, which promotes democratic leadership and strengthens civic participation in Myanmar. He is a Ph.D. candidate in the Travers Department of Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley. Min Zin is a comparative political scientist who studies civil-military relations, democratization, contentious politics, ethnic conflicts and civil war with a focus on Myanmar and Southeast Asian countries. Min Zin took part in Burma's democracy movement in 1988 as a high school student activist and went into hiding in 1989 to avoid arrest by the junta. His underground activist-cum-writer life lasted for nine years until he fled to the Thai-Myanmar border in August 1997. Min Zin writes for The Foreign Policy Magazine, The New York Times, and other media outlets.

## **OBSERVERS**

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- Pankaj Madan, Deputy Head - India Office, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
- Neha Aneja, Executive Assistant to Representative to India, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
- Simran Dhingra, Research Officer, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
- Ashish Gupta, Research Officer, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
- Prableen Kaur, Accounts Officer, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
- Kripal Singh Rawat, Accounts Officer, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
- Manu Emmanuel, Advisor/Team leader Administration, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
- Cdr. Amrut Godbole, Indian Navy Fellow, Gateway House
- Sameer Patil, Fellow, International Security Studies, Gateway House
- Amit Bhandari, Fellow, Energy and Environment Studies, Gateway House
- Chaitanya Giri, Fellow, Space and Ocean Studies, Gateway House
- Sifra Lentin, Bombay History Fellow, Gateway House
- Ambika Khanna, Senior Researcher, International Law Studies, Gateway House
- Aliasger Bootwalla, Media and Outreach Associate, Gateway House
- Arun D'Souza, Administration, Gateway House
- Kunal Thakkar, Researcher, Gateway House
- Kartik Astha, Researcher, Gateway House
- Saloni Rao, Intern, Gateway House
- Saeeduddin Faridi, Intern, Gateway House

## SECTION II

### KEY FINDINGS

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This week, Myanmar's generals marked 100 days of self-declared junta rule in the nation. Myanmar has navigated through years of military and civilian leadership. Throughout, the Tatmadaw – the Myanmar military - has remained the most powerful institution, and has been since the country's independence in 1948. An intensive and wide-ranging discussion on the 100 days of the 2021 coup, brought out the complexities and the stakes involved. A unique panel, comprising a thinker each from Myanmar and its two key neighbours - Thailand and India's North East Region - shed light on aspects that are often not probed with clarity.

#### ❖ MYANMAR: INTERNAL DYNAMICS

- **Backdrop:** The coup took place due to the National League for Democracy (NLD) ignoring the Army's complaints about the 2020 elections being fraudulent. A compromise could have been achieved, as military and civilian leaders often do in neighbouring Thailand. However, the underlying tension between the NLD and Army made the coup inevitable. The differences over constitutional reform became a major dispute between the two sides.
- **The Conflict:** The Military and the Civil Disobedience Movement, each feels that it can prevail over the other. The youth in Myanmar has been radicalized. The situation has now moved past Aung San Suu Kyi, even though she remains a popular figure. On the flip side, the opposition to the military this time has few well-known faces and names, unlike in 1988.
- **Way forward:** The country could end up either in an internal 'implosion' signifying a complete breakdown of state machinery, or an 'explosion' meaning exodus of refugees and spread of illegal activities affecting all the neighbouring states. The future for Myanmar, its civilians and neighbouring states remains uncertain.

#### ❖ INTERNATIONAL IMPACT AND RESPONSE

- **The United Nations:** The United Nations has been quick and forthright in condemning the military for executing the coup. The United Nations Secretary General said he would do everything to reverse it and punish the guilty. However, 'coordinated action' by the international community has been a disappointment.
- **The United States & Europe:** The U.S. and E.U. are strong proponents of sanctions, but have little leverage over Myanmar's military.
- **ASEAN:** On ASEAN's role, the panel remained divided. One view was that ASEAN could not achieve much in terms of reconciliation, while others argued that, with greater international



support and a stronger internal instinct for a solution, ASEAN alone could succeed in defusing the crisis and facilitating a national dialogue.

