

Myanmar's military coup: The Rohingya caught "Between the devil and the deep sea"

Iqthyer Uddin Md Zahed 

University of New England, Armidale,
Australia

Correspondence

Iqthyer Uddin Md Zahed, University of New
England, Armidale, Australia.

Email: izahedcu@gmail.com

Present address

Iqthyer Uddin Md Zahed, University of
Sydney, NSW, Australia.

Abstract

This article explores the consequences of the recent military coup in Myanmar for the Rohingya crisis. Data from seven semi-structured interviews were collected from academic and Rohingya leaders in the Australian cities of Sydney and Brisbane. The findings suggest that the regime change that has taken place will not resolve the Rohingya crisis unless the Myanmar government moves away from its current anti-Rohingya, religious nationalism policy agenda. A military coup on 1 February 2021 overthrew the relatively new democratic government in Myanmar. The anti-military movement now faces the military's brutal force for restoring democracy in the country. The elected parliament members established an interim National Unity Government (NUG) to lead anti-military protests. Regarding the military junta and NUG's strategy concerning the Rohingya crisis, both aim to get international support for their endeavours. The Rohingya became a sacrificial lamb for both of these competitors. The Rohingya now face a dilemma in making the decision to support one or the other political parties, as the leaders of both parties were involved actively in instigating the Rohingya genocide in 2017. The situation for the Rohingya becomes complicated as they now find themselves caught between the 'devil and the deep sea'.

KEYWORDS

Myanmar, Military coup, Rohingya, Min Aung Hlaing, National Unity Government (NUG)

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INTRODUCTION

Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) returned to power in Myanmar through the instigation of a military coup on 1 February 2021. The military had already ruled the country for more than half a century, and the country's constitution allows Tatmadaw supremacy in government and domestic politics. The constitution safeguards the military's power to govern. It offers the military a quarter of reserved seats in all legislatures, veto power over constitutional amendments, and control over the vital ministries of defence, border affairs, and home affairs. It is protected from past human rights violations, as it holds the majority of seats on the National Defence and Security Council (NDSC) (Selth, 2020). The State Counsellor (*de facto* Prime Minister) of Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi's last initiative to bring about constitutional amendments failed (Huang, 2017). After winning the 2020 election, she was determined to change the constitution through the support of a coalition government and liaising with a number of minority ethnic political parties, even with the military-backed opposition party USDP, which the generals could not accept. As a result, Myanmar faced another military coup. There was too much mistrust between Aung San Suu Kyi and the generals, which triggered the military coup in 2021. However, Myanmar's citizens were not ready to go backwards with the new military government and started a strong resistance movement, including street protests, strikes, boycotts of military businesses, and social ostracism of military members and their families (Kipgen, 2021). The military responded to the protest with intense repression, including extrajudicial killings, shooting protesters, torturing prisoners, and raiding homes. More than 800 protesters were killed, hundreds of others wounded, and more than three thousand arrested in late 2021. Ne Win's notorious quote became true again: "When the army shoots, it shoots to kill" (Tucker, 2001, p. 228).

The United States, Canada and Britain have imposed sanctions in response to the coup. Strategically, China will benefit from these sanctions, as Myanmar's alienation from the West suits China's best interests. China and Russia's geopolitical stand on this issue were made clear when they vetoed condemnation of the coup jointly at the UN Security Council (UNSC) on 2 February 2021 (BBC, 2021a). However, China's interest in Myanmar was accommodated by Aung San Suu Kyi's Government. So, there was no obvious China connection or support with respect to the military coup. Nevertheless, China tackles western interference in Myanmar in ways that befit its own purposes in the country (Hutt, 2021; Zahed, 2021a).

Interestingly concerning the Rohingya crisis, the day after the coup, Myanmar's army chief pledged to protect the Rohingya (Westerman, 2021; Zahed, 2021a). The army coup leader, Min Aung Hlaing, employed a lobbyist to improve the relationship with the United States, promising that the Myanmar general would proceed with Rohingya repatriation from the sprawling camps in Bangladesh (Lewis, 2021; Zahed, 2021a). The interim National Unity Government (NUG) in Myanmar announced that it would amend the 1982 Citizenship Law, which had revoked Rohingya citizenship rights (Westerman, 2021). This was NUG's move to get international recognition. Promises came from both sides of politics with the aim of placating the nations that had brought sanctions to bear on Myanmar and generally as a ploy to gain international support. However, it was all very confusing for the Rohingya, as this was the same military chief who had carried out the genocide against Rohingyas on 25 August 2017, and the NUG's leaders are the same ones that had supported the military's genocidal activities. It is important to note here that none of these leaders clearly expressed willingness to recognise the Rohingya officially as a legitimate ethnic group and citizens of the country.

The paper is aimed at understanding the consequences of Myanmar's military coup on the Rohingya. The first section describes the background of the study: Rohingya crisis, election discrepancy and the military coup, anti-military protests, and formation of the interim government, NUG. The second section elaborates on the reactions of the international community

regarding Myanmar's military coup. The third section introduces the methodology. The fourth focuses on analysing and interpreting results. The final section involves a discussion of the findings before concluding the study.

