



Democracy in transition: A review of political change in Myanmar

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Abstract

Myanmar's political landscape has undergone significant transitions over the last few decades, fluctuating between military rule, fragile democratic experiments, and authoritarian resurgence. This review paper critically examines the political changes in Myanmar from the establishment of military rule in 1962 to the recent 2021 military coup. Emphasizing key turning points, such as the 2010 general elections, the 2015 democratic transition, and the subsequent democratic backslide, the paper explores how internal political dynamics, ethnic conflicts, international pressures, and institutional weaknesses have shaped Myanmar's uncertain journey toward democracy. It concludes by identifying core challenges and possible pathways for democratic renewal.

Keywords: Myanmar, democracy, military rule, national league for democracy (nld), political transition, human rights

Introduction

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, represents one of the most intricate and turbulent cases of democratic transition in contemporary Asia. Since gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1948, the country has struggled to build a stable and inclusive political order. Early post-independence years witnessed an experiment with parliamentary democracy, but the hopes for democratic governance were soon derailed. In 1962, the military, under General Ne Win, seized power through a coup and installed an authoritarian regime that suppressed political dissent, nationalized major industries, and promoted a rigid form of socialism under the guise of the "Burmese Way to Socialism." This marked the beginning of a long period of military dominance that would define Myanmar's political trajectory for decades.

The late 20th century brought renewed calls for democratic reform, most notably during the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, where students, workers, and monks demanded an end to military rule. The subsequent crackdown was brutal, but it gave birth to the National League for Democracy (NLD), with Aung San Suu Kyi emerging as a symbol of resistance and democratic hope. Despite the NLD winning a landslide victory in the 1990 general elections, the military junta refused to recognize the results, continuing its authoritarian grip under different institutional names, including the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and later, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

It was not until the early 2010s that Myanmar appeared to take meaningful steps toward political liberalization. The 2010 general elections, though marred by irregularities and boycotts, led to the formation of a quasi-civilian government under President Thein Sein, a former general. This marked the beginning of a highly controlled but visible political transition. Key reforms followed: political prisoners were released, censorship was relaxed, and limited space was opened for civil society and media. The 2015 elections further cemented the belief that Myanmar was on a democratic path, with the NLD winning an overwhelming majority and forming a government, though the military

continued to hold significant power under the 2008 Constitution, which reserved 25% of seats in Parliament for military appointees and gave the military control over key ministries.

However, this fragile democratic progress proved to be short-lived. On February 1, 2021, the military (Tatmadaw) staged a coup, detaining elected leaders including Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint, claiming widespread fraud in the 2020 elections. This abrupt seizure of power ignited nationwide protests, a civil disobedience movement, and international condemnation, plunging the country back into authoritarian rule and political instability.

This review paper critically analyzes Myanmar's journey of political change, focusing on the nature and extent of democratic aspirations, the role of institutions in both enabling and obstructing reform, and the key domestic and international factors that have shaped its political landscape. Special attention is given to the interplay between civilian and military power, ethnic conflicts, constitutional limitations, and public resistance movements. By examining the historical evolution and recent reversals, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges Myanmar faces in its pursuit of democracy, as well as the prospects for genuine political transformation in the future.

Historical Background: Military Rule and Authoritarian Consolidation

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, achieved independence from British colonial rule on January 4, 1948. The country initially adopted a parliamentary democratic system led by Prime Minister U Nu and the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL). This early experiment in democracy, however, was marred by internal political instability, economic stagnation, and burgeoning ethnic insurgencies that challenged the central authority (Taylor, 2009)^[37].

Amid this turmoil, the military began to assume a more prominent role in national affairs. On March 2, 1962, General Ne Win led a bloodless coup, overthrowing the civilian government and establishing the Revolutionary Council under the banner of the Burma Socialist Programme

Party (BSPP). This marked the onset of authoritarian rule in Myanmar, as Ne Win implemented a unique form of state socialism known as the “Burmese Way to Socialism,” which combined Marxist-Leninist ideas with Buddhist concepts and nationalist rhetoric (Steinberg, 2010) ^[35]. The BSPP imposed strict control over all aspects of political, economic, and social life, nationalized major industries, eliminated opposition parties, and banned independent media.

