

## **A New Age: The Transition to Democratization in Myanmar**

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The transition from military rule to democracy is a challenging journey fraught with obstacles and setbacks. Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, exemplifies this struggle as it

navigates through the complexities of democratization. This essay aims to explore Myanmar's transition process, focusing on the progress made, persistent challenges faced, and the broader implications for its future. Myanmar's transition from military rule to democracy has been a long and arduous process. Following decades of authoritarianism under military rule, significant steps towards democratization were initiated in the early 2010s. Central to this transition was the conduct of open general elections in 2015, which marked a significant turning point in the country's political landscape. Led by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), these elections symbolized the people's aspirations for change and represented a crucial step towards civilian rule (Al Jazeera 2021).

Myanmar's transition holds particular significance due to its unique geopolitical position and historical context. As a nation with rich cultural heritage and diverse ethnic populations, its journey towards democracy offers valuable insights into the complexities of political transformation in post-authoritarian societies. Moreover, Myanmar's strategic importance in Southeast Asia makes it a compelling case study for understanding the dynamics of democratization in the region. However, despite notable strides in democratization, Myanmar faces persistent challenges, particularly regarding military influence and ethnic tensions, as evidenced by its transition to civilian rule, attempts at constitutional reform, and handling of the Rohingya crisis.

### **History of Military Rule**

Myanmar's history with militaristic rule dates to its independence from British colonial rule in 1948. Initially, the country began as a parliamentary democracy but saw a dramatic shift in 1962 when General Ne Win led a military coup, ushering in twenty-six years of military rule (Maizland, 2022). During Ne Win's regime, an isolationist foreign policy and socialist economic

program were implemented, resulting in the nationalization of major enterprises and a deteriorating economic situation. By 1988, widespread corruption, economic instability, and food shortages led to massive protests, culminating in a brutal crackdown by the army, which resulted in thousands of deaths and displacements. In the aftermath, Ne Win resigned as chairman of his party, but military rule persisted. The military regime changed the country's name to Myanmar in 1989 and moved the capital to Nay Pyi Taw in 2005, citing inclusivity as a rationale (Maizland, 2022). Despite international pressure and widespread protests, including the 2007 Saffron Revolution, the military-maintained control and introduced a new constitution in 2008, granting the military significant powers even under civilian rule. The official dissolution of the military committee in 2011 led to the establishment of a military-dominated civilian parliament, with former army bureaucrat Thein Sein appointed as president (Maizland, 2022). Although some reforms were initiated during Sein's presidency, including the release of political prisoners and relaxation of media censorship, the military retained control over domestic security and foreign relations (Maizland, 2022). The 2015 nationwide elections saw the landslide victory of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), yet the military, known as the Tatmadaw, continued to wield considerable influence through reserved parliamentary seats and constitutional provisions safeguarding their dominance.

### **Measures for Democratization**

The National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, played a crucial role in Myanmar's transition from military rule to civilian governance. Aung San Suu Kyi's familial ties to military general Aung San lent credibility to her leadership as she resisted the oppressive military regime, enduring house arrest and persecution. Under her guidance, the NLD mobilized supporters through grassroots organizing and civil disobedience, culminating in a

landslide victory in the 2015 general elections (Al Jazeera, 2021). Despite constitutional constraints, Aung San Suu Kyi assumed the role of State Counsellor, effectively becoming the de facto leader, facilitating the peaceful transfer of power, and initiating democratic reforms amidst military skepticism (Al Jazeera, 2021). The NLD actively pursued constitutional amendments to reduce the military's political power, aiming to address undemocratic provisions entrenched in the military-drafted constitution (Aung, 2020). However, these efforts faced significant challenges and resistance from the military and conservative political forces, underscoring the entrenched nature of military influence and the complexities of democratic reform in Myanmar. Despite hurdles, the NLD remains committed to constitutional reform as a crucial step towards genuine democratization and national reconciliation.

### **External Actors' Influence on Democratization**

External actors, including international organizations, foreign governments, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), have also played a significant role in shaping Myanmar's journey towards democratization. One key aspect of their influence is in the realm of economic development. International financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have provided financial assistance and technical expertise to support Myanmar's economic reforms, which are seen as essential prerequisites for political liberalization (Estevão et al., 2020). Moreover, external actors have been instrumental in supporting political reforms in Myanmar. Diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, and conditional aid have been leveraged by the United States, and other foreign governments to encourage the Myanmar government to undertake democratic reforms, such as releasing political prisoners, relaxing media censorship, and allowing greater political participation (Obama, 2012).