ROHINGYA CRISIS

After gaining Burmese independence in 1948, President U Nu established a civilian government in the country. His democratic government's tenure (1948-1962) recognised the Rohingya as a separate ethnic group as they self-identified themselves as 'Rohingyas' (Haque, 2017; Thawngmung, 2016; Uddin, 2020). However, the situation worsened after the military takeover in 1962. Myanmar is a multicultural country with diverse ethnicities, religions, and languages; however, all ethnic groups are not enjoying equal rights opportunities today (Zahed, 2021b). Bamar Buddhists dominate every sector, including the armed forces, public services, and political parties in the country, as they make up more than two-thirds of the population (Whitten-Woodring et al., 2020). The Burmese military victimised many ethnic groups, resulting in armed conflicts in different parts of the country (Smith, 1991). Callahan (2012) argued that the Myanmar military was in power for more than four decades through civil war and organised violence. The military clearance operations certainly contributed to and had a role in creating the Rohingya crisis. The Myanmar military regime considers the Rohingya as foreigners or illegal residents (Alam, 2019). Although the Rohingya's minority identity was established for generations, newly evolving Burmese nationalism and politics with ethnicity create an ethnic division and reshape the Rohingya identity as a non-Burmese Muslim faith people (Alam, 2018). Thawngmung (2016) argued that the Myanmar government's stand on the Rohingya is because of their skin colour and religion. It is not uncommon for all minority ethnic groups in Myanmar to face various forms of discrimination (employment, benefits, education). Fink (2018, p. 262) argued that after independence, the Rohingya carried citizenship documents called National Registration Cards (NRCs), which do not mention the card holder's place of birth. The NRCs replaced the Temporary Registration Card (TRC). Thus, the Rohingya had no official evidence of birthplace, which is needed to claim citizenship in Myanmar (Blitz, 2010).

Myanmar Janta's use of laws with ill intent, especially the citizenship law of 1982, which was enforced in 1987, revoked Rohingyas' citizenship rights, thereby rendering them stateless and removing their minority status in the country (Parashar & Alam, 2019). Ne Win forcefully deported over 200,000 Rohingyas to Bangladesh in 1978 following a brutal military operation called 'Dragon King' (Nagamin) (Ullah, 2011). In 1991, the military government expelled another 250,000 Rohingyas, who once again took refuge in Bangladesh (Zahed & Prodip, 2021). The clearance operations carried out by the government included widespread physical and sexual violence, including killings and rape, which prompted forced migration or deportation into an adjacent country, Bangladesh.

Democratisation in Myanmar intensified polarisation among different Buddhist groups, the government, and minority ethnic groups that, caused various divisions to protect their respective interests; the Rohingya remained isolated without a political ally (Zin, 2015). Lee (2016) argued that liberalisation was fertile ground for ultranationalist Buddhists to influence the government and military to speed up Rohingya persecution. Myanmar's democratisation process started in 2011, establishing a civilian government with General Thein Sein as the leader. President Thein Sein brought a new dimension to the Rohingya conflict when he brought forward the agenda of Buddhist nationalism, patronising ultra-nationalist Buddhist monks who spread hate speech against Rohingya Muslims. As a result, he successfully speeded anti-Muslim sentiment in the country that worked as a catalyst to escalate the 'othering' of the Rohingya population. The government started referring to Rohingyas as Bengalis over the last few decades, framing them to appear as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh (Fink, 2018). Military elites and ultra-

nationalists hid behind Buddhist nationalism to set off political violence against Rohingyas (Subedi & Garnett, 2020). During communal violence in 2012, at least 192 Rohingyas died, 265 were wounded, and 8614 homes were destroyed, along with 11 out of 17 townships. More than 14000 Rohingyas ended up displaced and confined in internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps (Alam, 2019). The attacks mainly targeted Rohingya Muslims. This state-sponsored communal violence escalated further when President Thein Sein stated:

We will take care of our own ethnic nationalities, but Rohingyas who came to Burma illegally are not of our ethnic nationalities and we cannot accept them here. ... The solution to this problem is that they can be settled in refugee camps managed by UNHCR, and UNHCR provides for them. If there are countries that would accept them, they could be sent there

(Ware & Laoutides, 2018, p. 38).

When Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi came into power for the first time with a landslide win in the 2015 election, people worldwide, including Rohingyas, expected her to resolve the crisis in her tenure. However, her hybrid-democratic government surprised the international community in that her government's treatment of the Rohingya community worsened during this period of so-called democracy. In October 2016, more than 87,000 Rohingya people were forcefully deported into Bangladesh through a military crackdown. The most notorious genocide against Rohingyas happened in 2017 during Suu Kyi's civilian government. The Burmese security forces conducted mass killings, torture, rapes, the burning down of entire villages, the butchering and burning of children alive as a means to an end to destroy the entire Rohingya community (MacLean, 2019; Ware & Laoutides, 2018). About 10,000 people died, 392 villages were destroyed, and 742,000 people fled to Bangladesh (UNHCR, 2019). The Myanmar Government and security forces were accused by the International Court of Justice of crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing and genocide for brutal "clearance operations" against the Rohingya in 2016 and 2017 (Selth, 2020). So, we can see that both types of governments (military, democratic-civilian) treated Rohingyas in a similar fashion, with disdain.

ELECTION DISCREPANCY AND MILITARY COUP

Myanmar intended to continue its democratic system when it called for a national election in November 2020. About 5600 candidates contested for 1117 seats: in the lower house (315), the upper house (161), states and regional legislatures (641) (Thawngmung & Noah, 2021). The level of citizens' aspiration to choose their government became obvious when over 70% of voters presented in the vote camps, which was more than in the 2015 election, despite the COVID-19 situation and ongoing armed conflict and violence. NLD won 396 seats out of 476 in the Upper House and Lower House legislatures and 920 seats, when including regional legislatures (Beech, 2021d). In these contests, the main opposition party, the military-backed USDP, secured only 33 seats in the Upper House and Lower House legislatures and 38 seats in the regional legislatures (Kipgen, 2021).

Three days after the election, the military, with twenty small political parties, brought forward allegations of election fraud and refused to accept the results, demanding the Union Election Commission (UEC) to investigate (Thawngmung & Noah, 2021). The military demanded another election with the cooperation of the military to ensure free, fair, unbiased and even opportunity during the election campaign (Kipgen, 2021). Thein Tun Oo, the USDP spokesperson, accused the NLD candidate of accepting benefits during campaigning for the election since July 2020, and the issue of whether or not the USDP and other political parties had to follow the COVID 19 restrictions allowing five or more people to gather (Kyaw, 2020).

