



POLITICAL ECONOMY OF AUTHORITARIANISM AND THE QUEST FOR DEMOCRACY IN MYANMAR

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ABSTRACT

Post-colonial history of Southeast Asia is generally characterised by the existence of a political culture ingrained deep with authoritarianism coupled with a continuous phenomena of democratic resilience, time and again. In the same context, Myanmar, the biggest country in mainland Southeast Asia, with all its complexities is not free from this existing vicious circle. As such, the almost eight-decade long post-independence history of Myanmar clearly brings out the unpredictable nature of the country's politics and an authoritarian culture embedded in its social set up. Taking full advantage of this situation is the country's military establishment. The political landscape that gradually emerged is an unavoidable interface between the years of military rule with that of the civilian democratic resilience. Adding to it, the coup of 2021 makes the presence of authoritarian institutions more prominent in the country. Ultimately, the attempt of the paper is to find the reality behind the presence of authoritarianism as a part of Myanmar's political culture, the political economy fuelling it, and at the same time the continuous effort of democratic forces for a rational political space in the country.

KEYWORDS: Myanmar, authoritarianism, military, democracy

INTRODUCTION

For many decades, Southeast Asian political landscape is marked by a continuous trend of authoritarian rule coupled with the emergence of democratic resilience time and again. In fact, the pre-colonial and colonial history of the region always points to the fact that there is a continuous phenomenon of power polarisation in the region.

The vestige of the same manifest itself even more prominently in the post-colonial era. The powerful presence of authoritarian tendencies marks the political development in the newly independent countries of Southeast Asia which cannot be separated from their nation-building and state-building process. The top-down system prevails with not much room for bottom-up mechanism. This is mainly because authoritarian practice is embedded deep in the socio-political fabric of the societies in Southeast Asia and is stuck in the mindset of its people. Corollary to it is the presence of a conducive political atmosphere for re-emergence of an authoritarian system in the region. Myanmar is not an exception to these developments. The country has for centuries a tradition of historical practice of power hegemony (Graevers, 1993). The power symmetry of ruler and ruled became very prominent, with the former having supreme control over the entire life and work of the latter. In simple parlance, authority and power dominance became two sides of the same coin in the Burmese society. Indeed, in spite of the fundamental significance of change in transitional societies, most such societies continue for generations to bear greater over-all resemblance to their basic traditional forms than to the modern world of their aspirations (Pye, 1962, p.63). Authoritarian norm remains one such form in Myanmar. In fact, the country has been in an “authoritarian trap” for decades, primarily due to the deeply entrenched role of its military in governance and society. This complex situation is a result of a combination of historical, political, and socio-economic factors. The recent military takeover itself is the continuation of the same phenomenon.

Considering Myanmar’s postcolonial history marred by years of hegemonic military rule or one party system (1958-60, 1962-74, 1974-88, 1988-2010 and 2021 onwards), subjugation of popular movement and very limited or almost absent political space, authoritarianism certainly has become an indomitable feature of the country’s complex politics. The situation has become more acute in the aftermath of the latest coup of 1st February 2021. The ever increasing civil disobedience movement (CDM) and the ongoing civil war could hardly make any positive change. Rather, the continuous autocratic rule of the military government, the State Administrative Council (SAC), since the coup, makes it even more rigid. Recent appointment of the State Security and Peace Commission (SSPC) and the announcement for holding National Elections in December 2025 could hardly bring any concrete change in the country’s political landscape. With its signs of democracy in the country are gradually disappearing while the removal of United States sanctions from individuals and companies providing armaments to the junta also make the situation serious in the country. What it signals is the return of a more authoritarian Myanmar in the family of nations.

At times, the arguments are also put up that at various junctures, democratic resilience may be there in Myanmar but the desired spirit is missing. So, one has to be contented with the ‘Asian Way’ democracy as is found in many countries of Southeast Asia. It means a political system where authoritarian components exist together with democratic elements (Neher, 1994, p.949). What everyone is witnessing in Myanmar is the absence of popular participation in governance and ever shrinking political space. The plan to introduce a federal structure to overcome the age-old complex ethnic divide in the country also faces hurdles. Attempt of the paper is to put the case of Myanmar in the aforesaid context and see if there is a room for change. It will try to study how different dialectical forces in the country are working within the same political system. In this article, I have used both the names ‘Burma’ and ‘Myanmar’ interchangeably wherever required.

