

Myanmar's Struggle for Democracy

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The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said it was deeply concerned about the situation in Myanmar, after the military staged a coup and declared that it had taken control of the country for one year under a state of emergency. The country's top leadership, including de-facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi, have also been detained. India has always been steadfast in its support to the process of democratic transition in Myanmar. The unrest in India's neighbourhood will pose several challenges.

In news: Democratically elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi ousted by the Military Junta in Myanmar

Placing it in syllabus: Foreign Affairs

Dimensions:

- Myanmar's History of Military Rule and Democratic Movements
- India's Role in the Democratic Movements
- India's Relations with Myanmar pre 1991
- Relations post 1991
- How should India handle the situation today?

Content:

Myanmar's History of Military Rule and Democratic Movements:

- Myanmar (formerly Burma) has been beset with political instability since it declared independence from Britain in 1948.
- Between 1958 and 1960, the military formed a temporary caretaker government at the behest of U Nu, the

country's democratically-elected prime minister, to resolve political infighting.

- The military voluntarily restored civilian government after holding the 1960 Burmese general election.
- Less than two years later, the military seized power in the 1962 coup, which under the leadership of Ne Win, precipitated 26 years of military rule.
- In 1988, nationwide protests broke out in the country. Dubbed the 8888 Uprising, the civil unrest was sparked by economic mismanagement, leading Ne Win to step down.
- In September 1988, the military's top leaders formed the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which then seized power.
- Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of the country's modern founder Aung San, became a notable pro-democracy activist during this period.
- In 1990, free elections were allowed by the military, under the assumption that the military enjoyed popular support.
- Ultimately, the elections resulted in a landslide victory for Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy. However, the military refused to cede power and placed her under house arrest.
- The military remained in power for another 22 years until 2011, following the military's roadmap to democracy.
- In 2008 a new Constitution of Myanmar was drafted.

2011–2015 Myanmar political reforms

- In the period of 2011-2015 a series of political, economic and administrative reforms in Myanmar undertaken by the military-backed government
- These reforms include:
 - the release of pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest and subsequent dialogues with her,

- establishment of the National Human Rights Commission,
- general amnesties of more than 200 political prisoners,
- institution of new labour laws that allow labour unions and strikes,
- relaxation of press censorship, and
- regulations of currency practices.
- Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy, participated in by-elections held on 1 April 2012 after the government abolished laws that led to the NLD's boycott of the 2010 general election.
- She led the NLD in winning the by-elections in a landslide, winning 41 out of 44 of the contested seats,
- In the general elections held in 2015 resulted in a victory for Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy.
- However, the military retained substantial power, including the right to appoint 25% of parliament members.

2021 Myanmar coup d'état

- The 2021 coup occurred in the aftermath of the general election on 8 November 2020, in which the National League for Democracy (NLD) won 396 out of 476 seats in parliament, an even larger margin of victory than in the 2015 election.
- The military's proxy party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party, won only 33 seats.
- The results of the 2020 election, held during the pandemic, were being seen by the NLD as a mandate for its plan of constitutional reform, through which it aimed to do away with the military's role in politics and governance.
- The army disputed the results, claiming that the vote was fraudulent.

- The coup attempt had been rumoured for several days, prompting statements of concern from Western nations such as the United Kingdom, France, the United States, and Australia.

India's Role in the Democratic Movements:

- During Jawaharlal Nehru's time India fully supported the democratic forces represented by U Nu
- India provided considerable support when Myanmar struggled with regional insurgencies.
- The conditions changed after U Nu was overthrown in a military coup and Gen. Ne Win took over.
- Along with much of the world, India condemned the suppression of democracy and Myanmar ordered the expulsion of the Burmese Indian community, increasing its own isolation from the world.
- Only China maintained close links with Myanmar while India supported the pro-democracy movement.
- This allowed Burma to slide into seclusion and accepting Chinese hegemony to India's detriment
- India fully supported the pro-democratic forces in Myanmar and continued to do so even when the NLD was denied its right to rule after the 1990 elections.
- In the 1980s, India wholeheartedly supported the Burmese pro-democracy movement – both in the region and in the UN.
- It opened its doors to the refugees who fled the brutal military crackdown in 1988.
- Burma's military rulers even accused India of funding dissident groups including the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) and the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB) .
- Supporting democracy and ASSK proved costly for India as China made deep inroads into Myanmar by fully supporting the military rulers.
- India had to change its policy and mended fences with

the military junta because of serious security and strategic considerations.

