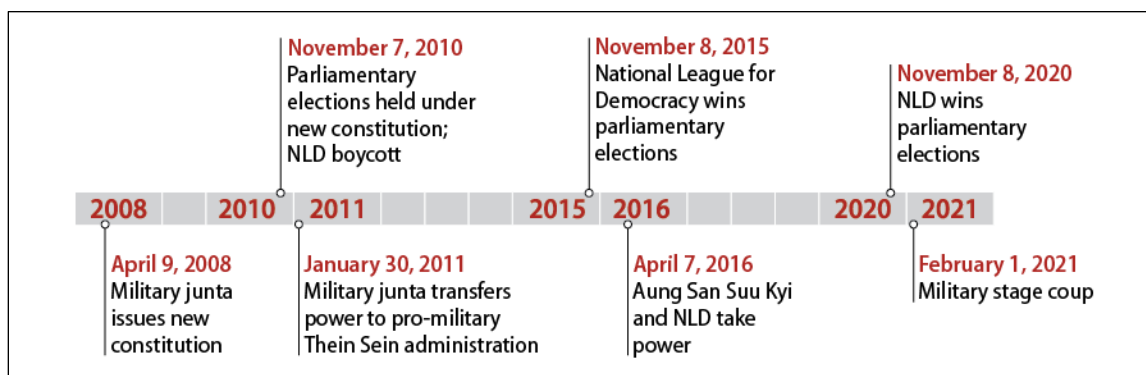


# Coup in Burma (Myanmar): Issues for U.S. Policy

February 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 1. 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 (see **Figure 1**). The Biden Administration is reviewing U.S. assistance to Burma, as required by law, and considering re-imposing sanctions (see below). Any U.S. effort to coordinate a multilateral response to events in Burma may be complicated by the reluctance of China, India, and Thailand to interfere in the internal affairs of their neighbor.

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IN11594

## 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, [issued a statement](#) indicating 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 from among three candidates nominated by the Union Parliament and the Tatmadaw. Min Aung Hlaing was widely expected to step down as Commander in Chief later this year, and had expressed interest in becoming President. The NLD's victory in the parliamentary elections made his selection as President unlikely.

**Figure 2. Map of Burma**



Source: CRS.

Another possibly significant factor may have been the deteriorating security and economic situation. The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has [caused a severe recession](#). The country's long-running civil war has worsened over the last two years, with major fighting in the states of Kayin (Karen), Rakhine, and Shan between the Tatmadaw and several ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) (see **Figure 2**).

The Tatmadaw [hope the coup will obtain popular support](#) if it can restore political, social, and economic order.

### Who is in control of Burma?

The Tatmadaw have effectively taken over the nation. The administrative capital, Nay Pyi Taw, [is under Tatmadaw control](#), as are most regional capitals. The only television network in operation is Myawaddy, which is [owned and run by the Tatmadaw](#). Tatmadaw soldiers are patrolling the streets of Yangon (Rangoon) and other major cities. The Tatmadaw [have appointed](#) a State Administrative Council, chaired by Min Aung Hlaing, that will govern until new elections are held. The Tatmadaw [say new elections will be held](#) in a year, after changes are made in the 2008 constitution and the Union Election Commission. The Tatmadaw have also [announced](#) a unilateral, one-month ceasefire for the entire nation, hoping for a break in the fighting with the EAOs.

### What has been the reaction in Burma?

Aung San Suu Kyi has called on the people of Burma to oppose the coup. Peaceful demonstrations reportedly have arisen across the country, including in the nation's [ethnic minority areas](#). Many of the nation's medical workers [staged a walkout](#) on February 3, raising the possibility of a general strike. Some 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*.)

President Biden [stated](#) that the coup would "necessitate an immediate review of our sanction laws and authorities, followed by appropriate action." Prior to the NLD's entry into government, the United States had a number of sanctions on Burma pursuant to legislation and executive orders. In October 2016, President Obama waived most of the sanctions by [Executive Order 13742](#). President Obama also ended some restrictions on U.S. foreign assistance to Burma via a presidential proclamation. Various sanctions remained in effect prior to the coup, including visa bans on certain Burmese nationals and restrictions on U.S. aid, some pursuant to the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 (P.L. 116-260). Several Burmese security force commanders also are subject to U.S. sanctions under Executive Order 13818 ("Global Magnitsky").

Some Members of Congress are consulting with the Biden Administration on the U.S. response to the coup. A [Senate resolution](#) has been introduced calling on President Biden to "reinstate and impose new targeted restrictions aimed at the Tatmadaw, military-owned or controlled enterprises, and those responsible for the February 1, 2021, coup."

### How have other governments responded?

U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres "[strongly condemn\[ed\]](#)" the military's actions, which "represent a serious blow to democratic reforms in Myanmar." Senior European officials [condemned the coup](#). Officials in Japan, [Australia](#) and [Singapore](#), among [others](#), expressed concern while [others in the region](#), including [Indonesia](#) and [Malaysia](#), expressed concern about Burma's democratic processes. China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin [stated](#) "We hope that all parties in Myanmar will properly

handle their differences under the constitutional and legal framework and maintain political and social stability.”

On February 2, the U.N. Security Council held a closed meeting on Burma’s coup. U.N. Special Envoy on Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener [urged the Security Council](#) “to collectively send a clear signal in support of democracy in Myanmar.” The Security Council [did not agree](#) on a joint statement due to opposition from China.

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