CONCEPTUALISATION

Authoritarianism is a concept, which has become part of contemporary debates on governance in Southeast Asia. Finding a single and universally accepted definition of it will not be possible. However, in simple parlance, it can be understood as the principle of unquestioning submission to authority, as opposed to individual freedom of thought and action. This system is characterised by power polarisation, rejection of political plurality and extreme political repression. Some scholars view it as an allegiance to traditionally established authorities stemming out of an attitude of acceptance. Specifically, in the Burmese context, authoritarianism may be taken as a political system that maintains near absolute control typically by force, showing little concern for public opinion, and governed by a single individual or a group of political elites. While marginalising the voices of the citizens, this system put limitations to the freedom of speech, media, and religion, and it does not follow majority rule nor does it safeguard minority rights.

Following authoritarianism, two other closely related concepts are ‘democracy’ and ‘democratisation’. Corollary to it is the concept of ‘political space’. Any debate on authoritarian rule cannot forego the discussion of democracy and democratisation. Democracy coming from the Greek words ‘demos’ and ‘cratia’, generally mean people’s government. In the phraseology of politics, it stands for popular sovereignty commensurate with popular participation. With Myanmar, it will be preferable to take the procedural type of democracy almost in tandem with Robert Dahl’s idea. It essentially denotes the institution of certain procedures, such as regular elections, based on some kind of universal suffrage and pluralist political participation and contestation, to produce an electorally legitimated government (Saikal, 2021). This is also referred to as ‘working democracy’. The concept is put up here because the transition to democracy is far from complete in the country with no scope for uninterrupted democratisation. But how does one interpret democratisation. It will be appropriate here to take it as a political process where there is the transition to a more democratic political regime, including substantive political changes moving in a democratic direction. Democratisation may connote the transition from an authoritarian regime to a full democracy, a transition from an authoritarian political system to a semi-democracy or transition from a semi-authoritarian political system to a democratic political system. It is the process by which a political system became democratic by the way of transition to democracy, democratic installation, and democratic consolidation. In the same context, political space implies an arena in which inputs from citizens is continually being received and taken into account by the governing authorities.

For *Asian Way of democracy*, it means a democracy in name and spirit but not following the norms and values by rejecting liberalism and Western-style democratic standards. In other words, it means concentration of power and less room for free political expression. It is almost similar to what Fareed Zakaria called ‘illiberal democracy’, a term used specifically for democratically unstable and authoritarian political systems of the less develop nations (Zakaria, 1997). Despite certain characteristics of a democratic political system, like election and quasi-civilian government, elements of authoritarianism exist and that the people do not enjoy much civil liberty.

MILITARY REGIMES AND AUTHORITARIAN PRACTICE SINCE INDEPENDENCE

Out of all the government apparatus and political players in Myanmar, use of authoritarian practices is most distinctly associated with the military institution (the *Tatmadaw*) and its leadership. In the entire post-independence history of the country, except for the two gaps i.e., U Nu’s term from 1948 to 1962 and the civilian

period from 2011 to 2021, it was always under one or another form of military regime, which can be defined as a “*system of government by the military*” (Perlmutter 1980, 96). The all-powerful military leadership has a say in most of the issues and controls the political developments in the country, irrespective of the type of government. Since the time of the nationalist movement when Aung San used the military in his struggle against the colonial rulers, the credibility of the said institution was enhanced. During the first civilian regime, Prime Minister U Nu allowed the country’s military to take a caretaker role from 1958 to 1960 when the country was plunged into political chaos. However, existence of political elites emanating authoritarian tendency is a long drawn tradition of the Burmese political culture not confined only with the military. U Nu himself was not an exception.