However, the commission had some limitations due to COVID related restrictions such as providing training to employees and volunteers. The UEC received around 300 complaints from many political parties about allegations of fraud, compared to forty-five complaints (Thawngmung & Noah, 2021). The allegations related to discrepancies on the voter list, low-quality ballot boxes, the use of envelopes, advanced voting, government's cash assistance, bribery, use of unverified materials on social media, repeat voting, as well as underage voting (Kipgen, 2021). The NLD demanded evidence for these allegations, while the Election commission dismissed them. The UEC confirmed that re-election was not necessary, rejecting the military's allegations of election fraud. The UEC stated:

“Only a few people accused the election of being unfair. But basically, democracy focuses on the voice of the majority of people. Some people might think the election was unfair, but they don't have any evidence to prove it unfair. There were minor flaws in the electoral procedures, but the commission has specifically announced them in order to correct them in future elections.”

(Kipgen, 2021, p. 6).

On 10 January 2021, Dr Nandar Hla Myint, the USDP spokesman's statement indicated that a military coup was imminent. He said:

“There was mass election fraud. The legislature needs to resolve these matters. If the new parliament convenes and forms the next government without addressing the issue, it will be historically damaging and could cause political chaos”

(Kipgen, 2021, p. 8).

In February 2021, a military coup took place, and the military released a public statement that the military had no choice but to take control of the country, as the election commissions and parliament did not respond appropriately to claims of election fraud, pointing especially to Aung San Suu Kyi's government's unwillingness to discuss the election issues in the parliament. Following the coup, Min Aung Hlaing seized power and declared a state of emergency for a year. President Win Myint, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, and other NLD leaders entered detention on the same day. The military announced emergency guidelines for a year and proclaimed it would establish a 'disciplined democracy' before handing the nation over to the winning party for a free and fair election (Thawngmung & Noah, 2021). There was, however, no mention of a timeline.

Most of Myanmar's population supports the anti-military coup. However, about fifteen to twenty-three small political parties complained of election fraud along with supporting the junta's military coup. The military regime has support from cronies, businesspersons, army family circles, and a few technocrats and collaborators (Thawngmung & Noah, 2021). Military junta pays bribes to low-income people to act as pro-coup protesters, known as “5000 Kyat earners” (Thawngmung & Noah, 2021). The military also took the step to minimise the monk's role in the protest. Three legendary monks (Myawaddy Sayadaw, Ashin Sobitha, and Shwe Nya War Sayadaw) who were military critics were detained the same day when the coup occurred. The military maintained deep relations with Buddhist lay organisations like the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) and the Patriotic Monk Association. The junta provided logistic support to them to support favouring the coup. Frydenlund, Mang, Wai, and Hayward (2021, p. 85) argue that the military planted the “fake monk” to achieve long-term support for the military. The Military was able to make some nationally respected famous monks pro-military, as monk Sithagu Sayadaw raised a question in his sermon over the election fraud just a week before the coup. MaBaTha issued a statement calling the coup for “protecting

race and religion.” The nationalist MaBaTha monk Ashin Wirathu has released from prison on 6 September 2021, negotiating with the military (Strangio, 2021b).

Though the international community praised the free and fair election process, Military General Min Aung Hlaing had no option but a coup to fulfil his high ambition of getting into power. The military coup leader was worried about losing military influence in parliament due to voters’ rejection. The NLD’s campaign and attempt to amend the constitution of 2008 also fostered this coup. The military opted for the time just after the election for the coup to justify it by alleging election fraud. Myanmar Junta amended the constitution of 2008 to eliminate Aung San Suu Kyi from Myanmar politics and created a barrier for her to becoming a prime minister. The military junta chose a similar tactic to block her from the future election since she has been sentenced to 11 years, and many charges are still under trial. During Aung San Suu Kyi’s tenure (2016–2020), the international community urged Suu Kyi to speak out for human rights and against the maltreatment of Rohingyas. Suu Kyi condensed too much on protecting her power rather than protecting minority groups in the country. She adopted a policy to walk along with the military to prevent any potential coup. As a result, she supported all military wrongdoings against the Rohingya. The military realised Suu Kyi’s weakness, and Suu Kyi’s tilt policy towards the military persuaded them to stage a coup.

ANTI-MILITARY PROTEST

The anti-military coup movement started immediately after the military seized power early morning on the 1st of February. It was mainly the youth that took the movement onto the streets to rid Myanmar of another military dictatorship. Different professionals joined the demonstrators and students, including teachers, lawyers, bankers, and government employees. A diverse group of organisations participated in an anti-military protest, such as the General Strike Committee (an umbrella group of twenty-six organisations of students, activist monks and Bamar political parties), the General Strike Committee of Nationalities (mainly the younger generations lead the committee and represent all ethnic groups including the Bamar majority and are inviting to the Rohingya as well), the Anti-Junta Mass Movement (AJMM), Bamar and non-Bamar civil society organisation networks, neighbourhood-based groups, and, armed ethnic groups (Thawngmung & Noah, 2021). Millions of workers joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), which brought massive encouragement for the protesters because CDM affected many departments in the nation and its economy, which caused the shutdown of much of the country (Beech, 2021c). Until April 2021, it is estimated that around 30% to 50% of employees in the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture were on strike, and about 50% of employees of the Ministries of Education, especially teachers, were on strike (Drechsler, 2021). Many protesters called for R2P (responsibility to protect), referring to intervention from the international community. They brought a creative approach to non-violence protests decorating roads with colourful women’s clothing on 8 March, International Women’s Day and named it the ‘*htamein revolution*’ (Gaborit, 2021). The Burmese term *htamein* means beautiful *sarong*, the traditional clothing of Myanmar women. There is a superstition in Burmese society that a man’s *hpon* (male superiority) would diminish if a man were to pass under a woman’s *htamein* or if a man’s clothes were washed with a woman’s *htamein* or undergarments. The protesters believed that soldiers were superstitious and afraid of women’s *sarongs*. The protesters adopted the tactic that they will have time to flee when the army stops to take down the laundry line, fearing they would lose their *hpon* (Gaborit, 2021).