- **China & Russia:** China, the principal player, supports ASEAN's mediation initiative, but was expected to step in if ASEAN failed. Russia is backing Beijing, though it has its own special relationship with the Myanmar military.
- **Economic Impact:** The panel was in agreement on the devastating impact on the nation's economy. Economic growth, already affected by the pandemic, was heading south, a cause for much worry to investors from abroad.

## ❖ INDIA'S PERSPECTIVES

- **The North East:** From the North East perspective, India's policy to ban refugees and suspend the free border regime makes little sense. There are strong economic, social and cultural linkages, and people travel for basic provisions, medical aid, etc. The Free Movement Regime between the two countries was suspended in March 2020; it is also a drugs and arms trade corridor. India should adopt a more humanitarian approach and be more open and firm in espousing democracy in Myanmar.
- **Pragmatic policies:** The panel conceded that guided by considerations of internal security, geopolitics and the desire to curb China's rising influence, India cannot avoid a more calibrated strategy. Nevertheless, India should be more active in promoting reconciliation, by working more closely with ASEAN.

## SECTION III

### WEBCAST TRANSCRIPTS' BRIEF

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#### Notes

#### **Introduction: Manjeet Kripalani**

- We warmly welcome you to the 8th KAS-Gateway House webcast.
- Today we host a webcast of a country that is close to India's strategic interest. We speak of Myanmar, enquiring into the coup the nation finds itself embroiled in.
- May 11th is a hundred days of the coup in Myanmar and to discuss this we have a fantastic panel.

#### **Opening Remarks: Peter Rimmele:**

- It has been exactly a hundred two days since the military coup in Myanmar.
- For large parts of the international community, this period marks now almost four months of condemnations, sanctions and continued diplomatic consultations.
- UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres promised that the United Nations would do everything in its power to unite the international community and create conditions to reverse the military coup in Myanmar.
- As quickly as the condemnations were pronounced, Beijing vetoed them in the Security Council.
- Hundreds of thousands of people of all ages have been marking the onset of a civil disobedience movement that fights against the military junta and for democracy.
- Now, specifically for Indians, of course, if they hear civil disobedience it connects immediately with Gandhi and also what can be achieved with the disobedience movement as it was at that time.
- The population of Myanmar is very young and they have benefited from their country's fragile democratic transition over the past decade.
- They know the military's rising power will undo all hard-earned gains in economics, social development and basic freedoms.
- As per data provided by the NGO Assistance Association for Political prisoners, over 300 have already lost their lives and over 2,000 were arrested of whom countless were tortured in custody.
- In 1950 Myanmar's per capita income was higher than that of Malaysia or Thailand. The following decades of closed-door policies of the junta rulers resulted in severe underinvestment in the economy and the military turned Myanmar from one of the most promising economies in Asia into one of its worst-performing ones.
- We must find concrete solutions to implement the core objectives of the UN in Myanmar; mainly respect for democratic duty, international law, human rights and peace.
- There were international condemnations by various nations. The strongest responses were from the U.S. and the U.K.
- Myanmar is used to sanctions and it doesn't bother them because they will find other states supporting them.
- As the resident representative of KAS to India, a foundation that stands firmly for the principle of democracy. This webcast will certainly provide food for thought on concrete solutions for the Myanmar crisis and its fragile democracy.

- Anne O'Hare McCormick stated, "Today the real test of power is not capacity to make war but capacity to prevent it." Unfortunately, the international community has failed to prevent the military coup.

### **Rajiv Bhatia to Min Zin**

- Did this coup come about due to a fundamental difference concerning the elections, or is it something much deeper than just the divergences on the elections? Kindly help us understand the genesis of the coup.

