
South Korea's Response to the Myanmar Military Coup in 2021

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Abstract: On 1 February, 2021, on the grounds that the 2020 election was fraudulent in nature, Myanmar's military launched a coup and declared martial law, arresting major government leaders. Myanmar citizens have protested the coup through a movement of civil disobedience. The military, in turn, mobilized soldiers and police to curb the protests with force. The U.S. and South Korea immediately demanded that the military release the arrested government personnel, including Aung San Suu Kyi, whose reputation as a peacemaker and Nobel Prize winner had been tarred by her handling of the Rohingya refugee crisis in 2017. Among East Asian countries, South Korea is the only one wherein thousands of people, including President Moon Jae-in, have demonstrated their support for Myanmar's democratic movement. This study aims to understand why South Korea is alone among East Asian countries in their support of Myanmar's democratic movement. Additionally, we will investigate some crucial, socio-political implications underlying this support.

Key words: Coup, democracy, Gwangju, military, Myanmar, South Korea

INTRODUCTION

Myanmar, located in Southeast Asia, is bordered by Bangladesh and India to the west and China, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam to the east. In 1948, after a long period of British colonial rule, Myanmar became an independent state, following Japanese occupation during World War II. But Myanmar's trajectory toward democracy has been stifled. Various internal power struggles, an incessant line of new military dictators, and an inability to change patterns generations in the making have kept Myanmar from achieving the democracy that many of its people believe is possible. General Ne Win (1911-2002) came to power through a coup in 1962 and held dictatorship until a series of protests in 1988 called "the 8888 Uprising." He was followed by General Saw Maung (1928-1997), whose use of the military further stymied progress. Hope came in fits and spurts through the checkered political career of Aung San Suu Kyi. Her role in "the 8888 Uprising" and her leadership in movements

like the National League for Democracy have led many across the globe to celebrate Ms. Suu Kyi. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, the Congressional Gold Medal in 2008, and the Amnesty International Ambassador of Conscience Award in 2009 – among other international honors. In the 2015 general election, she helped steer a civilian government into power (Park and Kim, 2021), and she served as Myanmar's State Counsellor and Minister of Foreign Affairs through 2021. But many of her honors were rescinded when it became clear that Ms. Suu Kyi failed to control the military during the massacre of the Rohingya minority ethnic group (YTN, 2021). The military took advantage of Suu Kyi's damaged reputation, weakening her political authority by initiating a coup on 1 February, 2021, under the instructions of Supreme Commander Min Aung Hlaing. Myanmar's military claimed that the 2020 general election was a fraudulent one, and once again the military emerged as the bearer of political power and waited a full year before holding another general election. In response, the citizens of Myanmar have initiated a movement of civil disobedience, organizing a variety of protests. The military has mobilized special force soldiers and policemen to curb the protests, and there has been no shortage of brutal beatings, imprisonments, and even killings. On 2 February 2021, the U.S. government officially defined the incident in Myanmar as a "military coup." China, Russia, and Japan have also expressed their desire for a fair solution to the Myanmar crisis; though their activity can be interpreted as merely diplomatic, since none of them delivered any strong action against the military (News Live, 2021). The solitary East Asian country that has emerged as a clear supporter of the democratic movement in Myanmar is South Korea. South Korean leaders have pointed out the brutality of the Myanmar military coup, and South Korean organizations – both political and apolitical – have initiated tangible countermeasures. In what follows, we will investigate the reasons why the democratization movement in Myanmar has elicited such a strong response from South Korea. We will conclude with considerations of the socio-political implications of South Korea's response.

SOUTH KOREA'S RESPONSE TO THE MYANMAR MILITARY COUP

Response from the South Korean Government

In February of 2021, when the actions of the Myanmar military were brought to international attention, a number of South Korean entities immediately made public denouncements (Smith and Cha, 2021). For example, President Jae-in Moon wrote on Twitter:

Use of violence against the people of Myanmar must stop now. There should not be any more loss of lives. We condemn the violent suppression of protests by the military and the police forces and strongly call for the immediate release of all those detained, including State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. We sincerely hope that democracy and peace will be restored as soon as possible (Yonhap, 2021).

Sye-kyun Chung, Prime Minister of South Korea, stated:

Innocent people of Myanmar are dying. Citizens shedding blood rekindles the painful memory of Gwangju from 41 years ago. The courage to protest against the unjust, and the conscience to protect democracy, cannot be a sin. The truth cannot be concealed" (Yonhap, 2021).