On the day of seizing power, the military restricted telephone and internet access, shut down the stock market and banks, and cancelled flights (Goldman, 2021). The military provided a copy of the Cyber Security Law to all telecommunication and internet providers and directed them to allow the government to access or provide user data, block websites, and disconnect

problematic users from accessing the internet. The military strictly observes the media and revokes licences if any anti-military news is broadcast (Beech, 2021b). The military killed more than 800 demonstrators, including 40 children, and jailed more than 5000 people (Beech, 2021b). According to the UNCHR, the military disappeared hundreds of detainees, and five were killed in custody (Paddock, 2021a). The Military engaged in looting, fire-bombing, open-street kidnappings, and killings, including children (Drechsler, 2021). A protester described military brutality thus: “They are killing us like birds or chickens, even in our homes” (BBC, 2021b). Kyaw Win, the director of the Burma Human Rights Network, described military action as “It’s a massacre, it’s not a crackdown anymore,” the military showed “no limits, no principles” (BBC, 2021b).

NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT (NUG)

A group of parliamentarians who were elected in November 2020 formed a unity government named the Committee Representing *Pyithu Hluttaw* (CRPH) as the opponent to the military junta on 3 February 2021 (Strangio, 2021a). CRPH declared a new interim constitution rejecting the military-drafted constitution of 2008. The military targeted the NLD’s leaders after the military coup. Since they were either arrested or had fled, the NLD could not effectively lead the anti-military coup protest. So, CPRH came forward to lead the protest aiming to unite anti-coup groups, ethnic organisations, and others (Thawngmung & Noah, 2021).

However, the NLD had many conflicting issues with ethnic minorities that hindered bringing everyone under the same umbrella. Ethnicity is a significant factor in Myanmar politics. About thirty per cents of its population consists of diverse people representing over a hundred ethnic groups. The relationship between predominantly Bamar ethnic groups and other ethnic minorities has become normal because of the recent military coup. Many of the minorities had started insurgencies since independence in 1948, demanding autonomy and protecting their culture and welfare (Thawngmung & Noah, 2021). The government and the military represent the Barmar dominant ethnic group. The Tatmadaw killed tens of thousands of armed civilians of different ethnic groups and displaced hundreds of thousands of them since the country’s independence (Thawngmung & Furnari, 2019).

The democratic, transitional USDP government came to a multilateral Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) to facilitate negotiations and discussions with insurgent groups to establish a federal democracy in 2012 (Thawngmung & Noah, 2021). Four years later, in 2016, only eight armed groups out of twenty-one signed the NCA. After taking power in 2016, NLD’s nationwide ceasefire strategy failed due to its lack of strategy to deal with armed groups, which allowed the army to defend its hard-line approach. As a result, only two other ethnic groups signed during NLD’s regime. Some ethnic minority groups were not satisfied with the NLD as it had failed to appoint a Chief Minister from the Arakan National Party (ANP), which had gained the highest share of seats in Rakhine state following the 2015 election, as well, the Shan National League for Democracy (SNLD) gained the second-largest share of seats in Shan State. Both ethnic groups expected the appointment of Chief Ministers from among the political leaders in their ethnic groups, which did not eventuate (Thawngmung & Noah, 2021). The NLD decided to name a bridge in Mon state, remembering the father of the nation Aung San, the father of Suu Kyi. However, people in Mon state wanted to keep the bridge’s name related to the Mon regional identity (Mang, 2017). Similarly, the NLD constructed a statue of Aung San in Kayah state against the wishes of the people of Kayah (Gerin, 2018). The people of Karen were disappointed and offended when the NLD government prohibited the commemoration of the Karen revolutionary hero, U Gyi, who was killed in battle against the Myanmar army (Han, 2019). Many ethnic groups complained that the NLD government had focused on

constitutional amendments to restrict the military's role and enhance Suu Kyi's power rather than attending to welfare and development in the ethnic states (Thawngmung & Htoo, 2021).

The CRPA, on 16 April 2021, formed the National Unity Government (NUG), an internal government-in-exile, and claimed that NUG is the legitimate representative of the Burmese people. The main objective of NUG was to organise opposition to the military junta and garner local and international support for re-establishing genuine democracy in Myanmar. Former President U Win Myint and Aung San Suu Kyi remained President and State counsellor of the NUG. This intervening government selected Mahn Winn Khaing Thann, a Karen leader with a Christian background, as Prime Minister and Duwa Lashi La, a Kachin politician appointed as Vice President (NUG Web Page, 2021). Approximately half the ministers were representatives appointed from minority groups.

The different ethnic groups were aware of the Bamar dominant NLD and military. As a result, many ethnic groups remained independent and isolated from NUG; they believed that the NLD members followed the "Burmanisation" policy, hence their reason for rushing to form an interim government rather than resolving principal policy differences among the diverse ethnic groups (Thawngmung & Noah, 2021).

The NUG's priority was to gain international recognition. However, the western countries followed the 'wait and see' approach because if they had recognised NUG, they might have had to shut their embassies in Myanmar, which may have caused the loss of opportunities to influence Myanmar through diplomacy. Russia and China recognised the military coup. If western countries formally recognised the NUG as Myanmar's only legitimate government, they could lose the ability to influence Naypyidaw, which would allow China and Russia an undue advantage (Hutt, 2021). International organisations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), International Red Cross, and UN Human Rights Council postponed Myanmar's participation in their summits, so the question of acknowledgement of either the military regime or NUG will not arise. However, the military junta, General Min Aung Hlaing was invited to join the ASEAN summit in April 2021, which certainly provided him with a degree of political recognition from ASEAN members.

