

# MYANMAR'S DECADE OF HOPE AND GLOOM

Implications for India

RAJIV  
BHATIA

## INTRODUCTION

India's immediate neighbourhood stretching from Nepal in the north to Sri Lanka in the south, and from Maldives in the west to Myanmar in the east, is a complex region that constantly affects India and is also influenced by it in numerous ways. Yet, interest on the part of the Indian intelligentsia in neighbouring countries fluctuates from time to time and varies from nation to nation. In general, neighbours such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh receive the lion's share of attention, whereas Bhutan, Maldives and Myanmar are relatively neglected by the Indian media and academia, except in crisis situations.

In Myanmar's case, this neglect is particularly jarring because, for decades, Burma, to use the country's more familiar name, was governed as part of British India. Following the advent of its independence in 1948, it continued—and continues—to be a vital factor in the security, stability and development of India's northeast. Besides, Myanmar's relevance grew substantially once India launched its Look East/Act East/Indo-Pacific policy and strategy. Thus, what happens there is of immense relevance to India's national interest.

The decade mentioned in the title of this essay refers to the period from March 2011 to January 2021, the time when Myanmar enjoyed the fruits of limited or 'hybrid' democracy, custom-designed for it by its military. Why it chose to do so is a question the answer to which lies in an exploration of the preceding era. This decade of hope and gloom has been followed by two years (February 2021–February 2023) of conflict and hardship, bringing Myanmar

to the verge of hopelessness where it stands today. What does the future hold for its leaders and the people as well as their neighbours, especially India?

This essay attempts to answer this question on the basis of the author's experience of having lived and worked in and travelled across 'the Golden Land', and years of research and interaction with a wide range of national and international experts on Myanmar. It pinpoints the nature of the nation's importance for India; reviews the key developments and trends of the said decade; dissects the impulses that lay behind the military coup of 1 February 2021 and its aftermath; and presents a few possible scenarios for the future. While analysing the external dimensions of the crisis in Myanmar, it focuses on India's policy approach and dilemmas. Does India have options to follow a different strategy on Myanmar?

Above all, the essay is a plea to India's intellectual and political leadership to take greater interest in a country that has been both a part of South Asia, as defined by the Ministry of External Affairs, as well as its 'gateway' to Southeast Asia.

## **MUTUAL IMPORTANCE**

That Myanmar is important to India is only a half-truth. The fact is that each country is important to the other. The recognition of mutual importance should shape the definition of mutual interest in forging closer ties of cooperation at the levels of government, business, civil society and people.

Not one but four Indian states—Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram—share land boundaries with Myanmar. The two countries are also linked through maritime borders. Interactions between the border states and regions and their people date back centuries, well before the concept of the nation-state was devised. J. N. Dixit, India's redoubtable foreign secretary who truly appreciated the value of neighbours, wrote about five 'truisms of Indo–Myanmar relations of contemporary history': (i) the cultural interaction between India's northeast and Myanmar; (ii) the Buddhist period as one of 'deep cultural and intellectual interaction'; (iii) Burma formed part of British India; (iv) a large Indian community of traders and professionals, and; (v) the leaders of the freedom struggle—Nehru, Aung San and U Nu—formed close personal friendships (1996: 165).

To this list should be added the strategic significance of the geographic location of Myanmar where *China Meets India*, as Thant U Myint named his book. K. M. Panikkar, writing in the context of World War II, had the last word on Burma's strategic importance for India in stressing that 'the defence of Burma is, in fact, the defence of India', and that 'no responsibility can be considered too heavy for India when it comes to the question of defending Burma' (1946: 40–41). China's rapid inroads in the past three decades in Myanmar's economy, infrastructure, defence and polity in general, and the ongoing quest for a route linking China's southwestern region to the Indian Ocean through Myanmar, make it all the more vital for Indian policymakers to consider the ways and means of 'defending' India's position in Myanmar today.