Complementing these public denouncements were practical steps by the government (Kim, 2021a). On 12 March, 2021, the South Korean government discontinued its cooperation with the Myanmar military. This was not a mere denial but a specific and proactive measure, since in the past South Korea had provided advanced defense and security maintenance education for Myanmar's military and police. The export of supplies such as tear gas and projectiles was banned, so that such equipment could no longer be used to suppress protests. Economic sanctions were imposed, and humanitarian aid was closely monitored. South Korea provided approximately 90 million dollars through of Official Development Assistance (ODA), a category used by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development to

measure foreign aid. The purpose of the ODA is to promote economic growth for developing countries and to enhance the lives of ordinary citizens without passing any resources toward military or anti-democratic activities. Finally, South Korea has taken special humanitarian measures to allow around 30,000 Myanmar citizens currently living in South Korea as international students or migrant to stay in Korea indefinitely until Myanmar's politics are stabilized.

Response from the South Korean National Assembly

The Korean National Assembly also denounced the Myanmar coup. Nak-yon Lee, Ruling Democratic Party (RDP) Chairman, stated:

[It is] a grave crime that can never be tolerated and should not be tolerated. Korea achieved democracy with the blood and tears of the people. So we deeply sympathize with and fully support the Myanmar people's desire for democracy. We will quickly vote on a resolution to denounce Myanmar's military coup, which has already been submitted to the National Assembly. The military government can take power for a while with a bayonet, but democracy will win in the end (Shin, 2021a).

Hye-min Cho, a leader of the progressive minority Justice Party, likewise stated: "It has caused devastating destruction to its citizens and their daily lives. . . . Korea should never turn a blind eye to this issue given that Korea was also a country where civil resistance against military dictatorship had long continued" (Shin, 2021a). On the other side of the political aisle, lawmakers from the conservative People Power Party proposed "a parliamentary resolution in condemnation of the actions of Myanmar's military forces, such as the repression of minorities and atrocities against civilians. They also expressed concerns that it could bring about a regression in human rights and democracy" (Shin, 2021a).

In short, the politicians from the South Korean National Assembly strongly addressed that democracy which was achieved by the sacrifices of the many Myanmar people should not be trampled, and the democratic government of Myanmar should be restored in close cooperation between South Korea and the international community.

Responses from South Korean Civic Groups

Support for the democratic movement in Myanmar is not merely political. Because of its unique mission, the May 18 Memorial Foundation is an eager supporter. It was founded to assist families who were killed in resistance to the Korean military in 1980. Jin-tae Jo, Director of the May 18 Memorial Foundation, said: "We will do everything. We've decided to build a coalition here in Gwangju to help the Myanmar people . . . We seek to procure necessary goods for Myanmar in association with all human rights movement organizations operating in Gwangju Metropolitan City. Masks and a variety of medical supplies will be more needed by Myanmar than ever" (Inquirer, 2021).

Both Protestant and Catholic churches in South Korea have offered their support, refusing merely to be bystanders. Jin-woo Jeong, a leader of the National Council of Churches in South Korea, said: "We won't just be throwing out support; we will make it last long enough . . . To help the Myanmar people well, we Korean Christians will contact local Myanmar church representatives in every way to find out what they most desperately need, and to implement support plans. We do this because it is the only way to repay the favor of those who have sacrificed themselves through the democratization movement in South Korea since the 1980s" (Inquirer, 2021). In the Catholic Church, The Catholic Bishops Conference in Korea, made a clear statement of their support entitled "Sharing Lament and Pain with Brothers and Sisters Suffering from the Crisis in Myanmar." They wrote:

Only because [people in Myanmar] raised their voices to call for freedom, democracy and peace, a number of

[them] are miserably bleeding and falling down on the streets. Dignified lives that no one can deprive of are trampled. Sister Ann Rose Nu Tawng knelt down on the ground in front of the heavily armed police officers and cried out; "Shoot me instead." This outcry is loudly ringing in our ears. Indiscriminate violence in protest sites must be ceased immediately. Every violence "leaves our world worse than it was before." (CBCK, 2021).

Various Buddhist groups have expressed their support as well. On 12 March 2021, twenty-five Buddhist groups in Gwangju Metropolitan City gathered in demonstration. They held a press conference, condemning the killing of citizens by the Myanmar military and demanding an immediate end to the massacre: "The military coup in Myanmar, civil resistance, and indiscriminate civil oppression with armed forces reminded us of the May Democratic Uprising in Gwangju" (Shin, 2021b).