Having said, authoritarianism in its most active manifestation in the post-colonial Myanmar was seen for the first time in March 1962 with the establishment of a military regime, popularly known as the *Revolutionary Council* (RC), under the leadership of General Ne Win. Soon after, the RC started running the country based on its two ideological pinning viz., “*the Burmese Way to Socialism*” (BWS) and “*the System of Correlation Between the Man and His Environment*” (SCME). Under the BWS, the military regime gradually removed most of the institutions, norms and ideas symbolising democratic values. One after another, the government suspended the Constitution, dismissed the parliament and abolished the Supreme Court and the Secretariat (Langpoklakpam, 2006). Arrest of all the opposing political leaders, and the formation of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) as the only official political party while banning all the other political parties in the country, was a strong move towards enhancing the totalitarian nature of the ruling elite. General Ne Win was the *Uno Numero* with supreme control over executive, legislative and judicial sphere of the government. One of the most renowned Burmese scholar on authoritarianism in Myanmar, Maung Maung Gyi (1983), had thus pointed out that “*with the armed forces as its power base, party apparatus such as mass elite communication conveyor belts and control mechanisms and administrative apparatus as the guiding and goading instruments, Ne Win has everything locked in for a power monopoly*” (p.203). Since then, this excessive increase in the military controlled governance in the political sphere of the country means the shrinking of political space and marginalising of democratic symbols and values.

The regime change that occurred in 1988 with the resignation of Ne Win had no major impact on the continuing trend of concentrating power in the top of the political hierarchy. The new regime that came to power known as the *State Law and Restoration Council* (SLORC), and later changed to the *State Peace and Development Council* (SPDC) in 1997, was also a military regime simply with a change in leadership and name. It remains totalitarian, with no room at all for liberalisation and democratisation. Even when the transition process was taken up under the *Seven Step Road Map to Flourishing Discipline Democracy*, every initiative was made so that the domination of the military in the governance continues despite regime change. Provisions of the 2008 Constitution allow the military to hold on to key sectors of the government for all time. Important ministries like defence, home and border affairs, and 25 percent of the seats in both the state and Union legislature is reserved for the military, the sole authority to have a final say being with the Chief of the Army (Egreteau and Robinne, 2016). It was because of this factor the civilian government under Aung San Suu Kyi, lasting from 2011-2021, failed to take an independent stand on critical issues.

The reality is that hierarchy of power in Myanmar is reduced to a small group of top military officials who unleash a regime of power. Excessive use of fear as a medium for subjugation remains common. The tragic part of the whole story is that vestige of the same creep to whichever party that comes to power, even if is not the

military. So, when there was a change in March 2011 from a military dictatorship with totalitarian practice into a quasi democratic rule, and again to a hybrid civilian democratic government led by Aung San Suu Kyi in 2016, the question that arise is whether authoritarian tendency in the country's politics has decline. Is the expected political space available? Evidence points otherwise.

SIGNS OF AUTHORITARIAN EXISTENCE

The traditional authoritarian existence, which was found in Myanmar's history gradually ingrain deep in the society thus forming an inseparable part of it even in the modern era. As such, government's functioning or any political control becomes synonymous with authoritarian rule. At present, three distinct signs of authoritarian presence in the political landscape of Myanmar are (i) an inadequate political base for federalism; (ii) a century-old crisis of state capability; and (ii) an institutional intolerance for dissent (Callahan, 1998). Giving wind to all these is the non-functional judicial organ of the state. Rather, extra-judicial activities and special courts had, in many instances, curtailed judicial independence and political freedom, pointing towards the free run of authoritarian trend.

Visibly, acts and provisions are inserted in the legal system so as to restrain any challenge to the government. Control of the political agenda remains important and there is an inclination to use government institutions and procedures to protect that control. The 2008 Constitution itself is considered a medium in this direction. According to Nyi Nyi "*For the people, the 2008 Constitution is of the military, by the military, and for the military* (Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 2019). It remains a safety valve for the military hierarchy in continuing with its ruling style. Likewise, *Electronic Transactions Law* have been used against journalists (Library of Congress, October 10, 2016) while the colonial-era *Unlawful Association Act* (1908) is used mainly to intimidate and arrest political activists and members of ethnic minorities in the country.