India' Relations with Myanmar pre 1991:

- India – Myanmar/Burmese relations date to antiquity and cultural exchanges included Buddhism and the Burmese script, which was based on the Indian Grantha script.
- In particular, Theravada Buddhism has tremendously influenced Burmese society and culture for millennia, with around 90% of Burma's population continuing to follow the religion.
- Myanmar (formerly Burma) was made a province of British India by British rulers and again separated in 1937.
- It was in Japanese-occupied Burma that Indian nationalist Subhas Chandra Bose delivered his "Give me blood and I will give you freedom!" slogan, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted Burma's role in the Indian independence movement.
- India established diplomatic relations after Myanmar's independence from Great Britain in 1948.
- India and Myanmar relationship officially got underway after the Treaty of Friendship was signed in 1951.
- For many years, Indo-Burmese relations were strong due to Myanmar previously having been a province of India, due to cultural links, flourishing commerce, common interests in regional affairs and the presence of a significant Indian community in Myanmar.
- However, the overthrow of the democratic government by the Military of Myanmar led to strains in ties.
- In such a scenario, India cut off its diplomatic ties with Myanmar.
- A major breakthrough occurred in 1987 when the then-Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi visited Myanmar, but relations worsened after the military junta's reaction towards pro-democracy movements in 1988, which resulted in an influx of Burmese refugees into India.

Relations post 1991

- Since 1993 the governments of the Indian Prime Ministers P. V. Narasimha Rao and Atal Bihari Vajpayee changed course and began to establish warmer relations between the two nations.
- Under India's Look East policy, fields of cooperation between India and Myanmar include remote sensing, oil and gas exploration, information technology, hydropower and construction of ports and buildings.
- In 2008, India suspended military aid to Myanmar over the issue of human rights abuses by the ruling junta, although it has preserved extensive commercial ties, which provide the regime with much-needed revenue
- The relations were restored as part of:
 - a wider foreign policy of increasing India's participation and influence in Southeast Asia,
 - Countering growing influence of the People's Republic of China
 - Insurgency problems in NE India (an India-Myanmar joint operation destroyed several militant camps of Arakan Army on the Indo-Myanmar border)
- India's ties with Myanmar improved substantially after Gen. Maung Aye's visit to New Delhi in 2000, the landmark visit by President U Thein Sein in October 2011 and the return visit by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Naypyitaw in May 2012, the first such visit in 25 years.
- These exchanges have fundamentally changed the context. Myanmar's international image improved since then and encouraged other countries including President Obama to visit Naypyidaw in November 2012.
- However, after the initial support, India failed to sustain the quantum of support for the pro-democracy movement. Suu Kyi expressed disappointment over India's courting the junta and backing away from supporting her when she visited New Delhi in 2012.

- The ambitious Kaladan transit and transport project is important for improving the connectivity in the Northeast.
- Myanmar is important for India because of the geographic, historical, cultural and economic linkages/ties that span centuries as well as for the overall development of North-Eastern Indian states.

How should India handle the situation today?

- The Prime Minister must reach out to Myanmar in unconventional ways and remove any antipathy among the people who once had begun to perceive India as a big military threat.
- China fully exploited those sentiments. The junta even looked once upon a time to Pakistan for military aid.
- India relations with Myanmar cannot be a bilateral affair – rather it is a matter of regional security and India's long-term interest.
- India should acknowledge Myanmar's military's role in stabilizing a country beset by an unprecedented insurgency problem that helped India as well.
- One very clear and indigestible truth is that the role of the Military in that country cannot be wished away easily. Any paradigm shift in policy will be too optimistic.
- Myanmar shares long borders with China with which it has a long historical association. India, therefore, should not aim to compete or replace Chinese influence but should exploit those areas where it enjoys a distinct edge in Myanmar.
- India should work on strategic convergences and shared concerns of dealing with insurgency along border areas. Dealing with Rohingya refugees is an important agenda.
- India's foreign policy should be a balancing act between supporting pro-democratic movements and maintaining closer relations with Myanmar.

Mould your thought: How has the relations between India and Myanmar evolved since independence? What should India do in the wake of the recent coup in Myanmar?

Approach to the answer:

- Introduction
- Write about historical relations between India and Myanmar
- Write about India's stance regarding recent coup
- Write about the steps to be taken in future
- Conclusion