All of these expressions of support can be traced to Korea's own painful history. It is only through active resistance that the oppressed will create a spark of democracy and hope. In his famous Letter from a Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King wrote, "Freedom is never given voluntarily by the oppressor. It must be demanded by the oppressed" (King, 1963). It was only through their own suffering that the people of Korea have found justice. This memory is not distant for them, and the suffering in Myanmar creates a fresh disclosure of that memory. As the Korean Bishops state:

We, all people, learned from history that the normal and innocent people's appeals and solidarity could open a door to a new world. It is hard to turn back against the path towards defense for not only life and peace but also freedom and justice because it is the righteous course of the history. When we put our efforts to make way for peace, the respect for the human dignity of persons and the common good should be in the core of the endeavor . . . We ardently pray that a nation community based on democracy, which all the Myanmar people are longing for, can be established through open-minded dialogue at the earliest (CBCK, 2021).

SPECIAL REASONS FOR SOUTH KOREA'S RESPONSE TO THE MILITARY COUP IN MYANMAR

The collection of evidence above demonstrates clear and relatively universal support in South Korea for the democratic movement in Myanmar against the military. The President, various government agencies, the National Assembly, religious communities, and social groups have all expressed condemnation of the military, thus further demonstrating that support for the people of Myanmar transcends politics and religious identity.

It is difficult to pin down exactly why South Korea has offered a collective endorsement of the democratic movement in Myanmar, but a few themes emerge. We do not find it convincing that South Koreans are merely offering their support as a diplomatic maneuver, meant to boost their international reputation. Indeed, South Korea is demonstrating its alignment with Western countries, but the support cannot be reduced to mere diplomacy. Further, South Korea's support to Myanmar cannot be considered solely economic. They are placing their bets with the people. If the military takes control, their economic investment will not result in an economic return; so the purpose has to be deeper than a merely financial return on investment. No, the reasons for South Korea's support are personal, memorial. More than political and economic reasons, South Koreans know about the terrible reality of military dictatorship. The wounds they have experienced past resemble those that Myanmar is experiencing right now.

On 24 February 2021, young people of Myanmar knelt down in front of the Korean Embassy in Myanmar and shouted in Korean, "Help us. Help us in our future" (Hobaek, 2021). Their cries reminded Koreans of the cries of their parents and siblings who fought against the Korean military in 1980. The similarities between "the 1980 Gwangju Protest" and "the 2021 Myanmar Protest" are uncanny (Chen, 2021). First, both movements remained resistant against the vicious forces of the military. Citizens were resolute in their fight for democracy, withstanding intense acts of oppression. Second, the military attempted to curb both movements with brutal violence. But the peoples' spirit was unyielding. As the movement of civil disobedience intensifies in Myanmar,

the people of South Korea are reminded of what they experienced. In both movements, unarmed citizens were killed by the military forces. Third, individuals in both movements were fighting against special forces known for their cruelty. Fourth, the special military units from both countries indiscriminately arrested citizens – those who were actively involved in the protests and many who were not. These units assaulted citizens with rifle butts and tortured them with clubs. Fifth, the two nations' military divisions took control of the newspapers and broadcasters to spread false reports. In doing so, they minimized the impact of such violence, reducing the number of deaths and creating a false story of outsider intervention. Seventh, through the distorted presentation of innocent citizens as rioters, both of them justified the brutal suppression of the military as exercising the right to self-defense.

On the other hand, there are certain differences between the two movements as well. In Myanmar, national protests have taken place in Yangon, the capital city and Mandalay, the second city, and other districts. Yet “the 5-18 Movement” in South Korea occurred only in the Gwangju area, as the other regions remained silent and the new Korean military thoroughly controlled the protest. Myanmar's protest became well-known immediately in the outside world through social media, allowing it to attain various forms of support. Yet, “the Gwangju Protest,” taking place in May of 1980, had no such opportunity. Any media that covered the event had to be on the ground themselves. This seems to be the driving force that makes almost all the South Koreans exhibit their deep interest and affection for “the Myanmar Protest.” Many Koreans are ready to help the Myanmar people, while remembering the Korean fighters in 1980 who sacrificed their lives for democracy. South Koreans believe that their support of Myanmarians will in some way repay the grace of their ancestors who ended their noble lives fighting for their country. Put another way, the democratization movement in Myanmar can be viewed as a resurrection and extension of the democratization movement in South Korea (Kim and Chung, 2021; Kang, et al., 2021).

Finally, it must be noted that Myanmar helped South Korea during the Korean War (1950-1953). During the time when Korea was turned to ruins and the people suffered from lack of food (Chung, 2003), Myanmar donated rice worth approximately 50,000 US dollars to South Korea (Happy School, 2021). This significant humanitarian act allowed many South Koreans to survive. Koreans were helped when they were cold and hungry. They are now returning the favor. Westad, a professor of history at Yale University in the United States, has found this kind of warmth of Koreans in “Korean righteousness,” a Confucian tradition of Koreans (Westad, 2021). Min-jin Lee, a renowned literary professor, has interpreted this special sentiment of Koreans who laugh together when they are happy and cry together when they are sad, as the unique culture of “Jeong” (genuine feeling) of Koreans (Lee, 2020).