Over and above, Buddhism, which is considered as the epitome of peace and harmony, also spread the idea of hierarchy and polarisation of power. The issue of superior-subordinate consciousness is very strict in the *sangha* (the Buddhist order) that is manifested in the socio-political system. One could see the unique practice of adopting Buddhism and its principles by those in the helm of power to propagate their agenda and dominate those under their sphere of influence. Both U Nu and General Ne Win tried Buddhist teachings as the basis of their nation-building process.

QUEST FOR POLITICAL LIBERALISATION

Years of authoritarian regimes in Myanmar did paved the way for alternative forces. Resistance and democracy groups came up calling for basic human rights and liberty plus a federal structure that could accommodate the 135 ethnic groups in the country. In due course, the political system of the country is marked by a complex ideological divide of democracy versus authoritarianism.

Though Myanmar saw a democratic civilian government immediately after independence, yet it failed to introduce a genuine democratic setup. The spirit of *Panglong Agreement of 1947*, initiated by Aung San, was completely sidelined in the ensuing melee thus giving a wrong message to the ethnic minorities of the country. It was only in 1988 that the country could witness for the first time a conscious nationwide move for democracy

after years of Ne Win's totalitarian rule. Entry of Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Aung San, filled up the required leadership vacuum. With her, a potent democracy movement ensued.

The democratic movement saw the emergence of active parties viz., political parties (having national character crossing across ethnic lines), students and the Buddhist order. Supplementing to it were the other civil society organisations of which the ethnic groups form a large part. These stakeholders have always been the back rock of democratic process in Myanmar despite the restraints faced. They have contributed to democratic changes that have evolved in the country.

In the initial stage of Myanmar's independence the role of political parties was there yet with the coming of General Ne Win, and the setting up of a one party system with the BSPP as the only official political party, the relevance of political parties hardly exist for almost three decades. It was only with the establishment of the National League for Democracy (NLD) in 1988 that political parties started reimposing its role in the country. Undeniably, the economic failure of the BSPP government and the pent up socio-political frustration of the general population provided a firm basis for NLD's popularity in the political scenario of the country (Steinberg, 2010, p.87). The party attained prominence when it won 392 of 485 seats in the sham national elections held in 1990 under the SLORC regime, which was annulled later on. Though the party could not operate effectively yet, its' pressure was immensely felt on both SLORC and SPDC. It acted as a symbol of Myanmar's conscience. It was because of NLD's continuous struggle that the SPDC was compelled to take the *Seven Step Roadmap* to a conclusive ending by holding a multi-party election in 2010 and subsequently transferring the power to a democratically elected quasi-civilian government in 2011. Later, the party won absolute majority in the country's 2015 general elections with 390 seats and could form a purely civilian government in 54 years (Egreteau, 2017, p.9). In the country's last election of 8 November 2020 too the party won majority though power was not transferred due to the coup that followed. Myanmar has nearly hundred political parties besides NLD, both ethnic and non-ethnic in character, but they are not reflected further in this discussion as there efficacy is negligible.

Another significant democratic force that needs reckoning in Myanmar is the student. Since the 1960s, the students have been continuously fighting for democratic rights in the country. Time and again, their group proved to be one of the strongest pressure groups fighting against injustice and socio-political deprivation. This became more prominent in the aftermath of the '88 *Uprising*'. Since then student movement and network expanded to regional, national and transnational level (Hong and Kim, 2019).. Later, the students acted as agent of democratisation when the country was going through a political transition in the new millennium. Many of the former student activist entered political or civil society organisations evolved to form networks with other activists and to contribute to political happenings in Myanmar. They were also involved in think tank like *Myanmar Egress* (established in 2006) or international NGOs. Now, students are once again in the street and border areas pressurising the regime to uphold people's rights.