The reverse of the coin highlights the significance of India to Myanmar in spiritual, cultural, political and developmental terms. To an ordinary Burmese, India is the land of Lord Buddha's nirvana, which every person wants to visit at least once in a lifetime. India's thought, culture and arts have held considerable sway over the centuries. Modern India is viewed as a powerhouse, a role model that marches on the path of 'democracy with development'. India's huge market for agricultural and other products, and as the source of manufactured goods, especially pharma, are also relevant factors. Above all, the nation's driving instinct is to pursue an independent foreign policy that entails the need for one or more balancers against China's growing footprint. India is of much value in this context, provided it remains willing and determined to help Myanmar maintain its policy of autonomy.

### **POLITICAL TRAJECTORY, 2011–2021**

The prologue to the decade under review was defined by the democracy era (1948–1962), the decades of autocratic rule by General Ne Win (1962–1988), and the transition years (1988–1992) when the biggest movement for democracy was crushed and the victory for the National League for Democracy (NLD) in the 1990 elections was set aside to ensure the continuation and consolidation of military rule until March 2011. But the generals had Plan-B ready. It aimed to introduce a Burmese version of limited democracy by sharing power between the military and elected representatives of the people, while ensuring that 25 per cent of seats in Parliament

were reserved for the military's nominees, thus blocking any substantive political change and allocating the ministries of home, defence and border affairs to the military's representatives. This was the essence of the new constitution that was offered to the people on a 'take-it-or-leave-it basis'. The referendum was held in cyclone-hit Myanmar in May 2008. It resulted in the people's acceptance of the new political order.

The decade of 2011–2021 needs to be analysed in two different segments, each of five years' duration: (i) the first, in which President Thein Sein was the country's top political leader from 2011–2016, and; (ii) the second, which saw Aung San Suu Kyi playing that role from March 2016 to January 2021. Even though denied the presidency, she, as state counsellor, effectively worked as the head of government.

The two periods were qualitatively different in several ways. As a retired general in civilian garb, Thein Sein began with many advantages. He had the blessings of the previous regime's strong man, Senior General Than Shwe; his Union and Solidarity Party (USDP) had won a clear majority in the November 2010 elections when NLD was absent at the polls; and he showed unusual resolve to be conciliatory to all stakeholders.

First, President Thein Sein secured limited accommodation with the NLD, creating conditions that brought the party into Parliament through by-elections. Second, he launched serious negotiations with the Ethnic Groups (EGs), scoring success in winning the support of several through the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) signed in May 2015. Third, his government focused on economic reform and better governance, opening up the economy to foreign investors and entrepreneurs. Finally, he adopted and followed an independent and balanced foreign policy, with a focus on improving relations with Western democracies, but without annoying China beyond a point. Thein Sein had his share of challenges: continuing opposition by NLD, the festering issue of the Rohingya, and the knotty problems relating to the Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) which had refused to sign the NCA. But scholars agreed that at his term's end, he left Myanmar in a far better and more optimistic place than it was five years earlier. This, then, was the Age of Hope.

The next five-year period was moulded by the 2015 elections. According to knowledgeable sources, Min Aung Hlaing,

the commander-in-chief, nurtured ambitions and a natural expectation of being the next president.<sup>1</sup> But a landslide victory for NLD in the 2015 elections put paid to any such plan by the military. Even within the limitations imposed by the constitution, NLD had its way of securing the presidency. As state counsellor, Suu Kyi began to govern, even as NLD started a campaign for constitutional reform that instilled a sense of insecurity in the military leadership. The government's endeavour to promote ethnic reconciliation through the ambitious vision of Pangalong II was pushed, but it made little headway as the chasm between the army and some ethnic groups was far too wide. Further, the NLD team was weak in governance on account of its dependence on the bureaucracy, which was still substantially manned by military officials or officials sympathetic to the military. A programme of economic reform was attempted, but it achieved very little progress because, as the NLD claimed, it threatened to erode the army's vested interests and ability to control large domains of business. In the latter part of the government's tenure, a strained relationship with the generals became the norm.