### **Min Zin**

- The underlying tension between the military and NLD (National League for Democracy) is the primary reason for the coup.
- The coup in February reflected the fundamental problem in civil-military relations.
- The military's misrule of the country can be encapsulated in the constitutional veto the military introduced to maintain its vice-grip on Myanmar's polity.
- For any major constitutional change, you need to get more than 75% of the vote in the parliament, where the military forms a majority. In this way, the military controls the constitutional veto.
- There are fundamental tensions between the NLD and the military with regards to constitutional amendment and reforms.
- Despite the military's powers, they could not contain Aung San Suu Kyi's popularity.
- That's why this coup is somehow to do with the military wanting to revise their veto power.
- This does not mean that the 2020 elections were flawless. There were some issues, such as the NLD maximising their incumbent advantage to marginalize ethnic minorities and religious minorities.
- This also shows that the NLD failed to stand to democratic standards.

### **Rajiv Bhatia to Kavi Chongkittavorn**

- Do you feel that this rift between the two camps was inevitable? How surprised do you think Thailand was, watching this unfold?

### **Kavi Chongkittavorn**

- One of the most important elements in Myanmar is the relation between the Tatmadaw and political leaders. It is both an easy and difficult relationship.
- For at least a decade, the military leaders and the civilian leaders were able to coexist. There have been a lot of tensions and in the last five years, with the NLD and particularly Aung San Suu Kyi having more public support owing to her Nationalist identity.
- But when it comes to local controls there's a big difference in the style of the two leaders.
- In Thailand, you have civilian leaders and military leaders working together. Despite not seeing eye-to-eye, they collude, sometimes also having to compromise.
- In the case of Myanmar, the failure is that both sides are confident that they can live without the other side.
- This creates a kind of tension or diminishes the traditional roles of Tatmadaw in the history of Myanmar.
- I think in the case of Thailand we will set up committees saying that we will investigate.

- So, the dynamic between the civilian leadership and Tatmadaw in Myanmar is all the more important as both sides are preparing for a dialogue towards reconciliation.
- This is why Thailand has developed a very good relationship with both sides.

### **Rajiv Bhatia to Patricia Mukhim**

- Do you think the government of India was right in discouraging the people of Myanmar to seek shelter in the Northeast? Feel free to tell us more about the special relationship between India's Northeast and Myanmar.

### **Patricia Mukhim**

- Looking from the Northeast, one is unable to understand diplomatic strategies deployed by India. Amid the terror unleashed by the junta, it was spectacular to see India along with 8 other countries, participating in Myanmar's Armed Forces Day.
- What was this supposed to signify? That India too relies heavily on its military might, like China, Russia and Pakistan.
- It appears that India is taking the middle path and engaging with Tatmadaw as a strategic ally. At the same time calling for the restoration of democracy. Is this weakening India's stand as a champion of democracy?
- Ironically in August 2018, India and Myanmar activated the free movement regime for people residing in villages on both sides of the 1,643-kilometre border, owing to the cultural and economic ties that villagers on both sides share.
- There are many stories of people coming in from Myanmar to Manipur to Naga villages to buy their supplies. It's a very close economic, cultural and social tie.
- International boundaries draw in and draw out people of the same ethnicity.
- If one visits Mizoram, it is common to see families having domestic help coming in from Myanmar.
- As far as allowing refugees to come in because they're suffering persecution, it is a question of whether India still believes in the human rights of refugees, being a signatory of that UN instrument.
- Of course one also has to agree that there is a limit to how many refugees a country can take.
- That is a double-edged sword because it involves economic resources.
- The deepest question here is whether India can afford to add to its existing population.
- As of now officially, there are about 700 refugees in Manipur and Mizoram. The free movement regime has been closed since March 2020 on account of the COVID 19 pandemic.
- This outlet is also a drug trade and arms trade zone. It can sometimes lead to spurts in the refugee movement, including insurgents moving in and out.
- On refugees, it is hard to say yes or no. The people of Mizoram feel that they are our flesh and blood.

### **Rajiv Bhatia to Kavi Chongkittavorn**

- Thailand is suffering from the same issue of refugees coming in from Myanmar. However, the influx is larger and brings forth the prospects of conflict between armed ethnic organisations and the military. How do you think Thailand is handling the refugee issue?