Likewise, another social institution that has an indomitable influence on the socio-political dynamics of Myanmar is the country's Buddhist order or *sangha*, though it is expected to be apolitical. Monks and nuns (400000 and 40000 respectively) are not allowed to cast votes since 1948, let alone actively involved in politics, though their number is almost in par with the army (Gravers, 2014,p.293). Nevertheless, there are many instances of religious mixing with the secular sphere in the history of Myanmar where Buddhist monks came out as institution or individuals protesting against the atrocities of the regime or state. This is because the Buddhist

sangha is entrenched in all parts of the social fabric and as such whatever happens in the Burmese society has got its repercussion on the monks too. Starting from the colonial era (U Ottama led rebellion), then during Ne Win's regime in 1974, in 1988 democracy uprising, and finally in 2007 as '*Saffron Revolution*', the Buddhist monks exerted their presence in the political sphere. Many scholars regarded *sangha* as the backbone of the Burmese society across centuries, and see it, intentionally or unintentionally, intertwined with the country's political dynamics. Consequently, at times their firm pressure on the existing political regimes bring out unexpected positive results which influence the democratic sphere too. Particularly, young monks consider both the SPDC and the SAC regime as against *dhamma* (principles of Buddhism) and supported democracy as it is compatible with the Buddhist

Besides, civil society organisations did emerged, mainly in the ethnic areas after the 1988 uprising. They have contributed to the quest for democracy and normalcy in the country either through supporting the military regimes in the ceasefire process or the civilian government of Aung San Suu Kyi in the initiative for framing a federal structure. The pressure from the democratic forces, inclusive of the different ethnic civil society groups, put a big challenge to the prevailing authoritarian rule.

Some scholars are of the view that the military, at a particular stage, is also responsible for heralding democratisation in the country. This cannot be sidelined despite the military's nature of governance. The *Seven Step Road Map*, the Constitution of 2008, transfer of power by General Than Shwe to a moderate General like Thein Sein, the election of 2010, military changing to a quasi-civilian system, relaxation to political movements and media are all clear examples of the military's initiatives. But, at the same time, this cannot be taken as basic characteristic or general practice of the *Tatmadaw*, rather dictated by compulsions of collective interest. There is no question of accepting the military as one of the democratic forces in Myanmar. On the whole, the picture is not heartening. Efforts of the democratic forces remain an inconclusive struggle, with no goal at sight for the time being.

INCOMPLETE EXPERIMENT WITH DEMOCRACY: LIMITED OPENINGS (2011 TO 2021)

After nearly five decades of continuous authoritarian system, Myanmar went for a change in the beginning of 21st century. Regime changed to a civilian government in 2011, which continued till the beginning of 2021. After a long gap, it was indeed a renewed experiment but which failed to achieve the goal fully. The said period may be divided into two specific phases viz., one that start with the military changing into civilian garb and the start of a pseudo-civilian democratic government; and another that begin from 2016 with the NLD under Aung San Suu Kyi forming a purely civilian government after getting an absolute majority in the 2015 national elections.

First post-junta quasi-Civilian regime (2011-2016)

Consequent to the SPDC orchestrated *Seven Step Road Map* the beginning of the new millennium saw a flicker of change towards restoration of democracy in Myanmar. After the nationwide elections of 2010, the military sponsored Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) under Thein Sein formed a quasi-civilian government on 30 March 2011, consisting of party members with military background. Political reforms followed. Curb on free speech and media censorship relaxed, dissidents and political activists released (including Suu Kyi), and formation of unions legalised. Myanmar was gradually on the move for a pragmatic political

change. The country started opening up with more room for political involvement of the population. Ethnic minority parties had improved on their ability to influence the national politics. Political and economic sanctions imposed on the country were gradually removed. Despite the changes, the system failed to be all-inclusive. Totalitarian practices and top-down mechanism exist. Indeed, it was not a transition to democracy, but greater political freedom combined with rapprochement with the West (Thant Myint U, 2019, p.151). The emerging change was from an outright military dictatorship to a softer form of authoritarian rule. Providing the room to include NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi in the government through the by-election of 2012 was part of the mechanism. And, the new quasi-civilian government continue to remain under the influence of the *Tatmadaw* as 25 per cent seat in the legislature is constitutionally reserved for it giving them ample power in the policy making process of the government.