SOCIO-POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF SOUTH KOREA'S RESPONSE TO MYANMAR

Again, it should be considered a relatively indisputable claim that South Koreans are expressing their collective support for the democratization of Myanmar. However, this support is limited to international politics. In principle, South Korea has no authority to interfere with Myanmar's internal affairs. Even if there is the possibility of engaging internally, South Korea is in a difficult political situation (Kim, 2021b). Likewise with Myanmar, as it is stuck between the international powers of the United States and China. The United States believes that Myanmar must support its efforts to lead the Western world in preventing China's expansion and influence. It has strongly condemned the coup and placed various forms of political and economic pressures on the military. This has been particularly evident after Joe Biden took office as President of the United States. Alternatively, China has been lukewarm. Chinese leaders have resorted to diplomatic clichés, such as statements addressing that Myanmar must find immediate stability, thus indicating China's implicit cooperation with the Myanmar military. Currently, Myanmar is viewed as a geographically important place for China, which seeks to

expand maritime trade routes, along with its power (Sutter, et al., 2021). China is Myanmar's largest trading partner, accounting for more than 33% of its total trade in fiscal year 2019-2020, and China depends on Myanmar for more than half of its demand for rare earth metals (Shim, 2021). The cooperation between China and Myanmar's military was further solidified with the takedown of Suu Kyi. Her leadership of Myanmar threatened this cooperation, but with her fall from power the partnership between China and the Myanmar military has been restored, and the 2021 Myanmar military coup may involve a full restoration of Myanmar's relationship with China. The Chinese government thus has failed to condemn the brutal practices of the Myanmar military.

Although South Korea's support for Myanmar has significant political and economic limitations, its moral and spiritual implications must also be considered. Like the vanguard of democratization, South Korea can influence not only Asia, but the entire world. Indeed, this influence has been evident across the world. Indonesian college students stated that Korean student movements inspired them tremendously (Ju, 2021). A Nepali man lived as a migrant worker in South Korea and learned about Korean democracy and civic movements. He revealed his plans of starting a labor movement for the poorest local workers after returning to Nepal (Ju, 2021). For Myanmar, South Korea is the object of admiration as one of the world's top ten economic powerhouses and an advanced democratic country. For many Myanmarisians, South Korea is a paragon of democratic flourishing. It sits as an example for many to follow, especially those whose lives continue to be impacted by the ramifications of colonialization. In this respect, this is not merely another example of the Korean Wave but an aspect of the very heart of Korean identity.

CONCLUSION

South Koreans have a deep affection and interest in the democratization movement of Myanmar and people's resistance to the military government. The reason is that Koreans are aware that the democratization process that they have experienced in the past is very difficult and painful. Is it possible to democratize Myanmar at this point? Many Koreans will answer: difficult, yes; but also possible!

In order for Myanmar to South Korea's lead into democracy, it must pursue several activities. First, the Myanmar people must work to establish their own national identity. In South Korea, the movement toward democracy was challenged significantly due to political factions, regional conflicts, and religious differences within the country, both in the past and even today. However, when a country faces a crisis, these factions, conflicts, and differences are often minimized as the people work against a common foe. Further, Myanmarisians must work to transcend their discomfort due to differences in customs, politics, religion, cultures, and geographic separation. In order to be unified, people must create a holistic identity, loving their country as a collection of difference. In other words, the difference between regionalism and religions must be overcome in the clear purpose and goal of aiming for a democratic state. It must likewise be understood that political democratization will come only when economic democratization is achieved. If the economy is not stable, the soldiers who protect the country and the civil servants who serve the people cannot work properly. If they face difficulty in terms of eating and living, they forget their identities, and begin to reign over the citizens, becoming the foremen of corruption. Those in power must first care for the physical needs of their people. When those needs are not met, the people revolt. The Myanmar government must likewise work to stabilize the economy and pay sufficient remuneration to soldiers and public officials so that they can become faithful servants of the state and citizens. The shortcut to economic democratization is to give equal education. High-quality education should be provided so that citizens navigate the challenges of a complex, pluralistic society and develop the skills needed to thrive. South Korea illustrates this need as a leader in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The South Korean education system has situated South Koreans to thrive in a global and exponentially advancing

economy. When economic and educational democratization is achieved, political democratization naturally follows. Even in Myanmar, by undertaking the same path as South Korea, democratization can be attained in all areas of society.

Contributorship

The original idea of this research was by Joung-jun Lee and Jun-ki Chung. All analytical interpretations and paper writing were done by the five co-authors. The final editorial work in relation to issues of plagiarism, references, and English structure was completed by Jun-ki Chung.

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