The Rohingya have been victims of genocide at the hands of the Bamar-dominated military and Rakhine neighbours (Drechsler, 2021; Selth, 2018). Bamar people had supported this genocide, which had rendered the Rohingya aliens in their own county. Since then, an increasing number of Bamar people have expressed their sympathies towards the Rohingya (Thawngmung & Noah, 2021). The biggest frustration for all concerned parties was the persecution of Rohingya and the repression of journalists and activists during Suu Kyi's government and NLD's term in office (Barany, 2018). US Congressman Ted Lieu stated that any recognition process of NUG would be blocked until it had a Rohingya representative (Hutt, 2021). This made good sense because the NUG has the same leaders who repressed the Rohingya; hence representation from Rohingyas and other ethnic groups was deemed necessary to enable a balanced approach to move forward with decision-making.

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY REACTION

This military coup in Myanmar was not sudden. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres had warned that a military coup was imminent three days before it happened (UN Secretary General, 2021). Seventeen diplomatic missions in Myanmar also expressed their concerns for democratic transition on 29 January 2021 (US Embassy Burma, 2021). However, after the military coup on 1 February 2021, the UN Security Council failed to condemn Myanmar's military coup via a joint statement because of China's veto (BBC, 2021a). China did not condemn the military coup; instead, it recognised the ensuing changes as a "major cabinet reshuffle" (Myers & Beech, 2021). China has had a strong relationship with the Burmese military



government since 1962. It built a strong relationship with Aung San Suu Kyi's government. US ambassador in Myanmar, Derek Mitchell, thinks the coup will allow China to counter US influence in Myanmar (Myers & Beech, 2021). But it goes further, Russian Deputy Defence Minister Alexander Fomin received a medal and ceremonial sword in a recent Burmese Armed Forces Day program (Paddock, 2021b). Chinese representatives also attended this ceremony. It seems like the old cold war games continue today in Myanmar. India is concerned with Myanmar's political instability, which can cause a new influx of refugees within its borders. However, India followed the strategy of diplomatic engagement. It did not oppose the military coup because of its economic and strategic interests and to counter China's growing influence in Myanmar.

Christine Schraner Burgener, the UN Special Envoy for Myanmar, advised the UN Security Council on 31 March 2021 that further action is essential to avoid a bloodbath in Myanmar (Lonas, 2021). The UN Security Council released a statement on 4 February 2021 asking for the immediate release of Aung San Suu Kyi and all detainees and the reinstatement of the democratically elected government in the country (UN Security Council, 2021). The military junta suspended Burmese diplomat U Kyaw Moe Tun when he condemned the military coup in his speech at the UN General Assembly on 26 February 2021. However, the UN rejected this dismissal (Beech, 2021a). The United Nations, the US, the UK, and many other European countries condemned the military coup and called for restoring democracy in Myanmar. The UK, US and Canada imposed additional sanctions on the military regime (Zahed, 2021a). On 10 February, President Joe Biden restricted access to one billion dollars in Burmese government funds deposited in the US (Sanger, 2021) and blocked \$42.4 million in US funding for Myanmar from the US Agency for International Development (USAID) (US Department of Commerce, 2021). The US government blocked military members and their family members involved in the coup from entering the USA. The United States, its allies, and the United Nations have sought to provide a coordinated response to the coup. US President Joe Biden asked the international community to work collectively to restore democracy and the rule of law in Burma (Zahed, 2021a). The USA's ally in South Asia, India, indirectly expressed its support to the military government. The US and G7 members advocated for ASEAN to address the Myanmar coup following the ASEAN summit in April 2021, at which General Min Aung Hlaing was a delegate (Paddock, 2021c). Fifteen ambassadors to Burma jointly released a statement on 14 February 2021 against the military's crackdown on the democratic movement. They stated that the overthrown NLD government is the country's legitimate government (US Embassy Burma, 2021). The military junta recalled Kyaw Zwar Minn, Burma's ambassador to the UK, and issued an order to lock down the Burmese embassy in London when Kyaw Zwar Minn had called for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint in a press release (Castle, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

The overarching question is: what consequences does the Myanmar military coup in 2021 have on the Rohingya crisis? This research applies a qualitative-interpretive methodology. The researcher carried out seven semi-structured interviews to collect information from two academics, one in Australia and the other from Bangladesh, and five Rohingya community leaders residing in Sydney and Brisbane, respectively. The two academic interviewees are faculty members of the University of New England, Australia and the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh, respectively; they are both experts in South and Southeast Asian politics and conflict studies. The five Rohingya participants are engaged in organising the Rohingya community in Australia and interacting internationally to bring attention to the Rohingyas' predicament. The author invited eight Rohingya leaders and five academic participants for an interview; however,

only seven in-depth interviewees gave consent. Data were collected from July 2021 to August 2021. The participants were recruited by using the snowball technique. Interviews were via telephone and zoom meetings due to COVID restrictions. Interviews could proceed only after gaining permission to record or take notes during interviews and for using the recorded data for research purposes. The questions were asked about Myanmar politics, the recent military coup, and the Rohingya crisis. Interviews were taken in English. The researcher coded the data and analysed these thematically across the emerging inductive and deductive slants, including narrative content, all of which ensured that the analyses captured information relevant to addressing the research question. Secondary sources included books, academic journal articles, reports, and online materials.

FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS

In this section, I discuss the views and thoughts of Rohingya community leaders who are concerned about the military coup and the effects of this has on their people in Myanmar. The academics interviewed are experts in Southeast Asian politics and conflict studies whose concerns are about the Myanmar military coup and anti-coup protests having consequences for the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar. Three broad themes classify the findings: 1) The military and anti-coup protesters; 2) The Rohingya dilemma: to support the anti-military demonstration or not; and 3) Rohingya crisis as a “catalyst” on the strategy of the junta and NUG.