Aung San Su Kyi and her Government (2016-2021)

In the 2015 general election, the NLD party under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi came out victorious with 86 per cent votes. Subsequently, a purely civilian-democratic government was formed by the NLD on March 2016. Since Aung San Suu Kyi could not be the head of the country under Article 59 (F) ¹ of the Constitution, one of her loyalist was appointed the President. And to make it possible for her to run the government as *de facto* head, a special post called the State Counsellor (equivalent to a Prime Minister) was created on April 6, 2016 by the Union Parliament especially for her. Although a purely civilian government was formed, but 25 percent unelected military representatives in the parliament still make it sort of a hybrid rule.

The government went with its priorities of democratic reforms, transforming the country towards an all-encompassing true federal structure, and ending the age-old ethnic conflicts. In addition, for a meaningful ethnic reconciliation the *Second Panglong* was started. However, despite a sincere desire for a universally accepted democratic system the NLD government continued under the influence of the earlier authoritarian culture. Overcoming crony capitalism, corruption, and inefficient governance by the political elites was a serious challenge. The most serious being the inability to tackle the deficit of trust and social capital. Over and above, civilian-military adjustment within the government and fulfilling the federal aspirations of the ethnic minorities was not proving easy for Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD government.

She tried materialising the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), signed between 10 Ethnic Ceasefire Organisations (EAO) and the Thein Sein Government on October 15, 2015, by starting the *Union Peace Conference - 21st Century Panglong* in August 2016. As already mentioned this was a significant step to start a political peace process with the EAOs. Later, three more follow-on sessions of *Union Peace Conference* were held in May 2017, July 2018, and August 2020, respectively. The last session culminated in the signing of a framework agreement for implementing the NCA. The framework mentioned for implementing various processes beyond 2020, and included basic principles to establish a democratic federal union (DD News August 21, 2020). These are all mentioned clearly in the 15 provisions of the *Union Peace Accord-III*. On her part, Aung San Suu Kyi was clear that democratisation could be successful only when there is a proper mechanism of decentralisation and federalism with room for sub-national governance. Her strong emphasis on building a democratic federal union with self-determination and equal citizen rights was clearly reflected in the NLD's election manifesto of the 2020 elections. NLD could get the absolute majority in the November 8, 2020 elections but its quest for

democratisation remain incomplete. In fact, NLD's period remain a limited democracy in the proper sense or an illiberal one.

WHY THE AUTHORITARIAN TRAP PERSIST?

Despite the visible political reforms in Myanmar since the beginning of the new millennium the big question is why authoritarianism prevails and the experiment with democracy is facing potholes. Why illiberal democracy with authoritarian characteristics persist? One of the foremost factors being the Burmese cultural dynamics. As superior-subordinate hierarchy is prominently inculcated deep in the culture of the land, there is always an avenue for authoritarian attitude to flourish. From the time of the freedom struggle, authoritarian political culture was ingrained within the nationalist leadership. Continuation of the same in the post-colonial political practices seems normal. The tendency at the time was that of considering nationalism as a practice of power. Professor David Steinberg rightly said that history matters, and culture is important. They are not residual categories of analysis, as some social scientists might claim, but are central to understanding societies (Steinberg, 2010, p149). The medieval Burmese mindset, deeply embedded in the traditional Burmese political culture, is being shifted to the present time. And the reality is that the authoritarian trend almost become a vicious cycle in the Myanmar society.

As for the hegemonic political practices, it is almost clear that the past tradition still influences the present political culture. This is the reality with Myanmar. Apart from the highly autocratic and authoritarian military regimes in the country, how was the NLD government under Aung San Suu Kyi in terms of authoritarian tendency is still a topic of passionate debate in the academic circles. Though there seems to be a genuine desire and effort towards democratisation but in many instances even Aung San Suu Kyi herself and the NLD government could not forego the totalitarian norms and practices as is common among the power elites of Myanmar. Contrary to expectation, restrictions on media and curb on free expression remain severe under the NLD rule (Thant Myint U, 2019).

