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Myanmar struggles to leave ghosts of coups amid military takeover

Over the past decade, Myanmar has been embarking on a path toward democratic reforms under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi while moving away from the shadows of its military past. Results have been mixed, with many pointing out that the civilian government backslid on an array of issues, but nevertheless, Suu Kyi is still being regarded as the country's best hope against a descent into authoritarianism.

That, however, changed on 1 February, as the powerful military (Tatmadaw) launched a coup that saw Suu Kyi and her colleagues from the National League of Democracy (NLD) being detained and ousted overnight. It was carefully executed and caught many ordinary Burmese off guard, as evident in the video of an aerobics instructor who went on with her daily routine just as a convoy of military vehicles passed by.

The latest development in Myanmar can be seen as a cusp of a troubled relationship between the civilian and military leaders as both sides have never really sat comfortably next to each other. Despite given a quarter of legislative seats and many important portfolios in the cabinet, the Tatmadaw has always been suspicious of their civilian counterparts amidst a deep-rooted antagonism and a contest for supremacy between Suu Kyi and military chief General Min Aung Hlaing. The stakes got higher when rumors swirled in mid-January that a takeover is on the brink following last November's voting. Suu Kyi's NLD secured a landslide victory in that election, defeating the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). Since then, the military has insisted that the election was fraudulent without proving concrete evidence. In the aftermath of the coup, General Min also justified his action by claiming "voter fraud" in a national TV address and declaring a state of emergency that will last for at least one year.

With the junta firmly in power, the country is now back to square one as the coup undid a decade worth of progress to democracy. Protests have erupted in major cities of

the country though they are often met by heavy security forces' resistance. Though the situation has yet to escalate to the level of violence seen during the Saffron Revolution in 2007 and 2008, the protests have been growing each day. The junta might eventually employ harsher tactics to deal with the unrest. Frequent internet cuts have also been reported as the military blocked attempts by anti-coup movements to organize themselves. Facebook, Whatsapp, and Instagram were all targeted as they have been regarded as the nemesis of the military in communicating to the populace.

As the election will only be called after the current state of emergency expires, the commitment of the Tatmadaw for an actual transition toward yet another civilian rule will likely be in doubt. The generals have never been interested in making Myanmar a full-fledged democracy, but it had instead created a hybrid model in which it was guaranteed a certain number of seats in the legislative branch. Considering the failure of its democratic experiment with the NLD, the Tatmadaw will probably seek to restore its political legitimacy in the next one year (or even longer) and at the same time props up its proxy party, the USDP that performed poorly in the previous two elections. Undermining the immensely popular NLD as well as Suu Kyi will also be one of its priorities though it might encounter difficulties in this regard amidst rising anti-junta sentiment.



Aung San Suu Kyi

Border hostilities threaten regional stability in East and Horn of Africa

Regional stability in the East and Horn of Africa has come under threat amid a deterioration of relations between Kenya and Somalia in the past months. What started as a diplomatic feud has escalated into military action, and a rise in recent clashes has led to an increased military presence along their mutual borders. This feud could also have broader implications for ongoing multilateral efforts aimed at tackling the Al-Shabaab militant threat.

While relations between the two countries have been strained for years, developments in recent months have led to a diplomatic standoff. This feud culminated in December 2020, when Somalia expelled Kenyan diplomats from the country by accusing Nairobi of meddling in its internal political affairs. This decision stemmed in large part from meetings held by Kenya with officials from Somaliland, a semi-autonomous region vying for independence from Somalia. Kenya has gone so far as to announce plans to open a consulate in Hargeisa, the capital of the self-declared region, in a bid to solidify diplomatic relations.

The standoff has, however, taken a more serious turn due to recent violent clashes near the mutual border. In late January, heavy fighting broke out in the town of Bula Hawo, located in the semi-autonomous Jubaland region near Kenya. The clashes broke out between Jubaland security forces and the Somalia National Army, resulting in multiple casualties, with violence also spreading into Mandera, on the Kenyan side. Somalia has since accused Kenyan Defense Forces of aiding and arming ‘rebel’ groups responsible for the violence. More alarming though, has been the increase in attacks in Mandera by Al-Shabaab militants, who, in the past months, have taken over mosques, imposed a tax on local businessmen, and destroyed critical infrastructures. A long, porous, and unchecked border has allowed militants to stage attacks and retreat, a strategy utilized by Al-Shabaab with great effect. Kenyan officials have



raised their concerns that renewed fighting could result in the large-scale displacement of civilians, aggravating an already dire humanitarian situation in Somalia and in the refugee camps in Kenya.

Kenya, as well as Ethiopia, are significant contributors to the African Union’s peacekeeping mission in Somalia (AMISOM), and as such, an ongoing conflict between the two countries could prove harmful to the overall mission. If relations continue to deteriorate, Kenya may order the withdrawal of its troops. The ultimate winner in this situation will be Al-Shabaab, who are likely to take advantage of security lapses to increase attacks and secure footholds in the region. These concerns have been shared by the African Union, which has called on both parties to exercise restraint, as peace between the two nations is vital to regional stability.

