

Myanmar Coup and the Rohingya Crisis: Responses across South Asia

Roshni Kapur and Jasnea Sarma

Summary

This insight explores the responses of the South Asian states to the coup that took place in Myanmar on 1 February 2021, the resistance movement that followed and the Rohingya crisis which is intertwined with the coup. While there is a recognition that these states need to uphold their democratic norms and ideals in diplomatic statements against the coup, national and realpolitik interests have been prioritised over condemning the military for its violent crackdowns.

Introduction

Myanmar shares important historical and contemporary links with Asia. Yet, the South Asian states' responses to the coup have been stuck between diplomatic ideals in support of democracy versus considerations for national security, and business and strategic interests in the region. The only South Asian state to issue a strong statement condemning the coup has been the Maldives. The sections below detail a country-wise assessment of the responses from South Asia.

India

India's current stance on the coup is fractured between words and deeds. Its statements so far have been to diplomatically call for a complete cessation of violence and for democratic norms to be upheld. India and Myanmar have a shared colonial history, with India often seen within Myanmar as an exemplar of democracy. India has historically been supportive of the democracy movement with strong support shown in 1988, but that shifted as Myanmar aligned with India's security concerns about the Eastern border as well as economic interests in Southeast Asia. From 2010 to the present, India has been Myanmar's fourth-largest supplier of military equipment and weapons amounting to approximately US\$484 million (S\$640.5 million). India also donated a submarine in 2020.¹

India's economic interests in Myanmar are also harnessed through direct and indirect links with the military's economic network. This has been seen by India as guaranteeing it some stability in balancing China and managing the Northeast region, and also in the securing of India's economic interests in Southeast Asia. India fears that condemning the Tatmadaw publicly would result in pushing Myanmar closer to China, thus being counter to India's

¹ Anjana Pasricha, "India Gives Submarine to Myanmar Amid Growing Chinese Footprint in Indian Ocean Countries", VOA, 25 October 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/india-gives-submarine-myanmar-amid-growing-chinese-footprint-indian-ocean#:~:text=NEW%20DELHI%20%2D%20India%20has%20given,growing%20influence%20in%20Southeast%20Asia>. Accessed on 20 March 2021.

geopolitical interest. However, there is a backlash against Chinese interference and investments as partners of the Junta.

Bangladesh

Following the coup in Myanmar, Bangladesh issued a four sentence statement, stating that it seeks to promote “democratic ethos” and “peace and stability” and “the voluntary, safe and sustained repatriation of the Rohingyas sheltered in Bangladesh.”²

The Rohingya issue is the biggest sticking point for Bangladesh’s inability to take a stronger position on the coup. The Bangladesh government does not consider the Rohingyas its own citizens, treating them as “temporary guests” to be returned to their “country of origin”. The official policy is that they did not even know about the Rohingyas until 1977 when they first fled to Dhaka. In 1978, Bangladesh and Myanmar decided to discuss the issue and concluded an agreement under which some of the Rohingyas were repatriated while others remained in Bangladesh. A similar pattern was observed in 1991-92 when fresh violence against the community prompted it to seek refuge there.³ The latest repatriation agreement was signed in 2018. Since December 2020, Dhaka started resettling Rohingya refugees from Cox’s Bazar to Bhasan Char, an island in the Bay of Bengal. While it is not known how much of the relocation of the refugees is voluntary, there is much criticism that at least some of the refugees are being relocated against their will.⁴ Dhaka proposed a village-based repatriation but Myanmar wanted to repatriate 42,000 of them first (these refugees are from a list of 830,000 Rohingyas living in Cox’s Bazar).

China has also expressed interest in the resettlement without the involvement the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Commission⁵ or other states. Such a vicious cycle of extreme violence, repatriation talks and refuge marks Bangladesh’s relationship with Myanmar. Keeping diplomatic channels open with the Tatmadaw serves Bangladesh’s goal to send the Rohingyas back.

Sri Lanka

Colombo did not issue a statement following the military takeover in Myanmar. Instead, on 10 March 2021, Sri Lanka’s Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena sent a letter to Wunna Maung Lwin, the new Minister of Foreign Affairs of Myanmar, inviting him to attend a meeting of senior officials on 31 March 2021 and for the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-

² “Press release on the situation in Myanmar”, Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh to the United Nations, <https://bdun.org/2021/02/01/press-release-on-the-situation-in-myanmar/>. Accessed on 10 April 2021.

³ Anis Alamgir, “Myanmar coup questions Rohingya repatriation”, *Dhaka Tribune*, 7 February 2021, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/op-ed/2021/02/07/op-ed-myanmar-coup-questions-rohingya-repatriation>. Accessed on 3 April 2021.

⁴ Roshni Kapur and Amit Ranjan, “2020 Myanmar Elections: No Signs of Change for the Rohingyas”, *ISAS Working Paper*, No. 338, 5 January 2021, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/338.pdf>. Accessed on 30 March 2021.

⁵ Ibid.

Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation summit on 1 April 2021.⁶ The invitation was met with much social media backlash by non-violent protesters in Myanmar and supporters of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) in Colombo for acknowledging a “terrorist group”. Many hashtags, including #protestSriLanka and #protestBimstec, are being shared and re-shared on social media, especially Twitter by members of the CDM and their counterparts in third countries.⁷ Although Sri Lankan activists have not joined the Milk Tea Alliance, the emerging cross-border solidarity indicates civil society in Sri Lanka has taken note.

Figure 1: Screenshot of a Tweet condemning Colombo’s invitation to Myanmar for the BIMSTEC Summit



Source: https://twitter.com/search?q=myanmarsrilankaterrorist&src=typed_query

Naypyidaw and Colombo have shared a strong Theravada Buddhist link for centuries. Hema Goonatilake has written that Colombo greatly contributed to the Bagan empire in Myanmar in terms of culture, religion and civilisation that is captured in both countries’ historical records. In the 11th century, a library was built in Myanmar with the purpose of studying Pali texts that came from the Mahavihara monastery in Colombo. Many Sri Lankan monks taught the Pali language through the Sinhala script and also translated the text from Pali language to Mon language and then to Burmese script on a massive scale. Sri Lanka’s long

⁶ “Myanmar Sri Lanka Invitation”, Twitter, https://twitter.com/search?q=myanmar%20sri%20lanka%20invitation&src=typed_query. Accessed on 20 March 2021.

⁷ “Protest Sri Lanka”, Twitter, https://twitter.com/search?q=protestsrilanka&src=typed_query. Accessed on 20 March 2021.

status as the centre of Theravada Buddhism is attested to by housing two relics of the Buddha, the Alms Bowl and Tooth Relic, Burmese historical texts have stated that the Bagan kings sought to acquire these sacred relics⁸

In recent years, Buddhist nationalism has been on a rise in both Myanmar and Sri Lanka. While religious nationalism is an international phenomenon that is not unique to Myanmar and Sri Lanka, it has puzzled many academics and policy makers on why democratic and democratising states are also experiencing such a phenomenon.⁹ New hardline Buddhist groups such as Ma Ba Tha and the 969 movement in Myanmar and Bodu Bala Sena in Sri Lanka have emerged and sent strong messages to the public that Buddhism is under threat from the minorities, especially the Muslims. These groups have been inspired by populist anti-Muslim groups present in other parts of the world.

The rise of religious nationalism can be attributed to demographic shifts and changing international politics. Many Burmese and Sinhalese think that their religion and identity are at risk and the current government is not doing enough to protect it. There are concerns in both countries on whether their respective governments are taking appropriate measures to institutionalise the protection of Buddhism in light of an “Islamic threat”.¹⁰ The nature of the support for these hard-line groups has been mischaracterised, including by the government. Their supporters do not perceive them as extremist or anti-Muslim organisations but rather as broad-based religious, cultural and social groups that seek to protect Buddhism at a time when there is much uncertainty in their home country.¹¹ The Ma Ba Tha has the support of a wide range of people, including those who disagree with its hate rhetoric. For many, this group gives them a sense of belonging, connect with their roots, and preserve their heritage and identity in a highly unpredictable and changing environment.

Pakistan

Following the 2021 coup, Pakistan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs said, “We hope that all parties involved will exercise restraint, uphold the rule of law, engage constructively, and work towards a peaceful outcome.”¹²

Besides Dhaka and New Delhi, a sizeable population of the Rohingyas have sought asylum in Islamabad. While it is uncertain how many Rohingyas are living in Pakistan, it was stated in September 2017 that approximately 55,000 of them are registered under the National Data Registration Authority.¹³ Many of them have been staying in the Arakanabad slum for

⁸ Hema Goonatilake, “Sri Lanka-Myanmar Historical Relations in Religion, Culture and Polity”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka*, 2009, New Series, Vol. 55, pp. 78-82.

⁹ “Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar”, International Crisis Group, 5 September 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/290-buddhism-and-state-power-myanmar>. Accessed on 28 March 2021.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² “We are closely following developments in Myanmar: Foreign Office”, Pakistan Press International, 1 February 2021, <https://ppinewsagency.com/we-are-closely-following-developments-in-myanmar-foreign-office/>. Accessed on 30 March 2021.

¹³ Sophia Saifi, “Pakistan’s stateless Rohingya”, *CNN*, 11 September 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/09/11/asia/pakistan-stateless-rohingya/index.html>. Accessed on 29 March 2021.

decades and have formed a large community there outside of Myanmar. While those who arrived prior to the 1971 war have been issued Pakistani identity cards that has enabled them to receive access to education, employment and basic healthcare, it is uncertain what documentation has been issued to the Rohingyas who came after 1971.¹⁴ Nonetheless, they have been denied citizenship rights, indicating that they lack the fundamental rights in both their host country and country of origin.

In 2017, Pakistan's cabinet passed a resolution condemning the crackdown and 'genocide' against the Rohingyas in Rakhine. The strongly worded resolution was a departure from the responses by the other South Asian countries. Similar resolutions were moved by members of Jamaat-e-Islami in the Senate and the National Assembly.¹⁵ However, Islamabad's overall position on the Rohingya crisis seems unclear. On the one hand, it has denied citizenship to members of the community residing in its territory, but on the other hand, it has issued strong resolutions condemning the atrocities for violating fundamental human rights.