### **Kavi Chongkittavorn**

- This is a sensitive issue because it involves the border security issue. Thailand shares 2400 kilometres of its borders with Myanmar. Thailand has had nearly a hundred thousand displaced persons from 34 years ago. So it's very difficult for Thailand to receive more.
- If refugees come, as they did, they will return once the order has been restored in Myanmar. At the moment, Thailand has worked out a contingency plan with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees.
- There were a large number of illegal migrants who amidst COVID19 escaped Myanmar for Thailand. Thus, Thailand is now suffering from the third COVID19 wave.

### **Rajiv Bhatia to Min Zin**

- Could you help us interpret the actual reactions and the way the West, the U.N., China, Russia and ASEAN have looked at this crisis?

### **Min Zin**

- Condemnation has been quite strong, and in some cases unprecedented, like the UNSC. However, in terms of coordinated action and mechanism, the reactions have been disappointing.
- The international community seemed to delegate this job to ASEAN. However, ASEAN itself in its capacity is internally weak.
- Western countries do not have much leverage, except economic sanctions and other targeted sanctions. The Burmese military is somehow stubbornly resilient.
- The role of China and Russia is quite crucial in keeping the military safe. That's why the Chinese and Russians together block any UNSC decisions on Myanmar.
- One of the key issues is the United States. It's Indo-Pacific strategy, with the QUAD and ASEAN as the main pillars. Myanmar is a part of ASEAN where it works on consensus building. Without Myanmar, how can the US sit with ASEAN as an element of its Indo-Pacific policy?
- We are in a situation, where the United States is willing to sacrifice a bigger goal, which is the Indo-Pacific because it allowed Myanmar to hijack it.
- It is important to acknowledge that Myanmar before and after the coup are completely disparate nations. What Myanmar is doing after the coup can be classified as violations of human decency.
- The Myanmar issue should not be framed as a China versus United States of America geopolitical rivalry.

### **Rajiv Bhatia to Patricia Mukhim**

- How can India tackle the situation whereby human rights, refugees and business interests remain protected? Do you have some advice for the government and the business community?

### **Patricia Mukhim**

- Some policy analysts believe India should continue to stick to its policy of engaging with the Tatmadaw and demand for restoration of democracy, however unlikely.
- India's policy towards Myanmar in the past was firm. When Aung San Suu Kyi was put in detention about three decades ago, India stood firm and demanded that democracy be restored in Myanmar.



- Then the Chinese became aligned with the Tatmadaw and got an entry point into South Asia, taking up a leadership role in the region.
- India lost out because it believed in democratic tenets. So if India's strategy right now is to counter Chinese influence over South Asia and the Indo-Pacific then maybe it needs to strategize differently.
- This is an opportunity for our economic development in the Southeast Asian region.
- We must have a very clear policy ourselves.
- If we are going to link China as a key stakeholder in every discussion then we might miss the wood for the trees. We need to be clear on our game plan.

### **Rajiv Bhatia to Min Zin and Kavi Chongkittavorn**

- We know that foreign investment is suffering in Myanmar. Telenor has recorded losses of about \$800 million and share prices are going down. We are aware of the lines in front of the banks and the joblessness in the region.
- How do you look at the economic dimension of this crisis and what do the people of Myanmar need to do? The problem has emanated from that soil and the solution also must come from that side.

### **Min Zin**

- The World Bank predicts Myanmar's economy will contract by 10%. People are lined up outside ATMs. FDI has been flying out of the country. Besides the economic collapse, there is a humanitarian crisis: 3.4 million people are likely to starve this year and a large number of people will slip below the poverty line.
- The healthcare situation is also worrying. Infant inoculation has stalled in Myanmar.
- Both sides, the public and the military, still feel like they can prevail over the other.
- The population in Myanmar is strong, resilient and also has harboured unprecedented anger against the military.
- The rule of law has gone kaput and the security and humanitarian crisis will take place in central Burma.