Signs of escalation in Afghan conflict as the government prepares for Taliban's spring offensive

In previous years of the Afghan conflict, the winter months' levels of violence have lulled as the Taliban forces prepared for their annual spring offensives. However, there are warning signs that this year's spring offensive may be more intense.

The increased activity of Taliban groups and retaliatory military operations in recent months has slowed the progress of peace talks and did little to de-escalate the conflict. To make matters worse, reports on the ground also suggested that Taliban groups are increasing recruitment, adjusting logistics, and gearing up what appeared to be a strong offensive. Similarly, Afghan

forces are also conducting comprehensive troops and commander restructuring and at the same time developing operations in anticipation of fierce fighting. Amid the latest developments, the window of opportunity created during the Doha Peace Talks to end the conflict seems to have narrowed significantly. While the peace process may not fall entirely apart, the advancements in preparation for the offensive are certainly hinted toward major military confrontations from March. The evolution of the operations on the battlefield, as well as the actions to be adopted by the administration of US President Biden regarding the presence of foreign troops in the country, are expected to become additional conditioning factors to the future of the peace process.

Tension mounts between protesting farmers and the government in India as negotiations to repeal controversial agricultural laws stall

Despite months of protests and hunger strikes, hundreds of thousands of farmers across India have continued to show little signs of relenting amid the controversial agricultural laws that, for them, only benefit large private buyers at the expense of producers.

Infuriated farmers have severely disrupted traffic movement along borders in Delhi, which has become the focal point of their protests. Some have also occupied railway tracks, while sit-ins were regularly held in front of prominent leaders' houses. Since then, scores of protesters have been arrested while internet services were temporarily shut to prevent the protesters from massing. Future talks between farm unions and the government

are likely to be challenging as the farmers have made it clear that they will not be accepting anything less than a full repeal of the legislation. With the uncompromising stance, the latest uproar has clearly emerged as one of the biggest challenges for Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who rode on farmers' support for his re-election bid in 2019. As the crisis threatens to erode the support for him as well as the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Modi's government will need to tap into new ways to reconcile with protesting farmers. The repeated failure of talks has only fuelled widespread agitation, potentially attracting a larger movement of non-farmers groups as well as more international condemnation.

China puts annual parliamentary sessions back on track as pandemic subsides

After rescheduling the annual parliamentary sessions last year following the Covid-19 outbreak, this year's event is finally back to its original schedule in March.

Locally known as “Lianghui” or the “two sessions,” the gatherings of policymakers will provide a glimpse of China’s economic trajectory going forward as the National People’s Congress (NPC) and National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) deliberate on various matters at Beijing’s Great Hall of the People. The meetings of the NPC and CPCC that are

comparable to Westminster’s House of Commons and House of Lords respectively come at a time when the Covid-19 pandemic continues to present fresh challenges to the country. At the same time, a new president also took charge in the United States. Expectations are also high as 2021 marks the beginning of China’s new five-year plan period and the 100th founding anniversary of the Communist Party. Heightened security should be expected in Beijing throughout the event from 4 March as authorities are keen to avoid any attempts to disrupt the lawmakers’ meet, be it from pro-democracy activists or sympathizers of the Uyghur or Tibetan cause.

Kremlin rattled as pro-Navalny protests grip Russian cities and towns

Since late January, Russia has been hit by a series of massive protests seen in years following the arrest of opposition leader Alexei Navalny as well as the ban on a documentary titled “Putin’s Palace.”

Navalny, who had in recent years grown into a central figure of the opposition movement as well as the national political arena, was also the target of an assassination attempt in 2020 that was thought to have been orchestrated by the Federal Security Bureau (FSB). Large protests calling for his release were held in cities and towns almost weekly,

though they were often met with stiff resistance from the security forces, leading to hundreds of arrests. Amid the constant harassment, organizers have also shifted strategy by holding protests at residential courtyards instead of heading to tightly-guarded city squares. While the decision to jail Navalny could spark further protests, the opposition movement could see more challenges down the road. This is as the Kremlin sought to prevent more Navalny supporters out on the streets by clamping down on key individuals, as well as intensifying an all-out media campaign to discredit anyone associated with them.



Dateline

-  1 March: **Independence Movement Day in South Korea**
-  1 March: **Independence Day in Bosnia and Herzegovina**
-  6 March: **Independence Day in Ghana**
-  8 March: **International Women's Day**
-  17 March: **General election in the Netherlands**
-  17 March: **St Patrick's Day in Ireland**
-  20 March: **Independence Day in Tunisia**
-  20-21 March: **Nowruz celebrations in Iran, Central, and South Asia**
-  23 March: **Legislative election in Israel**
-  26 March: **Independence Day in Bangladesh**
-  28-29 March: **Holi Festival in India**

Contributed by: Chan Hoi Cheong Senior Analyst and Office Manager Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; Ezza Omar Analyst Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; Federico Caprari Analyst Madrid, Spain; Misha Desai Analyst Lund, Sweden