



Coup in Burma (Myanmar): Issues for U.S. Policy

Updated March 4, 2021

On February 1, 2021, Burma's military, known as the Tatmadaw, seized control of Burma's Union Government and detained State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi (the country's de facto civilian leader) and members of her political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD). The NLD had won parliamentary elections held in November 2020, and the coup came as the country's Union Parliament was preparing for its initial session.

Figure I. Burma's Political Transition: 2008–February 2021



Source: CRS.

The military's action was widely condemned internationally as a blow to Burma's partial transition from military rule to democracy. The Biden Administration has redirected some U.S. assistance to Burma, as required by law, and imposed sanctions against the coup's leaders. Any U.S. effort to coordinate a multilateral response to events in Burma may be complicated by the reluctance of many of Burma's neighbors to take sharp action against their neighbor.

Why did the military stage a coup?

In statements following the coup, acting President Myint Swe and the Tatmadaw **claimed** that they had evidence of parliamentary election fraud perpetrated by the NLD and Burma's Union Election Commission (UEC). **According to the Tatmadaw**, it acted in accordance with the 2008 constitution to protect democracy in Burma, to prevent an illegitimate Union Parliament taking office. Several independent election monitoring organizations in Burma, however, **indicated** that the electoral process and outcome were credible despite minor irregularities.

Other sources posit that the coup occurred after the military's Commander in Chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, **failed to convince Aung San Suu Kyi** and the NLD to select him as the next President. Under the 2008 constitution, **the president is appointed** by the Union Parliament. The NLD's victory in the parliamentary elections made his selection as President unlikely.

Figure 2. Map of Burma



Source: CRS.

Who is in control of Burma?

The Tatmadaw has effectively taken over the Union Government. The administrative capital, Nay Pyi Taw, **is under Tatmadaw control**, as are most regional capitals. Tatmadaw soldiers and Myanmar Police officers are patrolling the streets of Yangon (Rangoon) and other major cities. **Over 1,100** have been arrested since the coup, and **more than 55** have been killed. Internet connectivity is being **shut down** between the hours of 1:00am and 9:00am.

The Tatmadaw [has appointed](#) a State Administrative Council, chaired by Min Aung Hlaing, to govern until new elections are held. The Tatmadaw [said new elections will be held](#) in a year, after changes are made in the 2008 constitution and the Union Election Commission.

What has been the reaction in Burma?

An informal, leaderless civil disobedience movement (CDM) has emerged based on existing civil society organizations and utilizing social media to coordinate opposition to the coup. Peaceful demonstrations, dubbed the [“22222 Popular Uprising,”](#) reportedly have arisen across the country, including in ethnic minority areas. The CDM staged a general strike on February 22, and called for the imposition of economic sanctions on the coup leaders and military-controlled businesses. Small numbers of police officers [reportedly have joined the CDM or fled to India](#), [several diplomats](#) at Burma’s Washington, DC, Embassy have issued a statement of support, and Burma’s U.N. Permanent Representative has called on the international community to use [“any means necessary”](#) to oppose the coup. Some ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) have issued statements opposing the coup.

How has the Biden Administration responded?

On February 1, President Biden [called](#) for nations around the world to unite in support of defending Burma’s democracy. On February 2, the State Department announced that the recent events constituted a “coup d’état” under §7008 of annual foreign aid appropriations measures (most recently, Division K of P.L. 116-260), triggering certain restrictions on U.S. aid to the government. (See CRS In Focus IF11267, *Coup-Related Restrictions in U.S. Foreign Aid Appropriations*.)

On February 10, President Biden announced sanctions against Burmese “military leaders who directed the coup, their business interests, as well as close family members.” The President [signed Executive Order \(E.O.\) 14014](#) on the same day, authorizing new sanctions and export-control restrictions on Burma, in addition to “freezing U.S. assets that benefit the Burmese government” in the amount of roughly \$1 billion dollars. President Biden also [announced](#) that the United States would maintain its “support for healthcare, civil society groups, and other areas that benefit the people of Burma directly.” On February 11, the United States Agency for International Development announced that it [immediately redirected](#) \$42.4 million of assistance towards programs “to support and strengthen civil society.”

Pursuant to E.O. 14014, the U.S. Department of the Treasury [announced](#) that it was “designating 10 current and former military officials responsible for the February 1 coup or associated with the Burmese military regime.” Additionally, E.O. 14014 designated [three entities](#) operating in Burma’s gem industry that are “owned or controlled by” the Tatmadaw. Subsequently, the Treasury Department [designated](#) two more military officials on February 22.

On March 1, U.S. Representative to the U.N. Linda Thomas-Greenfield urged the international community to [“ramp up pressure”](#) on the military regime and called for [“intense discussions”](#) at the U.N. Security Council (UNSC).

How have other governments responded?

On February 1, U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres [“strongly condemn\[ed\]”](#) the military’s actions, which “represent a serious blow to democratic reforms in Myanmar.” The UNSC [issued a statement](#) on February 4 that “stressed the need to uphold democratic institutions and processes, refrain from violence, and fully respect human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law,” and called for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and NLD colleagues.

In a February 23 [statement](#), G-7 Foreign Ministers said they “firmly condemn violence committed by Myanmar security forces against peaceful protestors.” Following a March 2 meeting of Foreign Ministers

of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, of which Burma is a member, officials [urged](#) a halt to violence, but the group reportedly remained divided on further responses.

China’s Ambassador to Burma [said](#) on February 15 that Beijing maintains “friendly relations” with both the Tatmadaw and the NLD, and that the coup is “absolutely not what China wants to see.”

Author Information

Ben Dolven
Specialist in Asian Affairs

Kirt Smith
Research Assistant

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS’s institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.