THE MILITARY AND THE PROTESTERS

A group of people are supportive of the military coup that did not assist or benefit Aung San Suu Kyi's government and her NLD party. One of the interviewees said: “You [researcher] must count that there are some military supporters too. Their number is not very small.” Monks are significant persons in the predominantly Buddhist country of Myanmar. The rise of Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar started at the hand of military general Sein in 2012. As a result, one group of monks supported the military junta. The active support from other monks in anti-military protests can encourage ordinary people. Another interviewee said: “The Myanmar military has been ruling the country for a long time. As a result, they have a strong influence on different institutions. The monk is one of the best examples.”

All participants interviewed mentioned the influence monks had on the Rohingya genocide and as beneficiaries of the military's actions. One participant claims that many monks support the anti-military coup as well, but without protesting in the streets. He said:

Monks joined with the military in the Rohingya persecution and genocide from 2012 to 2017. Buddhist ultranationalist monks played a huge role in committing genocide and eradicating the Rohingya community from the Arakan state. However, the majority of the monks support the public protests. Few monks support the military coup because they have been getting financial support. A few of the public also support the military regime because they have supported it for generations.

Another participant thinks international support is essential for the demonstrators. He said: “Without support from the international agencies and civil society [monks] from within the country, the protest will be turned into the hype.” China already expressed their support for the military junta in that it vetoed UNSC's joint condemnation proposal. One participant argued that Chinese and Russian support for the military junta weakened the demonstration. He said:

I do not think the protest will be successful. There are several reasons for it not being successful, like geopolitical and the role of neighbouring countries. The main thing is that China is supporting the military as they did earlier. China is helping them to earn resources. China is getting the benefit out of it. China and ASEAN are not interfering with the army government in Myanmar.

Most of the elected members of parliament disappeared, fearing the military would arrest or kill them. The protesters did not feel safe inside or outside of their homes. A Rohingya leader described the military brutality towards protesters:

There is no leadership in Burma now. The military is massacring protesters. When they protested, the soldiers beat them and shot them down in the street. At night, the situation worsens. Military personnel catch active protesters and take them away. After killing protesters, they [military] leave a bag with dead bodies in front of the house.

NUG was formed as a group of representatives of different political parties, protester groups, and ethnic minorities. Each of these groups joined the protest with its own agenda. A person interviewed pointed out the weakness of the demonstration, which different groups' demands and ideologies had caused. He said:

There are several groups in the protest. Each one demands autonomy or independence. But the motives and ideologies of each group are different. There are conflicts within and between the groups [protesters]. I [participant] think they would not be able to get the government to step down unless all of them united. I want to be optimistic. I hope that the military government steps down and peace will remain again in Myanmar. The other main problem is that protesters and ordinary people face a financial crisis because they are jobless now.

THE ROHINGYA DILEMMA: TO SUPPORT THE ANTI-MILITARY DEMONSTRATION OR NOT

The Rohingya community suffered systematic persecution in Myanmar, which turned into genocide in 2017 at the hands of both the military and civilian governments. These governments had active support from monks and Barmar Buddhist people to carry out genocide. Now, with regard to the question of Rohingyas supporting the anti-military protest, the Rohingya remember the treatment that Burmese people and governments had meted out to them. A Rohingya community leader described it as a dilemma for Rohingyas on whether to support the protest. He said:

There are two groups of Rohingya people supporting the protest. One is saying that these people [Barmar] committed genocide against us. Moreover, although the military has committed genocide and war crimes against the Rohingya community, the public has played a similar role. They have added fuel to the fire. They also provoked and aided the governments against Rohingyas. Another group of Rohingyas say that these people [Burmese] have come to learn what Rohingya people suffered over the decade, and we [Rohingyas] should come and support them these days. However, even with the reaction of the people in Myanmar, there are about 70% [approximately] of the people now who are talking about supporting the Rohingya community, calling for the repatriation of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh

and acknowledging the fact that genocide has been committed towards the Rohingya community going back even before 2012, in 2016 and again in 2017. Still, 30% or more of the people are declining to accept the very existence of the Rohingya community in Arakan [Rakhine] state, calling them Bangladeshi immigrants. So, there is a division in the Rohingya community regarding the dilemma of supporting the protest or not.

A participant mentioned that Rohingyas supported Aung San Suu Kyi from the beginning of her political career, and still, they are optimistic about her getting back their fundamental [citizenship, land ownership] rights in the country. Several participants mentioned the limitations that Suu Kyi faces and attributed this to the country's constitution allowing military participation in the government. A participant said:

The junta controlled the Suu Kyi government by one hundred per cent. If we had a genuine democracy, Suu Kyi would not have had to go to the world's most significant court and defend genocide and war crime against her government. I think the Rohingya people are not very hopeful. They did not find anything positive from the military regime. So, I must say 'no' to the military government. Suu Kyi may come with something better for Rohingyas than the military. We loved Aung Sun Suu Kyi. We thought if She came into power, something would be better for us. However, she did not do anything for us.

The military regime started the Rohingya crisis in 1978. After that, the junta outlined the citizenship law in 1982. The military government created the impression of Rohingyas being aliens in Myanmar. A participant said, "Rohingyas may pretend to support the protest to make the conflict worse for the military." Rohingyas showed their solidarity with the protest from IDP camps and refugee camps in Bangladesh, showing "three-finger salutes." A Rohingya participant said:

They [Rohingyas] are not allowed to come from the IDP camp. They support NUG from Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and many other parts of the world. NUG is saying they made a mistake with the Rohingya people. Then also, the NUG government was still in the very initial stages of forming a government. There is a big question mark: will NUG give Rohingyas their rights or not?

Rohingyas tend to support NUG in order to get back their citizenship rights in the country. However, an academic participant argued that the change of government would not bring an ultimate result for the Rohingyas but rather that the government needs to first move away from its ultranationalism ideology. He said:

I think the change of regime does not matter much for the Rohingya crisis. Instead, the nationalism issue is most significant here. Because of the rise of nationalism in Myanmar, the government just made all the minority people vulnerable. I think the solution to the Rohingya crisis will depend not on the regime change but on the ideology.