The *Tatmadaw's* capability to remain in control of the country's political and economic system is another reason for failure to curtail the ever-present authoritarian phenomenon. After seven decades of independence, Myanmar continues to be one of the most militarised country in Southeast Asia and also in the world (McCarthy, 2019). The military succeeded in penetrating and leaving its imprint in all the organs of the state machinery, with a maximum of its interests being tied up with the economic sectors, usually called military capital or *Khaki capital* or military-economics complex, a relationship based on distribution of the country's resources among a selected groups of elites. Even when the NLD government was formed with absolute majority in 2015, Aung San Suu Kyi tried not to interfere with the military interests, particularly the industrial conglomerates and economic sectors serving military interest and avoid any confrontation with the same. Reserving seats in the legislatures makes the situation more problematic and complex. In this condition, hoping to escape from the authoritarian trap has very little weight. Effort of the military to be in power by a play of divide and rule based on the existing religious and ethnic diversities are not helping in any way.

Absence of an effective civil society in the country proves to be another decisive factor in the inability to curb the authoritarian tentacles spread all over. Civil society in the form of small relief organisations, religious bodies, business representative groups and indigenous bodies exist in Myanmar but in a marginalised way. Even

though some relaxation was there in the one decade of semi-civilian or civilian rule but with the return of the junta it has changed. Today, the military regime continues to severely restrain civil society in Myanmar.

In the whole, what is imminent is a shrinking political space. Advocacy and confidence-building measures are almost out of the social sphere. The implication is the inability to reverse the ongoing situation in the country and the existing prominence of an authoritarian trap. This has become a vicious circle in the political landscape of Myanmar.

THE ECONOMIC EQUATION

What is clear from the above fact is that authoritarian practice embedded deep in the Myanmar society is not solely a political aspect but also got deeper economic implications that need a serious rethinking. In the whole political process somewhere there is an unavoidable economic undercurrent. In this resource rich but economically not so developed country, authoritarian pattern of domination has been accepted by the power elite, inclusive of the military, as a mechanism for long-term control over its economy. Post independence history of Myanmar has clearly indicated that there is an intermingling of political goals and economic ambitions of those in the helm of power. Moreover, authoritarian rule has been used as a basic but common means to control economic resources and regulate economic activities in the process of consolidating political power. The military leadership has maintained tight control over the economy to ensure financial autonomy, strengthen its authority, and limit the influence of democratic institutions. Authoritarian regime allow the military and its allied elites to have centralized control over key and strategic sectors of the economy. Through the state apparatus, the military controls the natural resources, mining, infrastructure, factories and industries, service sectors and allied activities of the country. Existence of economic conglomerates like Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL) and Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC), linked to the military, are clear example how authoritarian rule is being used by the military regime to sway the economy in its favour by sidelining civilian oversight and democratic accountability. In most cases, key mineral resources are also treated **as strategic assets under state or military supervision, giving a control over the country's large number of gemstone mines**. Not only this but authoritarian governance allows the regime to determine who can access these resources, who benefits from them, and how revenues are distributed, thereby strengthening the economic power of the military establishment. It enables the creation of patronage networks linking the military with business elites thus creating a system of crony capitalism. Ultimately, the existence of an authoritarian political pattern in Myanmar allows those in power to have a tight control over economic policy and shape reforms to meet one's own interest.

THE ROAD AHEAD

With all the above reality in sight, searching for a popular democratic base amid the authoritarian conundrum is the concern for many so-called defenders of democracy in Myanmar. Without a framework to address the religious and ethnic divisions in the nation, coupled with a lack of opportunities for democratization and a deeply hierarchical mindset among the Burmese, authoritarian tendencies are expected to prevail in Myanmar's political system for the foreseeable future.

Moreover, to add to it the military in Myanmar has become synonymous with authoritarianism and remains the most dominant actor in the politico-economic scenario. It has never been under democratic political

control and in its own right has become the basis for the formation of an economic elite. Changing civil-military relations, i.e. strengthening the autonomy of the state vis-à-vis military economic and political movements, is a key challenge for political reform in Myanmar, which is missing (Stokke, Vakulchuk and Overland, 2018.p. XII). Indeed, the autonomy of the state is restricted by the economic and political influence of the military.