The military regime’s policies led to international isolation, economic decline, and widespread poverty. Discontent simmered for decades, culminating in the 1988 nationwide pro-democracy protests, known as the 8888 Uprising due to their peak on August 8, 1988. These mass demonstrations, led largely by students, monks, and ordinary citizens, called for the end of military rule and the establishment of a democratic government. During the uprising, the National League for Democracy (NLD) was formed, with Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of independence hero General Aung San, emerging as its central figure and international symbol of non-violent resistance (Smith, 1999) ^[31].

The military responded to the protests with brutal force, killing an estimated 3,000 demonstrators and arresting thousands more. In the aftermath, the junta rebranded itself as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and promised multiparty elections. However, SLORC’s commitment to democracy proved superficial. The 1990 general elections, in which the NLD won over 80% of parliamentary seats, were effectively nullified when the military refused to hand over power, citing the need to draft a new constitution before any transition could take place (Callahan, 2005) ^[7].

Over the next two decades, Myanmar remained under firm military control. SLORC was restructured as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997, but the regime’s authoritarian grip persisted. Aung San Suu Kyi spent much of this time under house arrest, while dissent was met with imprisonment, torture, or forced exile. The government continued to suppress ethnic minority groups, intensify censorship, and use state media as propaganda tools to justify its rule (Cheesman, 2015) ^[10].

Throughout this era, the military employed constitutional manipulation to maintain its dominance. The most notable example was the drafting and approval of the 2008 Constitution, which legally entrenched military power by reserving 25% of parliamentary seats for the Tatmadaw (armed forces) and granting them control over key ministries, such as defense, home affairs, and border affairs (Bünte, 2016) ^[5]. This constitution laid the groundwork for the controlled political liberalization that followed in the 2010s while ensuring that genuine civilian authority remained constrained.

Despite intermittent gestures toward reform, such as the release of political prisoners or limited dialogue with opposition leaders, these efforts were often cosmetic and served primarily to reduce international pressure or attract foreign investment. The underlying authoritarian structure of the state remained intact, with the military’s monopoly on power largely unchallenged until the quasi-civilian transition in 2011.

2010 Elections and the Fragile Opening

The 2010 general elections marked a pivotal moment in Myanmar’s political history, representing the first

multiparty elections held in the country in two decades. Though heavily criticized for lacking transparency and fairness, the elections symbolized the beginning of a controlled political liberalization under military oversight. They were conducted under the framework of the 2008 Constitution, a document carefully designed by the military junta to maintain substantial control over any future civilian government (Cheesman, 2015^[10]; Bünte, 2011) ^[6].

Under the new constitutional framework, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) a political party formed from the junta’s former mass organization was poised to dominate. Led by Thein Sein, a former general and prime minister in the military regime, the USDP won a majority of seats in both chambers of Parliament, although the elections were marred by widespread allegations of vote manipulation, coercion, and the exclusion of major opposition parties (Holliday, 2011) ^[11].

Notably, the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, boycotted the elections, citing the unjust rules of participation. These included regulations that barred prisoners such as Suu Kyi herself from party membership and disallowed the NLD’s participation unless it expelled her from its leadership. The boycott further delegitimized the polls in the eyes of both domestic and international observers (International Crisis Group, 2011).

Despite the flawed nature of the election, the transition marked the beginning of a quasi-civilian administration, with former military leaders shedding their uniforms to assume government roles in civilian attire. President Thein Sein, though closely aligned with the military establishment, initiated a series of political and economic reforms that surprised many analysts and international stakeholders.

The years following the 2010 elections saw moderate liberalization in several domains:

- Political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi, were released in phases starting in 2011.
- Censorship was relaxed, leading to the emergence of independent media outlets and the growth of civil society organizations.
- Peace negotiations were initiated with several ethnic armed groups in a bid to end long-standing insurgencies.
- The economy was liberalized, including efforts to attract foreign investment, modernize financial institutions, and lift barriers to trade (Pedersen, 2014) ^[28].

