

Myanmar Post-Coup: Hopes for a Federal Future

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The debate on the prospect of a federal Myanmar has been a constant undercurrent in the politics of the state for almost 8 decades. Prior to the country's independence in 1948, discussion on securing autonomy dominated political narratives and in the aftermath of the promulgation of the 1948 Constitution continued to feature in political debate. The dominance of the military and its pro-centralist vision and authoritarian tendencies hindered prospects of federalisation, forcefully evidenced in the 1962 military coup led by General Ne Win and subsequent dictatorship. From the 2000s on, there was a softening in approach by leading military figures vis-à-vis processes of democratisation and federalisation, albeit rhetoric did not always align with actions. The signing of a National Ceasefire Agreement in 2015 by several Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) to end their resistance against the government in exchange for a peace process and lasting political reforms and subsequent resounding victory for the National League for Democracy (NLD) in the November 2015 elections, reinvigorated the debate on democracy and federalism.

The Union Peace Conference was established in 2016 to facilitate negotiations between Myanmar's principal political actors – the NLD-led Government, the military and different EAOs. A key challenge that emerged during the different rounds of negotiations was the different agendas of the main reform drivers: While the NLD-government focused substantially on constitutional changes that would limit, and eventually eliminate, the role of the military in the political affairs of the country, EAO representatives were particularly focused on the implementation of a federal system. Military figures expressed support for federalism in principle, but in consonance with their long-standing hesitance to dividing power, demonstrated little commitment to enduring reform (Anderson and Keil 2024). In the aftermath of another overwhelming victory for the NLD in the 2020 general election, the military staged another coup in 2021. Senior figures, including State Counsellor Aung Sang Suu Kyi were arrested and the hopes of institutionalising major reforms were significantly dashed.

The coup, nonetheless, has been met with significant resistance and has reinvigorated the federal debate in Myanmar. A National Unity Government (NUG) was established to lead in preparing the country for post-military rule with a strong commitment to promoting federalism and engaging in coalition building with EAOs. In recognition of its commitment to diversity and to increase its legitimacy, the NUG created 'explicitly pan-ethnic' institutions, including a multi-ethnic cabinet to represent all Myanmar citizens (Kaung Myat et al, 2022: 284). Further, addressing gaps between the NLD and ethnic peoples vis-à-vis understandings of federalism, particularly the lack of concrete detail on the former's federal vision (Breen 2018), there has been closer alignment between these different groups with the commitment to federalism featuring prominently in debate and official publications. The Federal Democracy Charter, for instance, published in March 2021 committed anti-coup forces to construct a 'Federal Democratic Union' (South, 2021: 448).

The 2021 coup certainly impeded concrete progress in the democratic transition and federalisation process, but it has concomitantly reinvigorated the federal debate and engendered closer cooperation between coup-opposition forces. The prospect of a federal Myanmar may seem far off in the distance, but the military coup has strengthened not weakened the federal resolve. Cautious optimism remains.

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