From 2010 until January 2021 Myanmar seem to be reforming and democratic transition was the new normal. There were visible changes in the socio-political and economic sphere promoting overall democratisation process in the country. However, even during this civilian period, indexes from different global watchdogs on democracy and governance were not promising. For instance, in the global Democracy Index 2020 of the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) of the Economist Group, Myanmar was ranked at 135 out of 167 countries and still considered an authoritarian regime (EIU, 2021, p.12). And, with the sudden military coup and the consequent regime change, the emergence of a more hegemonic political scenario could be seen. At present, there is more tightening in the continuing authoritarian grip in the country. Everything seems to be back to square one, showing a clear return of a repressive and rigid state with a complete absence of political space. Even the signs of illiberal democracy that were present in the system have disappeared. With the repeated postponement of the national election and the ongoing civil war, where is Myanmar's politics heading is something very hard to pinpoint concretely at the juncture.

CONCLUSION

What Myanmar requires today is a balancing between authoritarian attitudes and liberal norms, creating enough space for democratic values to flourish. For democratisation to be meaningful civilian control over the military of the country is a must which is far from complete. Constitution need to be amended in order to remove the reservation of 25 per cent seats in the legislature for the military. One of the top priorities for Aung San Suu Kyi's government was to correct this problem. A strong initiative was taken from her side to convince even the military of the need for scrapping this provision so that genuine democratisation could proceed and that authoritarian trend in governance is curtailed. During a parliament session in March 2020, she put up the proposals to end the defence services' national political leadership role, gradually reduce its share of seats and end both the commander-in-chief's role as the supreme commander of the armed forces and his right to take power during an emergency (*The Irrawaddy*, March 23, 2020). The proposals, however, failed to cross 75 per cent vote mark, and were all rejected. She specifically proposed for gradually reducing the military's share of seats from 25 percent to 15 percent after the 2020 election, 10 percent after 2025 and 5 percent after 2030 elections respectively. It however failed to materialise thus clearly showing a political landscape still characterised by a distinct totalitarian culture, with the military having a decisive role.

Ultimately, democratisation, controlling the military and subduing authoritarian practices are all interrelated and intertwined. Involvement of all the stakeholders, including the *Tatmadaw*, the democratic forces, and the civil society organisations, taking into consideration the national interest in the global politico-economic order, could be an added advantage. Overcoming authoritarianism by taking up initiatives for democratisation, and finally transforming to a genuine democracy, calls for a conscious all-inclusive move. Both top-down and bottom-up mechanisms need to be generated in every possible area of the Burmese society. Inculcating a democratic culture in the mind of all the Burmese people through right advocacy will also go a long way. Will it really materialise soon, is still the big question. Nevertheless, the positive aspect this time is that the wheel of

democratisation, even though flawed or illiberal, in some form had already started with the involvement of the *Tatmadaw*, despite the follow-up coup. Besides, there is increasing awareness among the sections of the military and the general population as regards the need for a clear-cut separation of the military from politics and law-making process. The ongoing civil disobedience movement also leads to the emergence of a more rational and concerned section of young people who are seriously thinking about a meaningful political transition and curtailment of political authoritarianism for overall growth of the country. However, on the flip side, the recent military orchestrated sham elections and the coming of a military government in civilian garb could very likely create a situation where by the country is pushed towards a failed state deepening further the existing trend of authoritarianism in the political dynamics of the country. Having said all this, the evolving political dynamics in present Myanmar is still unpredictable. What new political metamorphosis will emerge from all these and how long it will be only time will tell. For the time being, it is all about the continuation of the authoritarian trend despite democratic resilience from the masses.

ⁱ Article 59(f) of the 2008 Constitution of Myanmar bars anyone from becoming president if their spouse, either of their parents or any of their children or their children's spouses are citizens of a foreign country.

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