These reforms were, in part, a strategic response to the decades-long international sanctions regime that had isolated Myanmar from global trade and diplomacy. Recognizing the geopolitical importance of Myanmar especially as a buffer state between India and China international actors responded quickly. The United States, the European Union, and other major powers began easing or removing sanctions, initiating diplomatic engagement and offering economic aid packages (Steinberg, 2010 ^[36]; United States Department of State, 2012).

The re-engagement with the international community led to Myanmar’s reintegration into regional and global forums, including its 2014 chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Western leaders, including then-U.S. President Barack Obama, visited

Myanmar, further legitimizing the reformist image cultivated by the Thein Sein administration.

However, this opening remained fundamentally fragile. The 2008 Constitution entrenched military influence by guaranteeing the Tatmadaw (military) 25% of seats in Parliament, giving it a veto over constitutional amendments, which require a 75% majority. Furthermore, the military retained control over three powerful ministries defense, home affairs, and border affairs which effectively limited the scope of civilian governance (Egretau, 2014) [12].

While some perceived these changes as a genuine shift toward democracy, others interpreted them as calculated concessions by the military to maintain its power while alleviating international pressure. The hybrid regime that emerged in this period blended formal democratic institutions with deep-rooted military influence, creating a "disciplined democracy" a term originally used by the junta itself to describe the desired political system (Taylor, 2009) [37].

Democratic Gains and the NLD Government (2015–2020)

The 2015 general elections marked a historic moment in Myanmar's political trajectory. After decades of authoritarian rule and a fragile semi-civilian experiment (2011–2015), the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, won a resounding victory, securing nearly 77% of the contested seats in Parliament (Bünte, 2016) [6]. This landslide result was widely interpreted as a popular mandate for democratic reform and a rejection of military dominance. However, Myanmar's democratic journey remained structurally constrained by the 2008 Constitution, which preserved significant power for the military establishment.

Under the 2008 constitutional framework, the military retained 25% of parliamentary seats, which effectively gave it veto power over constitutional amendments (Cheesman, 2015) [10]. Moreover, the military directly controlled three key ministries Defense, Home Affairs, and Border Affairs thus maintaining influence over the police, security apparatus, and ethnic border regions (Egretau, 2016) [13]. Despite the NLD's popular support, these entrenched provisions severely limited the scope of civilian governance and institutional reform.

To navigate these constraints, Aung San Suu Kyi assumed the position of State Counsellor a newly created role equivalent to a de facto head of government, circumventing the constitutional ban on her presidency due to her foreign family ties. Although her presence in government symbolized a break from the military past, substantive democratization remained incomplete and contested (Pedersen, 2020) [29].

1. Achievements and Policy Reforms

During its term (2015–2020), the NLD government initiated several development-focused reforms, especially in the areas of education, health care, and economic liberalization:

- Public expenditure on education and healthcare increased modestly, with efforts to expand access and improve teacher training and rural health infrastructure (OECD, 2020) [27].
- The government undertook some anti-corruption measures, reformed tax collection, and encouraged foreign investment through legislative initiatives such

as the Myanmar Investment Law of 2016 (World Bank, 2019).

- Aung San Suu Kyi launched the 21st Century Panglong Peace Conference in 2016 to resume dialogue with ethnic armed groups and seek a sustainable political settlement for Myanmar's long-standing internal conflicts.

However, critics argue that these efforts were piecemeal and centralized, with the NLD leadership operating in a top-down fashion that alienated civil society and even its own party members (Egretau, 2019) [14]. Internal party structures lacked transparency, and decision-making remained tightly controlled by Suu Kyi and a small group of loyalists, limiting participatory governance and institutional capacity-building (Asia Foundation, 2018) [2].

Democratic Deficits and the Rohingya Crisis

The NLD's tenure is most critically remembered for its failure to address human rights concerns, particularly its handling of the Rohingya crisis. In August 2017, Myanmar's security forces launched a military campaign in Rakhine State following attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). This operation, labeled as a "clearance operation" by the military, quickly escalated into a brutal campaign of mass killings, rape, arson, and forced displacement. Over 700,000 Rohingya fled to neighboring Bangladesh, sparking one of the world's worst humanitarian crises in recent decades (UNHRC, 2018).