### **Kavi Chongkittavorn**

- Border trade continued between Thailand and Myanmar, where border trade has increased during the first quarter. People carry cash from Thailand across the border every day, so economic free fall will impact society.
- In the past 10 years, the government has tried providing a new orientation, from socialist central control to a free market economy, but it has not yet been successful.
- I bet on the hope that ASEAN will move quickly so that humanitarian aid can be assessed and provided first-hand.
- Major Powers trust ASEAN's ability to handle this issue because ASEAN has a sort of convening power, where if the ASEAN is engaged, the major powers provide help in the second tier.
- ASEAN's chair will send its special envoy and secretary-general to Myanmar to gain consensus. If the ASEAN commits to any issue it cannot retract, it cannot withdraw and it has to move on until a sustainable solution is found.

### **Audience Q&A**

#### **Question to Min Zin:**

- Is Myanmar the latest addition to the emerging second pole of the world, led by China with Russia playing second fiddle?

### **Min Zin**

- There is anti-China sentiment, not only among the public but even within the Tatmadaw. The Tatmadaw undertook the political transformation of 2010-2011 because they wanted to diversify and not rely on China.
- The failure of the Tatmadaw and Aung San Suu Kyi's regime to reach multiple equilibriums on negotiations to transform Myanmar into a constitutional democracy.
- If the international community coordinates well to restore some kind of acceptable solution in Myanmar, then we cannot assume Myanmar will become another one of China's clients.
- People in Myanmar have a strong sense of nationalism. It will be too premature to say Myanmar will become a client of China. Structurally, it will be difficult to resist Chinese influence.

### **Question to Kavi Chongkittavorn:**

- Can we expect to see a more active Chinese role in Myanmar, or unless their interests are directly threatened? Are they willing to wait and watch?

### **Kavi Chongkittavorn**

- China now is awaiting ASEAN as the first tier actor. China was the first to support the ASEAN leader summit.
- ASEAN engagement with military junta works in China's favour, and it might become more assertive if ASEAN fails.
- Russia may have a special role. Russia has difficulty in engaging with ASEAN. Russia is a special case in Myanmar.

### **Question to Min Zin:**

- Myanmar generals love their homes and are not interested in living in exile. If this is correct, what are the implications of this perception?

### **Min Zin**

- Myanmar generals are very inward-looking. They think of themselves as the guardians of not just society but also religion. This type of complex situation and patriotic militarism is a part of Myanmar's society.
- During the Rohingya crisis, the entire country stood behind the Tatmadaw and Aung San Suu Kyi. This strikes as a good opportunity to promote tolerant and liberal values.

### **Question to Patricia Mukhim:**

- Is it wise to accept more refugees especially in this pandemic given that monitoring their movement in India is practically impossible?

### **Patricia Mukhim**

- If you look at the Mizo people, they feel that their neighbours are their kin who deserve to be protected from the persecution that they are undergoing at the moment.
- On the one hand, the COVID19 cases in Mizoram are peaking, where they reached 7,000 just yesterday.
- Monitoring people's movements is very difficult and the borders are porous, so no matter what you do, you can never really shut down borders between neighbours.

### **Question to Min Zin:**

- How should the international community proceed to provide a proper mediation process in Myanmar? Should the military junta be given a back door to step down without losing face?

### **Min Zin**

- For the time being, both sides in Myanmar are not ready to accept any type of mediation. Both sides believe they have the upper hand.
- We need to re-shape the crisis from being seen as zero-sum. The military thinks that they can resume their roadmap. The opposition, the public, assume they can win and undertake regime change.
- We need to re-frame the crisis from zero-sum to conflict transformation.
- At the same time, it's important to be aware that we should not raise expectations because the people on the ground are not ready for any type of mediation.

### **Question to Kavi Chongkittavorn:**

- How will the crisis in Myanmar affect the situation vis-a-vis the Rohingyas?

### **Kavi Chongkittavorn**

- One thing emphasized in the Chairman's statement is the Rohingya crisis. ASEAN has not forgotten these challenges. Any durable solution to the Myanmar crisis will include the issue of the Rohingyas.
- At the moment, a lot of groundwork must continue.
- The ASEAN leader's statements always include Rohingyas and their plight.
- ASEAN has assessment teams on the ground and already has preliminary infrastructure there. Thailand, Indonesia and Singapore also have bilateral humanitarian assistance on the ground.