On one major issue, though, the military and the NLD found themselves on the same page. Against the backdrop of long-standing tensions between Buddhist and Muslim communities in the state of Rakhine, the Arakan Rohingya Solidarity Army (ARSA), a militant organisation, carried out some attacks on police posts and vehicles. This became the trigger for the Myanmar military to launch a systematic campaign of violence against the Rohingya. It resulted in the expulsion of about 1.1 million Rakhine Muslims, who fled seeking shelter in neighbouring Bangladesh.

This was a clear case of the gross violation of human rights and sacrifice of democratic values. However, those who had expected Aung San Suu Kyi, the international icon of democracy and human rights, to stand with the victims and restrain the military, were stunned by her stance. She stood on the side of the generals, even going to the extent of defending their cause in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) through her personal appearance on 10 December 2019.<sup>2</sup> Critics claimed, quite aptly, that her Bamar (or Burman) background carried with it an anti-Rohingya prejudice. Instantly, she lost considerable international adoration and support, but had much of her home constituency behind her. However, if she

had calculated on winning the army's permanent affection, she was to be proved wrong.

Another landslide victory for the NLD in the 2020 elections was a clear challenge to the military leadership, too bitter a pill to swallow. Commander-in-chief Min Aung Hlaing was already facing difficulty in extending his tenure. He saw the presidency slipping away again. The army feared that an emboldened Suu Kyi might do everything possible, including make major constitutional changes, to curtail its privileges and position. In any case, the generals had no intention of letting Myanmar advance towards a genuine, full-fledged democracy which, they were convinced, would lead to the nation's disintegration. The last thing they planned to do was to return to the barracks and assume an altogether unfamiliar role of an apolitical army. As the year 2020 paved the way for a new year, the country's political future was at stake—yet again.

### **THE COUP, THE AFTERMATH**

On 1 February 2021, the military swung into action against the immediate backdrop of its allegations and complaints that the November 2020 elections suffered from 'terrible fraud in the voter list' and the Election Commission had 'failed to settle the matter'.<sup>3</sup> Few accepted this view, least of all NLD government leadership. The retaliation was swift: President Win Myint and State Counsellor Suu Kyi were arrested, the government was overthrown, and the army assumed full control over state power. Its efforts to paint the coup as an emergency imposed in accordance with the constitution failed to convince anyone. But it was a coup with a difference. The military, which wielded half of the power, decided to help itself to the other half (given to the elected representatives) too, regardless of the law or the consequences. Two days later I wrote that this created 'a perception of *déjà vu* as one recalls 1962, 1988 and 1990, the milestone years when the generals took similar drastic actions to overthrow a democratic government or derail people's expressed preferences' (2021).

Two years after the coup, Myanmar continues to live through a long nightmare. For months after 1 February, the people staged non-violent and peaceful agitations and demonstrations, essentially asking the authorities to transfer power to the elected Parliament that was never convened. Later, they demanded a complete

withdrawal of the military from governance and the adoption of a new constitution that envisioned the creation of a new federal democratic republic in the country. The military's response was ruthless suppression through the use of force and large-scale arrests. By 28 February 2023, a total of 3,071 people had been killed and 16,075 were still detained, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma).<sup>4</sup>

The second phase of the anti-military movement led by a parallel, though unrecognised, entity named the National Unity Government, backed by the people's militias, was marked by violent attacks on police/military personnel and installations. This led to further intensification of the use of force by the military, including attacks by the Air Force on the rebel areas, particularly those controlled by a few EAGs. In a way, it was a 'free for all' cycle and counter-cycle of violence, thus demonstrating the emergence of civil war, or a full-fledged rebellion of people against the rulers, or a true freedom struggle. It was a conflict in which the military seemed to have lost by not winning, and the people in opposition seemed to have won by not losing.