Multiple investigations, including by the United Nations Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar, concluded that the military's actions could constitute genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity (UN, 2018). While international observers expected the NLD government to condemn these atrocities or initiate accountability processes, Aung San Suu Kyi instead defended the military at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 2019, severely damaging her international standing as a Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

Scholars have interpreted the NLD's inaction and complicity as either strategic pragmatism—to avoid direct confrontation with the powerful military—or as evidence of ethno-nationalist biases within Myanmar's political elite (Kyed, 2020 [24]; Walton, 2017). Either way, the episode starkly demonstrated the limits of civilian authority under the military-dominated constitutional order and the fragility of democratic norms in the face of entrenched ethnic majoritarianism.

Critique and Missed Opportunities

Despite its electoral legitimacy, the NLD failed to pursue significant constitutional reform, largely due to the Tatmadaw's veto power. Attempts in 2020 to amend the constitution and reduce the military's political dominance were overwhelmingly blocked by military-aligned legislators (ICG, 2020).

Moreover, critics argue that the NLD government did not strengthen democratic institutions such as the judiciary, local governance mechanisms, or independent commissions. The Union Election Commission (UEC), appointed by the executive, was accused of lacking impartiality, especially in the run-up to the 2020 elections when it canceled voting in conflict areas, disenfranchising large ethnic populations (NDI, 2021).

While some progress was made in state capacity and service delivery, deep structural reforms were postponed or avoided. In hindsight, this period is often viewed as a missed opportunity to entrench democratic practices, foster inclusive governance, and create resilient institutions that could have better resisted future authoritarian reversals.

2021 Military Coup: Democratic Reversal

On February 1, 2021, Myanmar's fragile democratic experiment was abruptly dismantled when the Tatmadaw (Myanmar military) staged a coup d'état, detaining State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint, and other senior leaders of the National League for Democracy (NLD). The coup occurred mere hours before the newly elected parliament was scheduled to convene following the November 2020 general elections, in which the NLD had secured an overwhelming majority winning 396 of 476 parliamentary seats, a result widely seen as a clear endorsement of democratic governance by the electorate (NDI, 2021).

The military justified the coup by alleging widespread electoral fraud and irregularities in the 2020 election. However, both the Union Election Commission (UEC) and independent international observers found no substantial evidence to support these claims (International Crisis Group, 2021; Carter Center, 2020) [8]. Analysts suggest the coup was less about electoral integrity and more about preserving military interests and authority, which had become increasingly threatened by the NLD's consolidation of civilian political legitimacy (Holliday, 2021) [18].

▪ Nationwide Resistance and the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)

The coup ignited immediate and unprecedented public resistance. Civil servants, doctors, engineers, teachers, and students joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), a decentralized nationwide protest campaign aimed at paralyzing the junta's administrative capacity through mass non-cooperation. Protesters demanded a return to democratic rule, the release of detained leaders, and the drafting of a federal democratic constitution (Thawngmung, 2021) [38].

Mass demonstrations were met with brutal crackdowns. The military deployed live ammunition, snipers, arbitrary detentions, torture, and internet shutdowns to suppress dissent. According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), by late 2023, over 3,000 civilians had been killed, and more than 20,000 had been arbitrarily detained, including journalists, human rights defenders, and lawmakers. Reports from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have documented widespread human rights violations amounting to crimes against humanity (Amnesty, 2022 [1]; HRW, 2021).

This violent response demonstrated the depth of the Tatmadaw's authoritarian entrenchment and its unwillingness to tolerate any erosion of its constitutional privileges, even in the face of overwhelming democratic mandates. The military's actions also exposed the inherent weaknesses of Myanmar's political institutions particularly the absence of independent judicial oversight, weak civilian control over the military, and the lack of constitutional mechanisms to check military power (Cheesman, 2021) [11].

▪ The Emergence of the National Unity Government (NUG)

In response to the military takeover, elected lawmakers from the 2020 elections, ethnic minority representatives, and members of civil society formed the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) and later declared the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG) in April 2021. The NUG operates as a shadow government in exile, representing the democratic will of the people and seeking international recognition as Myanmar's legitimate governing body (International IDEA, 2021).

