INTERVIEWS 02.02.2021

# 'Most people just go about their daily lives'

Myanmar's military has taken power in the country in a coup. Bernt Berger on the situation on the ground

*Read this interview in German.*

**In Myanmar, the military has taken over after a coup, ousting the de facto head of government Aung San Suu Kyi and her administration. What exactly happened and what's the situation on the ground?**

The coup had been in the offing for several days, but was considered unlikely by most observers. After negotiations between the military and the government broke down to investigate the results of the November elections for electoral fraud, the military leadership had issued an ultimatum until Sunday. The government did not respond. Armoured vehicles were then deployed in central squares in various towns as a show of force. On Monday morning, the military blockaded parliament and arrested high-ranking members of the government, including Aung San Suu Kyi. During the morning hours, all means of communication – digital and analogue – were switched off, so that many in the population only learned about the events very late. In general, the situation in the largest city Yangon is calm. Most people just go about their daily lives under the conditions imposed by the corona pandemic.

**Why did the military organise the coup – and why now?**

The timing was because of the ultimatum given by the military, which was scheduled just before the constituent session of the parliaments. Their demand was to disclose the results and procedures of the November elections. Even before the elections, some voiced complaints in local media about the lack of transparency of the Union Election Commission. In particular, the composition of the electoral rolls raised questions. The pro-military USDP party had performed unusually poorly in the election. One can only speculate about the reasons for their strong reaction. The fact is that there are hardly any

relations between the government and the army. There is a complete lack of communication and cooperation on critical issues. This state of affairs resulted in a power struggle in which the military has now restored its version of the status quo.

**According to reports from her detention, Aung San Suu Kyi has already called for protests against the military coup. The freedom icon and her NLD party won the parliamentary elections in November by a landslide – more than 80 per cent of the vacant seats in the lower and upper houses. Can we now expect mass demonstrations in the country?**

Reports of such calls should be taken with a grain of salt. So far, there is no evidence that Aung San Suu Kyi has made such calls. Rather, some believe that she is advising restraint and passive resistance. There are many rumours and false reports circulating on social media at the moment. It would be tragic if such reports led to unrest. The military, at least in its public announcements, has not committed to any rigorous measures unless there is unrest. The usual restrictions for coups, such as curfews, are already in place because of the pandemic and have been prolonged.

The military has initially announced that it will take over the affairs of state for one year. New elections are to be held after the last election has been reviewed. Because of the various power centres in the country – based on old elites and corporations, some of which can be attributed to the so-called cronies – there are now strong interests in not threatening public life and Myanmar's international integration.

Therefore, for the time being, the government takeover will probably be carried out according to the detailed guidelines prescribed in the 2008 constitution. It states that the military has the right to declare a state of emergency if activities occur that threaten the unity of the country. The procedures outlined in the constitution include handing over the affairs of the government to the commander-in-chief of the army and dissolving parliament. Of course, one can debate what constitutes a legitimate cause.

**Under decades of military rule, Myanmar was ostracised internationally. The UN, the EU, the US and other countries have already condemned the military takeover and the abolition of the separation of powers. After the tentative democratisation and reform processes of the last ten years, is the country about to be isolated again?**

Let’s hope not. Great hopes were always placed in the country and in individuals, which could not be realised given the situation and the

time period. In the meantime, the constellations of actors has changed and the dividing lines are often no longer as sharp as they were five years ago. A renewed international ostracism would primarily affect the population, which is already under great pressure because of the speed of economic change and the associated uncertainties. At present, well thought-out strategies are needed to persuade the military to act quickly within its own parameters. Excluding Myanmar, which is already suffering from the lack of supply and value chains under corona, would hit the wrong people, deprive many of hope and fuel the nationalism that now exists in both camps.

*This interview was conducted by Nikolaos Gavalakis.*

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