

INDIA'S MYANMAR QUANDARY, ITS PARADOXICAL POLICY

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'The junta's decision to reduce Ms. Suu Kyi's sentence and shift her from the prison is a move that has perplexed a few. Yet, it is not a step towards democracy' | Photo Credit: AFP

July 31 and August 1 will be recorded as the crucial dates when the history of Myanmar's ongoing tragedy was written. In the first case, the acting President of Myanmar, Myint Swe, announced the fourth extension of the 'emergency' for another six months, which is in violation of the 2008 Constitution. In the second instance, the military regime decided to release several political prisoners and even reduced the sentences imposed on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the deposed President Win Myint. Ms. Suu Kyi was also moved out of prison to house arrest. However, these developments do not signal the dawn of a democratic and peaceful Myanmar.

The extension of the emergency further delays the elections proposed by the military. Min Aung Hlaing, the coup orchestrator, justified the extension due to the failure to establish 'normalcy' in large parts of the country. However, it is this pursuit of 'normalcy' that has resulted in suffering, with ACLED, or the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (a disaggregated data collection, analysis, and crisis mapping project) reporting that Myanmar civilians witness two and a half times more violence than those in Afghanistan.

The military regime's relentless campaign includes an average of over 30 airstrikes per month in 2023. Surprisingly, the Tatmadaw (the military of Myanmar) exerts real control in only 30%-40% of the territory, as in admissions from the Burmese military and a report of the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar (SAC-M). A factitious national election would lead to the loss of further credibility if it is conducted only in a third of the country.

Moreover, the reshuffling within the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) under Khin Yi, is aimed at adding more military hard-liners, further raising concerns about the junta's commitment to democracy. The decision by the National League for Democracy decision not to participate in the new elections, combined with the exclusion of smaller parties through the new party registration laws, leaves no viable opposition to the USDP in a parliament whose constitutional structure gives the military a practical veto.

The junta's decision to reduce Ms. Suu Kyi's sentence and shift her from the prison is a move that has perplexed a few. Yet, it is not a step towards democracy. Despite being the Tatmadaw's

biggest rival, Ms. Suu Kyi has demonstrated a willingness to compromise and work with the military. She remains the rallying point for political change in Myanmar despite international criticism over her position/stand and role in the Rohingya persecution. Some protest may ease with these symbolic gestures. But more importantly,

Ms. Suu Kyi's return could potentially split the National Unity Government (NUG)-led resistance. A young generation of activists is leading the NUG and its cooperation with ethnic armed organisations and even reconciliation with Rohingyas. This could all change if Ms. Suu Kyi is back in active politics.

These symbolic gestures by the junta, as said, may ease some protests and allow the military to claim progress over international and regional appeals, possibly leading to a lifting of sanctions and revived economic prospects. Additionally, they offer political bandwidth and a face-saving token to actors engaging with the junta, such as India.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the coup, India took a proactive approach by providing food and vaccine assistance. However, the plight of the Myanmar people seems to have faded from memory, with accusations of instigating violence in Manipur replacing it. Communities along the border have already defied the Home Ministry by providing shelter to the refugees. Concerns over trafficking and drug smuggling in Myanmar led to India suspending the Free Movement Regime in September 2022. India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar raised the issue of infrastructure projects and stability in border areas with his Myanmar counterpart Than Swe in Bangkok in July, on the sidelines of the Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) meeting. India has also supported the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' 'Five-Point Consensus'. Nevertheless, India's policy towards Myanmar presents a paradox.

India's official rhetoric on commitment to democracy in Myanmar is in contrast with its policy framed through the lens of its security concerns in north-east India and relations with China. For example, India's announcement of the Sairang-Hmawngbuchhuah railway project near the Myanmar border, under India's Act East Policy, aims to counter China's railway access in Myanmar through Yunnan and the ambitious China-Myanmar Economic Corridor.

Disturbingly, sources such as Justice for Myanmar, SAC-M, and the United Nations Special Rapporteur have reported an increase in India's arms supply to the military since the coup. Arming the Tatmadaw not only undermines India's position on restoring democracy but also adds fuel to the fire, which spills over regularly across the border.

India's policy options in Myanmar are challenging, but not limited. The relaxation of Ms. Suu Kyi's prison sentence may provide an opportunity for India to engage with her and pro-democracy actors, including the NUG. Additionally, the government and media must avoid blanket securitisation and profiling of incoming refugees, many of whom have ties of kinship in India. This approach is essential to prevent further violence and foster an environment of care and compassion.

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