### **Question to Min Zin:**

- The issue of the release of political leaders was not included in the 5 points. Does this mean that the release of prisoners will be used as a diplomatic chip by the Junta? Does this mean that the political future of Aung San Suu Kyi is dark?

### **Min Zin**

- In short, ASEAN wants the killing to be stopped first and frame this as a humanitarian emergency. This will allow special envoys to play key roles in coordinating.
- The release of prisoners will be the immediate step after they enter communication.

- Regarding Aung San Suu Kyi, the situation on the ground is radicalised beyond her expectations. Her relevance is symbolically there, but in the real political war, the younger generation is more radicalised and prone to radical action.

### **Question:**

- Which is the bigger challenge before Myanmar, the civil-military crisis or the problem of ethnic reconciliation? Which is more important historically and currently?

### **Patricia Mukhim**

- Both are very important. The fact that Aung San Suu Kyi never reached out to the ethnic minorities and the NLD became a Burmese majority party. If there was a united stand taken by Aung San Su Kyi and the NLD, the Tatmadaw would not have had the kind of clout it has today.
- The people of Myanmar need to ensure the return of democracy. India should play a more productive role in getting ASEAN countries to mediate here. We don't hear many discussions from India. America is asserting itself ever so often, however, India has been muted.

### **Final Remarks:**

### **Kavi Chongkittavorn**

- ASEAN has already started the so-called regional process and I think other countries must provide support. The U.N. and G7 have already expressed very strong support to the cause of democracy
- ASEAN has its weaknesses. I see its weaknesses as its strengths because if you are too strong nobody wants to work with you.

### **Min Zin**

- I think the Myanmar situation will either be a prolonged conflict or if we are unlucky, there will be an explosion that will have a spillover effect on its neighbours: India, Thailand and China. It could lead to armed warfare, guerrilla warfare, and medical crisis in central Burma.
- The international community might prefer an implosion scenario due to other geopolitical concerns. But implosion will lead to an explosion because looking at the refugee crisis, it will lead to border issues along with India, China and Thailand because of human trafficking, which is already in place in Myanmar.
- It will not be smart for the international community to think the Myanmar crisis will be somehow contained within Myanmar, it will have huge spillover effects for neighbouring countries.
- Some may think you have to allow a passage of time to resolve a conflict. In this case, timely help from regional players can help in getting more mediation and conflict transformation in Myanmar.

### **Rajiv Bhatia to Min Zin:**

- What is the stand of the Buddhist clergy on the possibility of explosion and implosion?

## **Min Zin**

- In the past 5-7 years the relationship between Buddhists and NLD has not been smooth. The younger generation monks dislike the coup, at the same time, they worry about the erosion of Buddhist nationalism.
- The central institutions in the society, the Tatmadaw and the Buddhists are under heavy pressure to transform themselves to meet the challenges of society.
- It is to see how they cope with the challenges of modernisation.

## **Patricia Mukhim**

- As a North Easterner myself, we rely heavily on Myanmar for the Act East policy. We need a Myanmar free from what it is facing today.
- We are a landlocked region, so this is the only outlet connecting us to the world, besides the narrow passage connecting us to the mainland and Bangladesh.
- Without a peaceful and democratic Myanmar, the Act East policy is futile.

## **Closing Remarks**

### **Sameer Patil**

- Looking at Myanmar's internal situation, the constitutional reforms are a result of the political dynamics.
- The underlying reason for the coup was the military trying to reassert its position, under the pretext of voter fraud.
- Another important stakeholder is the staunchly nationalist Buddhist community.
- There are major economic and humanitarian costs.
- ASEAN has an interest in Myanmar's stability. China is also watching closely, and ready to step in if ASEAN falters.
- The international community's response has been insufficient and looking at this issue from the U.S. against China prism will be misleading.
- Implications for India: India's Northeast shares close socio-economic ties, but has difficulty understanding the diplomatic concerns. Refugee flows, insurgent movements and arms flow are concerns for India as they can threaten peace in the region.
- India should play an active role with ASEAN to resolve the issue.