ROHINGYA CRISIS AS “CATALYST” ON THE STRATEGY OF JUNTA AND NUG

The international community condemned the Myanmar military coup. Myanmar was an isolated country till 2011 due to the junta regime, and it faced economic sanctions from the US and European countries. The Military coup leader suspects that Myanmar will now see the imposition of similar treatment. Western leaders raised their voices against the Rohingya genocide that happened in 2017 and pressured the Myanmar government to accept the vulnerable stateless Rohingyas as people of Myanmar. After the military coup, the junta wants to take this opportunity to placate the international community by saying that they would resolve the Rohingya issue. An academic participant mentioned that this was a strategy of the military junta. He said:

I do not believe the military regime will resolve the crisis. It is a political game. They [military] are trying to assure that they [military] will not commit genocide again and are trying to satisfy the westerners. However, here, China is the key.

A Rohingya interviewee said the following about the earlier initiatives regarding Rohingya repatriation from Bangladesh:

This military regime is against the Rohingya and other ethnic communities, even the Burmese [Burmar] people. They [the military] just want to keep themselves in power and continue to grow their own businesses. There was a refugee repatriation program in Bangladesh in 1991. At this time, they [military government] had promised the security of Rohingya after repatriation and assured them [Rohingya] not to deprive them of their fundamental rights. However, what happened later? The conditions for Rohingyas remain the same in Myanmar.

Another participant argued that the military junta did not commit to returning Rohingya's citizenship rights in the country and said nothing about the process of how they [Rohingyas] would repatriate to Myanmar. He said:

There are social and political reconstructions that they do consider very positively and affirmatively. In the long term, it is inconceivable any military regime would do as promised regarding the repatriation of a brutally expelled minority group. However, the military dictator did say that he is very keen to resolve the problem. Nevertheless, he did not speak of anything specific concerning how he would resolve the issue. Note, Rohingyas have no documents or birth certificates that they can provide as evidence to prove that they belong in Myanmar. The government took these documents off them earlier in exchange for an ID card, so the question is: how will the Rohingya claim their rights to self-determination as citizens of Myanmar?

The NUG adopted a similar strategy to the military coup leader once again because they wanted international recognition for NUG. The NUG's priority was establishing an alternate government of Myanmar; to do so, they needed to gain support from international bodies and nations. So they adopted the strategy of calling for the resolution of the Rohingya issue. The international community [Western powers] had already demanded this from the Myanmar government for a long time. An expert participant was optimistic about NUG regarding this issue. He said:

Possibly they [NUG] will adopt that strategy [to concentrate on resolving the Rohingya issue]. They must please western counties. ASEAN is a multicultural organisation. Many countries in ASEAN are already victims of sizable refugee influxes. It does not want more refugee problems like Indonesia or Malaysia. So, the NUG wants to please ASEAN, too, through this kind of declaration.

All of the Rohingya participants responded positively regarding the NUG. However, they continued to have doubts about its intention to resolve the Rohingya issue. A participant in this study called for genuine democracy, complying with the Universal Declaration of 1948 and rescinding the citizenship law of 1982. He said:

We cannot believe the NUG hundred per cent. There are many groups involved in NUG. There is also no Rohingya representative. It is okay to establish a party. Nevertheless, we demand that the NUG should treat all groups equally to ensure the establishment of genuine democracy in Burma, with equal rights. If it [NUG] really wants to establish a true democracy, it must follow the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and remove the 1982 citizenship law. The parliamentary committee has not declared this unconditionally. However, they are not making any commitments either. There are IDP camps in Rakhine where many Rohingyas have been living for many years. Aung San Suu Kyi did not send them back to their own houses and provide them with protection. The Rohingyas who are living in Bangladesh are safe now. The Burmese military cannot go to Bangladesh to conduct genocide on them. However, Rohingyas at IDPs are at risk of genocide. The military can kill them at any time. The same leaders of the NUG could not solve the problem of these IDPs, so how will they now solve the whole Rohingya crisis?

DISCUSSION

The article concentrates on understanding the consequences of Myanmar's recent military coup on the Rohingya crisis. The study scrutinises the actual intentions of Myanmar's political regimes in the Rohingya crisis. The paper contributes to Myanmar's strategic adjustments and Southeast Asian politics. After the military coup, the military and the protesters, the ordinary people became competitors in the same political game. The military has also received some more public support which is alarming (Frydenlund et al., 2021). As Myanmar is a predominantly Buddhist country, monks are very respected and influential people in the country. Monks had made a vital contribution to every past revolution in Myanmar before the rise of Buddhist ultra-nationalism in 2012. Religious extremism is used effectively against religious minorities that are considered a threat, such as the Rohingya (Zahed & Jenkins, 2022). But the paradox is that Buddhist people are organised and support the current protest movement. However, despite popular support for the protests from many Buddhists, the Myanmar coup leader managed to get assistance from at least a few groups of monks and to do so offered them various benefits like financial assistance and promises to release monks who were involved in anti-government activities in the past from prison (Strangio, 2021b). For one reason or another, other groups of monks are not actively involved in the current protest movement (Thawngmung & Noah, 2021). All of the above suggests that the military's strategic success in remaining in power involves dividing the support bases of the protest movement, Buddhist monks, the previous opposition party NLD, and the conglomerate alternate/interim government, the NUG.

All participants in the interviews mentioned the necessity of international support for the protesters. China's support of the military government weakens the anti-military protest. China

has recognised the Myanmar coup as just a “reshuffle of administration” and imposed a veto in the UN Security Council meeting on the Myanmar coup issue, which has proved China’s unyielding support for Myanmar’s military government. Undoubtedly, Beijing wants to protect its interest in Myanmar (Hutt, 2021; Myers & Beech, 2021). Most of China’s projects in Myanmar are part of its Belt and Road Initiatives. It is not an important factor for Beijing who is running the government, whether military or civilian, as both regimes seem to have very good relations with Beijing. It is more important for China to remove and deter foreign intervention in Myanmar and stand firmly beside Myanmar as its protector to continue its development plans.