The NUG articulated a federal democratic charter and committed to abolishing the 2008 Constitution, which had institutionalized military dominance. It called for the establishment of a Federal Democracy Union, a long-standing demand of Myanmar's ethnic minority groups who have historically been excluded from state power (South, 2022) [33]. For the first time in Myanmar's modern history, the opposition included ethnonationalist leaders and majority-Bamar pro-democracy activists within a unified political framework.

Despite its lack of formal control over territory, the NUG has built diplomatic relations with foreign governments, international organizations, and diaspora groups. It has also established a military wing the People's Defence Force (PDF) which, alongside ethnic armed organizations (EOs), is engaged in asymmetric warfare against junta forces. According to multiple sources, the post-coup environment has evolved into a nationwide civil conflict, with various regions witnessing high-intensity armed resistance (ICG, 2022; The Diplomat, 2022).

▪ Institutional Collapse and International Response

The coup and ensuing violence marked the collapse of Myanmar's post-2010 democratic transition. International actors, including the United States, the European Union, ASEAN, and the United Nations, issued condemnations and imposed targeted sanctions on military leaders and military-owned businesses. However, the lack of coordinated enforcement mechanisms and divergent geopolitical interests particularly China and Russia's support for the junta limited the effectiveness of international pressure (Haacke, 2021) [16].

The ASEAN Five-Point Consensus, introduced in April 2021 as a diplomatic roadmap to de-escalate the crisis, failed to produce meaningful outcomes, largely due to the junta's non-compliance and ASEAN's policy of non-interference (ASEAN, 2021) [4].

▪ Factors Influencing Democratic Transition and Reversal

Myanmar's path toward democracy has been complex and highly contingent upon historical, institutional, social, and geopolitical dynamics. While the country experienced moments of apparent liberalization, such as in the post-2010 period, these transitions were always precariously balanced against powerful countervailing forces. This section explores four major factors that influenced both the country's democratic transition and its subsequent reversal.

a. Constitutional Entrenchment of Military Power

One of the most significant structural impediments to democracy in Myanmar has been the 2008 Constitution, drafted unilaterally by the military junta and approved in a

flawed referendum conducted amidst Cyclone Nargis. The Constitution granted the Tatmadaw (Myanmar military) a dominant and autonomous position within the political system. It reserves 25% of parliamentary seats for unelected military officers, thereby giving them veto power over any constitutional amendment, which requires more than 75% parliamentary approval (Cheesman, 2015^[10]; Egreteau, 2014)^[12].

Furthermore, the Constitution provides the military with control over three key ministries Defense, Home Affairs, and Border Affairs and the authority to appoint one of the two vice presidents and a portion of members of the National Defence and Security Council (Bünté, 2016)^[6]. These institutional features effectively militarized the core of the civilian government, preventing the emergence of full civilian supremacy.

Despite repeated efforts by the National League for Democracy (NLD) to amend constitutional provisions most notably in 2019 and 2020 all attempts were blocked by military-aligned legislators in Parliament (ICG, 2020). The constitutional design thus ensured a "disciplined democracy," a term coined by the military to describe a controlled transition that would protect its long-term interests (Taylor, 2009)^[37].

b. Ethnic Conflicts and Fragmented National Identity

Myanmar is home to over 135 officially recognized ethnic groups, many of whom have long-standing grievances against the central government related to political exclusion, cultural marginalization, and economic neglect. Since independence in 1948, various ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) have engaged in protracted insurgencies, seeking autonomy or federal arrangements (Smith, 1999^[31]; South, 2008)^[32].

The failure to construct an inclusive national identity has been a central challenge to democratic consolidation. The state-building project has historically favored Burman Buddhist nationalism, sidelining minority languages, religions, and cultures. Even during the NLD's tenure, promises of federalism and ethnic reconciliation remained unfulfilled, and the 21st Century Panglong Peace Process launched by Suu Kyi in 2016 yielded limited tangible results (Sadan, 2016)^[30].

The Rohingya crisis further exposed the ethno-nationalist bias embedded in Myanmar's political structure. Rohingyas were denied citizenship under the 1982 Citizenship Law and were largely excluded from democratic participation. Their persecution in 2017, described by the UN as a "textbook case of ethnic cleansing" (UNHRC, 2018), reflected the limits of democracy in an exclusionary state and fractured international support for the NLD (Walton, 2017).