In effect, the nation stood badly fractured and divided into three camps: the military, which controlled the major towns; the opposition that called the shots in the countryside; and the ethnic groups that remained assertive in the geographic periphery. The absence of security and stability, and damage to the economy, which seemed to be in freefall from the time the coup was staged, were the obvious outcomes of the conflict. It showed no signs of ending at the time of writing.

## **EXTERNAL DIMENSIONS**

The record of the past two years of international and regional diplomacy to resolve the crisis in Myanmar has been presented and analysed by several experts. What it proves is, given the serious fissures in the international community on Myanmar, its citizens are unlikely to receive the long-awaited miraculous assistance or salvation.

Three different approaches have been in operation. First, for the West, led by the United States and the EU, it is a clearcut case of the army suppressing the people, depriving them of their human rights and brutally ending the experiment with the

transition to democracy. The Western nations, therefore, react through condemnation at the United Nations, adopt targeted sanctions against the regime, and provide material assistance to the opposition. Second, China and Russia have focused on forging closer cooperation with the military government. The former has been a preferred partner over the years, while Russia—shunned by the West and others because of its invasion of Ukraine—has found a soulmate in today’s Myanmar to which it extends political and diplomatic support, fostering defence cooperation. Third, ASEAN, the main multilateral grouping of the region—of which Myanmar is a member—has been promoting reconciliation and seeking to play the role of mediator. But it has achieved little success as a consequence of the regime’s refusal to cooperate with it. The ASEAN-promoted ‘Five-Point Consensus’ formula has failed to break the deadlock, partly because ASEAN has very little leverage with Myanmar, and partly because it is divided internally on the best approach to deal with its most problematic member.

Summarising the analysis, columnist Nirupama Subramanian puts it succinctly, ‘The West does not have the bandwidth for Myanmar. ASEAN has been ineffectual. India is treading a fine line. Russia and China have rushed in’ (2022).

What is thus clear is that the political impasse in the internal dynamics in Myanmar is matched by a continuing stalemate in diplomatic endeavours by the international community. Besides, other major geopolitical developments in the world—the Russia–Ukraine war, the NATO–Russia conflict, the US–China strategic contestation, and India–China border tensions—have all combined to ensure that the Myanmar file rates a much lower priority today.

### **INDIA’S POLICY, DILEMMAS, OPTIONS**

In respect of Myanmar, as in the case of other countries such as Pakistan, India follows the policy of dealing with the government of the day and refrains from interference in their internal affairs. From the time of India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, to the present day, this has been a consistent policy—with a single exception. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi chose to side with the pro-democracy camp led by Aung San Suu Kyi and others during 1988–1990, much to the annoyance of the generals. The result: India–Myanmar relations sank to a new low.



Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao reversed this policy in 1991, adopting a two-track approach of re-establishing normal ties with the military government while extending political and diplomatic support to the cause of democracy in Myanmar. This reversal and the subsequent growth in bilateral relations, especially since the late 1990s onwards, were important developments in which this author had the privilege to play a modest role, first as the joint secretary responsible for relations with Myanmar in the Ministry of External Affairs (1991–1994), and later as Ambassador in Yangon (2002–2005).

Viewed from this angle, it was not surprising that following the coup of February 2021, New Delhi fell back on the two-track policy. It was assumed that, as in the past, the military would prevail and succeed in curbing popular agitation after a while. But this did not happen. As was noted earlier, the polity's deep fragmentation is a reality today and a serious threat to the nation's stability. This, in turn, has serious implications for India's interests.

The unrest in Myanmar has led to nearly 50,000 people being sheltered in Mizoram and other states (Subramanian, 2023). Some of the Indian Insurgent Groups (IIGs) operating on Myanmar soil have reportedly developed close ties with the military government. The latter, instead of curbing their anti-India activities, may be using them to fight anti-regime militias. Critics of New Delhi's policy also argue that two other interests of India are in jeopardy: mega projects such as the Trilateral Highway and Kaladan cannot be completed in the absence of a return to normalcy; and the regime under constant Western pressure shows clear signs of moving closer to Beijing.