All of the interviewees considered the lack of strong leadership as the main shortcoming of the protest movement, along with deficiencies in unity, obscure ideological differences, and financial difficulties in securing funds to persist. In this protest, many ethnic organisations who want autonomy and many of those who have a conflict or prefer to distance themselves from the NLD have bought their own agendas forward. Without uniting on some common ground, the demonstration front cannot get to its destination of ousting the military regime from holding on to power illegally. The military’s extrajudicial killing and oppression are obstacles for the protesters, many of whom have suffered from the brutality of military repression. Most of the NUG leaders hide rather than lead the demonstration front.

Though the Rohingya express their anti-military sentiments regarding the coup, it is not a straightforward decision for them. Rohingyas have an ongoing conflict historically for past atrocities which the Military inflicted upon them as it was the Military that was behind the expulsion of the Rohingya from the country as per the clearing operations which the military generals designed as a solution in 1982 after adopting the new citizenship. Rohingyas living inside the Myanmar and IDP camps are under threat of becoming a victim of another genocide similar to 2017. So Rohingyas do not support the military. However, Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the quasi-democratic government, also followed the same strategy to drive out Rohingyas from the country (Barany, 2018; Selth, 2020). Her government was responsible for the Rohingya genocide in August 2017. The Rohingya have no choice, and they are still optimistic with regard to Aung San Suu Kyi, the top leader and state counsellor of the newly established interim government, the NUG, in the hope of getting back their citizenship rights and Rohingya identity in Myanmar.

Rohingyas mainly worry about the extreme Buddhist nationalism in the country for what the majority of ordinary Buddhist citizens stood for against the Rohingya Muslims and strongly supported their expulsion from Myanmar. Though most of the Buddhist people apologised to the Rohingya community, still many of them believe that Rohingyas do not belong in Myanmar, even though they have been living in the Arakan region of Burma [Rakhine State] for generations. So, the Rohingya have very little hope that NUG, if it can position itself to get into power, will do much for them unless it changes its policy of religious nationalism for the country.

After the military coup, the longstanding Rohingya issue was significant in both the coup government and the interim national unity government’s strategy or policy framework. The US and western countries are concerned about mass human rights violations against the Rohingya Muslim community in Rakhine (Hutt, 2021). However, their concerns never became important to the military leaders and Myanmar governments as China served as a guaranteed protector of Myanmar from western condemnation. Myanmar was once isolated from the rest of the world because the military in 1962 was in power illegally. To void the tension in the international arena, the military coup leader played a political game promising to “protect” the Rohingya (Westerman, 2021). It is very difficult to get someone, maybe the general himself, to believe his promise as he was the architect of the 2017 genocide against the Rohingya, aiming to play out his “final solution.” The military made a similar promise in 1978 and 1992 during the repatriation agreement signed between the Myanmar government and the government of

Bangladesh. But it was not an honest promise then and it is highly unlikely to be so now, as everyone concerned has experienced the duplicitous strategy involved in such promises.

Getting international support and recognition for the NUG is a very important priority for the interim/alternate government. Without international recognition, it cannot legitimately become a legal government of Myanmar. For this objective, the Rohingya issue finds an important place in its strategic policymaking. The international community [Western powers] cannot trust the NUG because the same NUG leaders now argue for resolving the Rohingya issue, which also supported the military to commit genocide against the Rohingya in 2017. The top leaders of the NUG were the NLD leaders who stood up for the military in the International Court of Justice to support their genocidal activities against Rohingyas.

Although the Rohingya community is presented with a dilemma of whether to support NUG, they are willing to accommodate NUG, as many of its leaders publicly apologised for the NLD and their repugnant role in the 2017 genocide. The main shortcoming of NUG's strategy concerning the Rohingya is that there is currently no Rohingya representative in the NUG's executive body. The Rohingya want the NUG to include a Rohingya representative to ensure equal rights for every people in Myanmar. This would follow the Universal Declaration of 1948, which stated: that every person in the world must be ensured citizenship. Rohingyas demanded that the citizenship law of 1982 be rendered void and the citizenship rights they had enjoyed from the time Burma gained independence from Britain be restored in full. Unfortunately, neither the NUG nor the military junta has any specific policy or roadmap to resolve the Rohingya issue thus far.

CONCLUSION

Myanmar's recent military coup was not unpredictable, and it happened with a clear signal. Myanmar constitution that the military had drafted encouraged the military to assume power via a *coup de tat*. This constitutional weakness (the army controls all security departments) made the country's State Counsellor helpless despite getting a clear signal that democracy in the country was about to fall via a military coup. The anti-military demonstration for returning democracy in the country is facing the difficulties of a military crackdown - brutal repression at the hands of the military. China's aid to the military leader at UNSC and powerful Buddhist monks who support the military junta together seems to make it possible for another longstanding military government to prevail in Myanmar. The Rohingya crisis became a political game for both the military junta and the NUG, who were vying to gain international support and recognition. Though the NUG came with the progressive policy of establishing the federal government formula and revoking the 2008 constitution, the international community seems not to be interested. This mistrust is most likely a response to Aung San Suu Kyi's position on the Rohingya issue in the International Court of Justice and their [Western Powers and their allies] stand on the Rohingya genocide in 2017.

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ORCID

Iqthyer Uddin Md Zahed  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8424-8684>

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Dr Iqthyer Uddin Md Zahed holds a PhD degree from the School of Humanities, Arts & Social Sciences of the University of New England, Australia. He researches Asian politics, genocide, forced migration, geopolitics, State policy, digital health, and child development. He currently works as a researcher at the Brain and Mind Centre, University of Sydney, Australia. He can be reached via izahedcu@gmail.com

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