Ethnic divisions not only undermined national unity but also fragmented opposition efforts against the military regime, making it harder to establish a cohesive pro-democracy movement that includes both majority and minority voices (Thawngmung, 2021)^[38].

c. Weak Civil Society and Political Institutions

Decades of authoritarian rule under military governments first under Ne Win's socialist dictatorship (1962–1988) and later under the SLORC/SPDC junta led to the deinstitutionalization of political life in Myanmar. The repression of civic organizations, media, and political

parties created a hollowed-out public sphere, where civil society was stunted and the culture of democratic participation remained underdeveloped (South & Lall, 2018)^[34].

While some civic space opened up during the 2011–2015 period, the gains were uneven and easily reversible. The judiciary remained weak and politically dependent, unable to provide checks on executive or military power (Cheesman, 2011)^[9]. Political institutions lacked transparency, and public administration was dominated by former military personnel even under NLD rule. Scholars have described Myanmar's governance structure as a hybrid regime in which elected officials operated within a system that retained deep authoritarian characteristics (Pedersen, 2014^[28]; Egreteau, 2016)^[13].

The Union Election Commission (UEC), for example, was appointed by the President and lacked independence, leading to controversies in both the 2015 and 2020 elections, particularly regarding voter disenfranchisement in ethnic minority areas (NDI, 2021).

d. International Engagement and Its Limitations

International engagement played a complex role in Myanmar's democratic journey. During the 1990s and early 2000s, Western nations imposed economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation in response to human rights abuses and the denial of democratic elections. These measures were aimed at pressuring the junta to democratize, but critics argue that they pushed Myanmar closer to China, which remained an economic and strategic ally (Haacke, 2006)^[15]. With the political opening in 2011, the international community particularly the United States, European Union, Japan, and ASEAN shifted toward engagement, lifting sanctions and investing in development and capacity building. However, this support was inconsistent and often driven by geostrategic interests rather than principled support for democracy (Holliday, 2012; Steinberg, 2013)^[36].

Following the 2017 Rohingya crisis, many countries reimposed sanctions on military leaders but continued diplomatic engagement with the NLD government. After the 2021 coup, targeted sanctions were renewed, but lack of coordinated global pressure, along with China and Russia's support for the junta, undermined collective efforts to restore democratic order (ICG, 2021).

In short, while international actors contributed to creating space for reform, their inability to sustain consistent pressure, enforce accountability, or support inclusive democratic processes limited their long-term impact on Myanmar's transition.

Prospects for Democratic Renewal

The post-coup environment in Myanmar is one of the most repressive in recent history, characterized by authoritarian consolidation, widespread violence, and socio-political fragmentation. Yet, amid this turmoil, the prospects for democratic renewal have not been extinguished. The enduring strength of popular resistance, the formation of alternative political structures such as the National Unity Government (NUG), and digital activism reflect the persistence of pro-democracy sentiment within Myanmar's society (Thawngmung, 2021)^[38].

The resilience of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) a decentralized, grassroots movement made up of students,

civil servants, doctors, and ethnic minorities demonstrates the people's rejection of the military's legitimacy and an enduring commitment to democratic principles (ICG, 2021). The continued operations of the NUG, composed of ousted elected lawmakers and ethnic representatives, is a symbolic and organizational step toward a new democratic alternative, one that envisions a federal democratic union (South, 2022) [33].

Still, translating this spirit into sustainable political reform will require confronting several systemic challenges and initiating deep structural changes. The following elements are critical for a viable democratic future in Myanmar:

1. Rewriting or Replacing the 2008 Constitution

The 2008 Constitution, designed by the military, remains a central obstacle to democratic transformation. It entrenched the military's power by guaranteeing it 25% of parliamentary seats, control over key ministries, and immunity from civilian oversight (Cheesman, 2015^[10]; Egretau, 2016) [13]. As long as this framework is in place, democratic governance will remain constrained by institutionalized authoritarianism.