Nepal

For Nepal, the date (1 February 2021) is reminiscent of another coup held on the same date 16 years earlier. In 2005, Nepal's monarch, King Gyanendra in Kathmandu, took control of the country and placed party leaders under house arrest.¹⁶

On the coup in Myanmar, Nepal issued a terse three sentence statement, "Nepal has been closely following the recent developments in Myanmar. We believe that all parties involved will respect the will of the Myanmar people and hope that the democratic and constitutional process will be restored soon. We are equally concerned about the safety and wellbeing of the detained civilian leaders, including President U Win Myint and State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and call for their immediate release." Notably absent was any mention of the perpetrators of the coup or even a mention of the "events" in Myanmar being a coup.¹⁷

The Maldives

Lastly, the Maldivian government issued a statement only on 4 February 2021, indicating that it may have hesitated to even issue a statement in the first place. However, despite its tardiness, the language was much stronger. The Maldivian statement used the word "coup"

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "Cabinet passes resolution against Myanmar on Rohingya genocide", *Pakistan Today*, 7 September 2017, <https://archive.pakistantoday.com.pk/2017/09/07/cabinet-passes-resolution-against-myanmar-on-rohingya-genocide/>. Accessed on 28 March 2021.

¹⁶ "Nepal: One hundred days after royal takeover and human rights crisis deepens - Feb 1 - May 11, 2005", Reliefweb, 12 May 2005, <https://reliefweb.int/report/nepal/nepal-one-hundred-days-after-royal-takeover-and-human-rights-crisis-deepens-feb-1-may>. Accessed on 20 March 2021.

¹⁷ Press Release regarding the recent developments in Myanmar - Ministry of Foreign Affairs Nepal MOFA. 1 February 2021, <https://mofa.gov.np/press-release-regarding-the-recent-developments-in-myanmar/>. Accessed on 6 June 2021.

and spoke of the atrocities carried out by the “Military Junta”. It further urged the military to accept the election and end the state of emergency.¹⁸

The strong language should not be surprising. The Maldives, in contrast to India, has no long-standing amicable ties with the Myanmar government. In December of 2019, Aung San Su Kyi shocked and disappointed many international observers when, standing before the UN International Court of Justice, she appeared to deflect accusations of ‘genocide’ against the Rohingyas and expressed faith in the military justice system to punish any abuses.¹⁹

While Gambia initially brought the ‘genocide’ case, the Maldives publicly intervened by hiring Amal Clooney in February 2020 to represent the Rohingyas.²⁰ The case was extended due to COVID-19 with the last update three days before the coup. The next important date is in July 2021.²¹ How the coup will complicate the case remains to be observed.

Conclusion

South Asia’s pandering to both the Junta and the National League for Democracy (NLD) followed suit from the west, which prematurely embraced the NLD-Tatmadaw arrangement despite ongoing abuses, turning Myanmar into a ‘development darling’ and lucrative ‘economic frontier’. With the increase in the scale of violence and number of deaths, the South Asian countries need to take a strong position and condemn the atrocities. Their current non-committal positions might prove ineffective for future diplomatic relations since Myanmar’s people have clearly articulated the need to send the military back to the barracks, and out of future political preponderance as a first step to nation-building. The South Asian response would necessitate cessation in aiding the military, cutting its finances (through targetted sanctions, embargos and checking on business links when investing in Myanmar), weapons sale, recognising its long record of impunity and human rights abuses and near total monopoly over economic transactions through crony capitalism, and supporting the legitimately elected parliamentarians and their representatives.

.....

Ms Roshni Kapur is a former Research Analyst at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). She can be contacted at kapur.roshni@gmail.com. Dr Jasnea Sarma is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at ISAS. She can be contacted at isasjass@nus.edu.sg. The authors bear full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

¹⁸ Statement by the Government of the Republic of Maldives on the Situation in Myanmar, GOV.MV, 4 February 2021 <https://www.gov.mv/en/news-and-communications/statement-by-the-government-of-the-republic-of-maldives-on-the-situation-in-myanmar--1>. Accessed on 6 June 2021.

¹⁹ Marlise Simons and Hannah Beech. “Aung San Suu Kyi Defends Myanmar Against Rohingya Genocide Accusations”, *The New York Times*, 11 December 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/11/world/asia/aung-san-suu-kyi-rohingya-myanmar-genocide-hague.html>. Accessed on 6 June 2021.

²⁰ Rebecca Ratcliffe “Amal Clooney to pursue Rohingya case at The Hague”, *The Guardian*, 27 February 2020, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/27/amal-clooney-to-pursue-rohingya-case-at-the-hague>. Accessed on 6 June 2021.

²¹ APPLICATION OF THE CONVENTION ON THE PREVENTION AND PUNISHMENT OF THE CRIME OF GENOCIDE (THE GAMBIA v. MYANMAR (2021)). 28 January 2021, <https://www.icj-cij.org/public/files/case-related/178/178-20210128-ORD-01-00-EN.pdf>. Accessed on 6 June 2021.