Overall, the influence of external actors on Myanmar's democratization journey has been multifaceted, spanning economic, political, and social dimensions. While external support has contributed to considerable progress in democratization, it has also faced challenges and limitations, including resistance from entrenched interests within Myanmar and concerns about sovereignty and external interference. Nonetheless, the role of external actors remains pivotal in supporting Myanmar's ongoing efforts towards building a more inclusive and democratic society.

### **Resistance to Democratization**

However, despite the country's transition to quasi-democratic governance, the military, known as the Tatmadaw, maintains considerable influence (Thiha, 2022). Operating independently from civil agencies, the Tatmadaw has expanded its role beyond traditional defense duties to include national politics, religion, and culture, solidifying its position as a guardian of the nation. Upholding ideological principles such as the "Three Main Causes," the military justifies its political role and influence, positioning itself above other institutions and parties (Thiha, 2022). Despite democratic transitions, the Tatmadaw's hegemony remains unchallenged, shaping Myanmar's political trajectory.

One pressing issue in Myanmar's democratization efforts is the crisis involving the Rohingya Muslims. Numbering around one million, Rohingyas face persecution and denial of citizenship by the government (BBC, 2020). Historically marginalized, Rohingyas have been excluded from the census and denied recognition as a distinct ethnic group. The crisis gained international attention in 2017 when deadly attacks by Rohingya militants prompted a brutal military response, leading to mass displacement and thousands of deaths. Accused of genocidal acts by UN investigators, Myanmar faced international scrutiny, leading to legal actions and investigations (BBC, 2020). Despite denials and claims of conducting investigations, doubts

persist about Myanmar's efforts to address the crisis, leaving Rohingya refugees in precarious conditions.

### **Application of Dahl's Criteria of Polyarchy**

The application of Robert Dahl's criteria of polyarchy offers a framework for assessing Myanmar's democratization. These criteria, including free and fair elections, civil liberties, and inclusivity, are vital for a functioning democratic system (Krouse, 1982). Firstly, examining free and fair elections is crucial. While Myanmar has transitioned to quasi-democracy, concerns persist about electoral integrity, including allegations of voter intimidation and restrictions on opposition parties (Nachemson, 2021). Challenges remain in ensuring fairness and transparency. Secondly, assessing civil liberties is essential. Myanmar has made strides since media censorship relaxation and political prisoner releases (Obama, 2012). Yet, restrictions on freedom of expression and harassment of journalists persist, indicating ongoing struggles for full civil liberties. Lastly, inclusivity is key. Myanmar faces challenges due to ethnic tensions and minority marginalization, exemplified by the Rohingya's exclusion from the electoral process and ongoing persecution (BBC, 2020). Therefore, while Myanmar has made significant strides towards democratization, challenges persist in ensuring fair elections, protecting civil liberties, and fostering inclusivity. Addressing these challenges is crucial for Myanmar's journey towards polyarchy and inclusive governance.

### **Comparison with Other Democratizing Countries: Indonesia**

Myanmar is not the only country that has made strides in transitioning to democracy after experiencing authoritarian rule. Myanmar's democratization journey shares similarities and

differences with Indonesia, offering valuable insights for both countries (Anwar, 2019). Both nations emerged from authoritarian rule and transitioned to democracy, but with distinct contexts. Myanmar and Indonesia faced military-dominated governance before transitioning to civilian-led administrations. However, while Indonesia's military supported democratization, Myanmar contends with ongoing military influence. Indonesia's pluralistic state ideology, Pancasila, promotes inclusivity and tolerance, contributing to its successful democratization. In contrast, Myanmar faces challenges from ethnic tensions and minority treatment, notably the Rohingya crisis (Anwar, 2019; Maizland, 2022).

Myanmar can learn from Indonesia's emphasis on pluralism and inclusivity to address similar challenges. Additionally, Indonesia's experience highlights the importance of political consensus and stakeholder engagement in building a resilient democracy (Anwar, 2019). Myanmar can use these insights to overcome military influence, promote inclusive governance, and foster national unity amidst diversity.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Myanmar's journey toward democracy reflects both noteworthy progress and enduring challenges. While strides have been made, particularly with the conduct of open elections and the emergence of civilian leadership under Aung San Suu Kyi, critical issues such as military influence and ethnic tensions persist. Addressing these challenges is imperative for Myanmar's future stability and prosperity. By drawing lessons from its own history and comparative analyses with other democratizing nations like Indonesia, Myanmar can chart a course toward a more resilient and inclusive democratic future. Upholding democratic principles, fostering political consensus, and prioritizing national reconciliation are essential steps in this journey.

The aspirations of the Myanmar people for freedom, justice, and equality remain paramount. Through collective action and unwavering determination, Myanmar can overcome its challenges and fulfill its democratic aspirations. The road ahead may be challenging, but with perseverance and a commitment to democratic ideals, Myanmar can indeed realize its full potential as a flourishing democratic nation in the global community.

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