In response, the NUG and its allies have declared their intent to abolish the 2008 Constitution and replace it with a new charter based on federal principles and ethnic inclusion (NUG, 2021). This approach has found support among many ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and civil society groups, which have long viewed federalism as essential to achieving both peace and participatory governance (Sadan, 2016) [30].

Successful constitutional reform would require inclusive participation, transitional justice mechanisms, and robust dialogue among diverse ethnic, religious, and political constituencies.

2. Building Inclusive Federal Institutions

Myanmar's future governance must address the historical exclusion of ethnic minorities and their demands for autonomy and cultural recognition. Ethnic conflict has persisted since independence, undermining national unity and democratic cohesion (Smith, 1999^[31]; South, 2008) [32]. A federal system rooted in power-sharing, local autonomy, and resource equity is widely regarded as a key pathway toward long-term stability and democratic deepening (ICG, 2022).

The Federal Democracy Charter issued by the NUG in 2021 outlines a framework for such a transformation, emphasizing the protection of minority rights, decentralization of power, and equality before the law (South & Lall, 2018) [34]. The inclusion of ethnic voices in both governance and security structures would not only improve legitimacy but also reduce armed resistance and societal fragmentation.

3. Strengthening Civil Society and Civic Education

Decades of authoritarianism have stunted civil society development, eroded public trust in institutions, and suppressed civic awareness. While the brief reform period (2011–2020) saw a resurgence of NGOs, independent media, and community-based organizations, the coup severely reversed these gains (Holliday, 2021) [18].

Rebuilding democratic culture will require supporting independent civil society organizations, promoting grassroots leadership, and investing in civic education that

fosters political literacy and tolerance. Studies show that civic education can empower communities, especially youth, to actively participate in democratic processes and counter propaganda (Pedersen, 2014^[28]; Asia Foundation, 2021) [3].

Moreover, diaspora activism and online platforms have kept democratic discourse alive, showing potential for transnational civic engagement even under severe repression (The Diplomat, 2021).

4. Ensuring Accountability for Human Rights Violations

For Myanmar's democracy to be meaningful, there must be justice and accountability for the atrocities committed particularly during the 2017 Rohingya genocide and the post-2021 coup violence. Without confronting the past, any political transition risks reinforcing cycles of impunity.

International bodies such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) are already involved in legal proceedings against Myanmar's military leaders, and numerous reports by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have documented war crimes and crimes against humanity (UNHRC, 2018; HRW, 2021).

Domestically, truth and reconciliation mechanisms, reparations, and institutional reforms will be essential to rebuild trust and uphold the rule of law (Cheesman, 2021) [11].

5. Coordinated International Diplomatic and Economic Pressure

The international community has played a mixed role in Myanmar's democratic journey alternating between isolation and engagement depending on geopolitical interests. However, the 2021 coup demonstrated the limits of fragmented responses. While some countries imposed targeted sanctions on junta leaders, China, Russia, and ASEAN remained neutral or supportive, thus weakening global leverage (Haacke, 2021^[16]; ASEAN, 2021) [4].

A coordinated and sustained international response including sanctions, arms embargoes, and support for the NUG and civil society will be crucial. Equally important is long-term development assistance that strengthens democratic institutions, civic capacity, and inclusive economic growth once a political settlement is reached (OECD, 2020) [27].

Additionally, international actors must resist the temptation to recognize the junta's legitimacy, even de facto, in multilateral forums a point emphasized by scholars as critical to undermining military impunity (International IDEA, 2021).

Conclusion

Myanmar's journey toward democracy has been marked by brief openings followed by harsh reversals. The post-2010 transition raised hopes for reform, but the 2008 Constitution, military control, and unresolved ethnic tensions limited real progress. The 2015 NLD victory offered an opportunity for democratic consolidation, yet deep-rooted structural constraints and the 2021 military coup revealed the fragility of Myanmar's political system. Despite repression, strong grassroots resistance, the rise of the National Unity Government (NUG), and ongoing demands for a federal democratic system indicate that the

struggle for democracy endures. For true renewal, Myanmar must rewrite its constitution, build inclusive institutions, ensure accountability, and strengthen civil society. Coordinated international support will also be essential. Ultimately, lasting democracy in Myanmar will require systemic transformation and a commitment to justice, inclusion, and citizen empowerment.

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