What, then, should India do? Is it time to make some tactical adjustments to the traditional two-track policy? Perhaps, yes. A policy that is dynamic and adapts itself to the changing situation alone can deliver the desired results. New Delhi's constant attempt is to balance its principles, values, interests and geopolitical realities. With this perspective in mind, the elements listed as follows now ought to constitute and shape India's Myanmar policy:

- Continue dealing with the military government, pressing it hard to respect India's interests relating to border security, economic cooperation, and the need for

Naypyitaw to follow an independent policy that is not too reliant on a single power such as China.

- The suggestion by some for India to impose sanctions on the Myanmar government is completely unrealistic and unhelpful (Kumar, 2022).
- Reiterate India's clear support for a democratic setup acceptable to the people, while making it clear that designing, establishing and nurturing it is the responsibility of the nation's leaders, elite and people.
- Urge a dialogue for national reconciliation between the government and various political formations through the mechanism of 'proximity talks', with an independent third-party facilitator helping the process along.
- Suggest that the third-party facilitation by a new Quad of powers may be considered, comprising India, Indonesia, Thailand and Japan. It can endeavour to create a suitable environment, but the onus to devise and develop a formula for political compromise should rest with Myanmar's political class. This new Quad could also assist with arrangements for humanitarian assistance to reach all the needy sections of Myanmar society.
- Hold discussions between New Delhi and the governments of Mizoram and Manipur to deliver such assistance as they may need to deal with the influx of Myanmar people (Nepam, 2022).
- Consult with the government of Bangladesh as well as the other members of the proposed Quad to ensure that the return of Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh to their homes in Myanmar stays on the international agenda.
- Encourage and assist India's civil society, think tanks, universities, media, etc., to continue, and step up, dialogue with their counterparts in Myanmar, based on the premise that the security and prosperity of that nation and India's northeast are deeply interlinked.

## CONCLUSION

India's neighbourhood is in trouble today. Pakistan, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka are clear examples. Hence, there is a pressing need for New Delhi to shift gradually to a proactive stance in order to

prevent Myanmar from similarly becoming a flawed polity or a China dependency.

The nation's premier intellectual institution—India International Centre—working in collaboration with a reputed Indian think tank should convene an 'International Conclave on Myanmar'. Well-known scholars from Myanmar, India and select third countries could be invited to deliberate on various dimensions of the complex Myanmar situation and craft a solution, incorporating the policy suggestions listed earlier. This can be a valuable contribution to the well-being of an important player and neighbour in the region, and a testament to India's abiding interest in Myanmar.



#### NOTES

1. This is based on the author's conversation with a former senior diplomat who served in Myanmar at the time under question.
2. For details see, 'Transcript: Aung San Suu Kyi's speech at the ICJ in full', *Al Jazeera*, 12 December 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/12/12/transcript-aung-san-su-kyis-speech-at-the-icj-in-full>.
3. See 'Statement from Myanmar Military on State of Emergency', Reuters, 1 February 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/myanmar-politics-military-statement-idUSKBN2A11A8>.
4. See 'Political Prisoners Post-Coup', *Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma)*, 28 February 2023. <https://aappb.org/>.

#### REFERENCES

- Bhatia, Rajiv. 2021. 'Booting Out Partial Democracy', *The Hindu*, 3 February.
- Dixit, J. N. 1996. *My South Block Years*. New Delhi: Paul's Press.
- Kumar, Radha. 2022. 'Taking on the Tatmadaw', *The Indian Express*, 2 August.
- Nepram, Binalakshmi. 2022. 'Why Burmese Generals Should Worry New Delhi', *The Times of India*, 27 July.
- Panikkar, K. M. 1946. *The Future of South-East Asia: An Indian View*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Subramanian, Nirupama. 2023. 'Reading the Junta's Poll Promise', *The Indian Express*, 6 January.
- . 2022. 'Myanmar's Violent Chaos', *The Indian Express*, 28 October.

