

The Myanmar Coup and the Craft of Politics

Professor Walter F. Hatch

I probably owe an apology to Aung San Suu Kyi, who is languishing in prison after being removed from her position as leader of the government in Myanmar.

Obviously, I didn't put her there; the Tatmadaw (Burmese military) did. What I did was banal, maybe even benign: I blamed her for being a politician. I forgot that politics is the messy, complex contest for power, not a tidy or simple morality play. But this was a significant mistake for someone like me, an otherwise careful student of politics.

Here's my story: I once idolized the leader of Myanmar's pro-democracy movement. Youngest daughter of Gen. Aung San, the anti-colonial freedom fighter often viewed as the "Father of Myanmar," she had gone to college at Oxford and settled in the UK but returned to her homeland in 1988 to care for an ailing mother. Myanmar then was in the midst of a political revolt against the military government. Students, workers, and Buddhist monks filled the streets to demand free elections, and Aung San Suu Kyi joined them. She founded the National League for Democracy (NLD), the political arm of the movement. "I could not, as my father's daughter, remain indifferent to all that was going on," she explained that summer.

The military intervened to brutally suppress the protests, and it placed ASSK (my shorthand) under house arrest. Political pressure in Myanmar continued to mount until the military agreed in 1990 to hold elections. The NLD won a big majority in the Parliament, but the military refused to seat the winners. It clamped down even tighter. In fact, over the next two decades, the military government mostly kept ASSK under house arrest. Although permitted to leave the country, she declined – knowing that she would be refused re-entry. This meant that she was unable to see her British husband and two children for years.

Two decades later, the military, which had controlled Burma (or Myanmar) since 1962, finally agreed to loosen its grip on the country's political system. NDL did well in by-elections in 2012, winning all but a couple of the available seats. And then, in 2015, it won a supermajority in both houses of Parliament, ending military rule after more than a half century. ASSK became *de facto* leader of the new government, serving as state counsellor.

Like much of the rest of the world, I was giddy – and bloated with expectations. ASSK quickly dashed those by failing to stand up to the Tatmadaw as it brutalized the Rohingya, a Muslim minority group residing mostly in the western state of Rakhine. The government in Yangon had refused to acknowledge the citizenship of these people, frequently raiding villages, torching homes, and beating or killing anyone who protested. Tens of thousands of displaced Rohingya fled to Bangladesh. As leader of NLD, and then head of the new government, ASSK strongly denied charges of ethnic cleansing or genocide. She went so far as to ardently defend the military's actions at a 2019 hearing before the International Court of Justice in the Hague. This was more than a disappointment; it felt like a betrayal.

For many years, I had served as director of the Oak Institute for Human Rights – a Colby organization that, one fall, hosted a Rohingya couple, Nandar and Tony, who had worked for the UN High Commission on Refugees in Myanmar. Nandar's father, a local leader who had tried to mediate communal conflict, was in prison on trumped up charges of inciting unrest. I listened closely and felt the emotional pain experienced by our Oak Fellows, who spent much of their time in Maine listening to the news from home as it went from bad to worse for their persecuted community. And I came to resent ASSK for accepting if not facilitating what was clearly a gross violation of human rights.

I was not alone. Around the world, individuals and groups committed to social justice became louder and louder in their criticism of ASSK. A petition on Change.org pushed for revocation of her Nobel Peace Prize. The Oxford (UK) City Council withdrew an award it had bestowed upon her for leading the democracy movement in Myanmar. The U.S. Holocaust Museum revoked its Elie Wiesel award, claiming ASSK had failed "to condemn and stop the military's brutal campaign" against the Rohingya. Amnesty International pulled its "Ambassador of Conscience" award. And so on.

For the most part, the people of Myanmar, especially the majority Burmans, did not share this critique of ASSK and her party. (Racism is not unique to the U.S.) In the November 2020 election, NLD won 396 of 476 seats in

Parliament, crushing the military's party. This was too much for the Tatmadaw. It claimed fraud, demanded a new, military-supervised election, and filed complaints with the courts.

Then, on February 1, the military carried out a coup. It seized Parliament, and it arrested and detained ASSK. When Burmese citizens used the internet to organize resistance, the Tatmadaw shut off access. And when they nonetheless took to the streets in protests, it ordered soldiers to shoot – killing hundreds of non-violent demonstrators.

This, I now realize, was the outcome ASSK struggled to avoid from the very beginning. She had been dancing with the Tatmadaw, trying to expand democratic space when she could – but otherwise respecting the military's prerogatives (on the Rohingya, for example). She also understood that, for now at least, the Burmese public generally supported the generals in their bid to ethnically “cleanse” Rakhine state. She could work gradually to consolidate democracy, or she could call on the military to abandon a popular position. She could not do both and survive, politically. That's the lesson I see now in the rearview mirror.

One could certainly argue that the coup offers a different lesson: dancing with the devil never ends well. After all, even though she followed the military's lead on its effort to expel the Rohingya, ASSK was unable to hang onto power. One might conclude that pragmatism in the face of evil is always a failed approach.

For me, though, it's impossible to ignore this counterfactual: If ASSK and the NLD had opposed the military's brutal campaign against the Rohingya in 2017, they would have been immediately ousted by the Tatmadaw. The hammer would have dropped much sooner – before democratic experiences and expectations began to take root in Myanmar.

Because hypotheticals are always imagined, not played out in real time, we will never know for sure who's right. But I certainly feel less righteous, less judgmental toward ASSK today. While I should not have praised her so lavishly 30 years ago, perhaps I also should not have condemned her so bitterly four years ago. Yes, she was timid, maybe even complicit in criminal behavior. But she was not, politically, wrong. Because politics is about winning power and (if successful) wielding it. ASSK may have done her best to use the political process to advance democracy in Myanmar.

Interview with Professor Walter Hatch, 4/19/21
Walter Hatch, professor of government, is an expert on Asian politics as well as comparative political economy and global security. Academia is his second career; he spent years as a journalist – mostly as a political and investigative reporter for *The Seattle Times* but also as stringer for CBS News. Now he teaches, researches, and writes about government-business networks in Japan, civil society in China, international relations in East Asia, regional trade agreements, war memory and reconciliation, and U.S. military bases in Japan and Korea.

Keerthi: Would you say that your interest in Aung San Suu Kyi and Myanmar was inspired more by your scholarly work in East Asian politics or rather your personal interest in human rights activism?

Hatch: It was really both my scholarship and my activism that was touched, especially the latter. I have a strong interest in human rights, and as I learned more about the plight of the Rohingya, I became increasingly upset with the Burman majority in Myanmar and the government, including Aung San Suu Kyi's (ASSK) leadership. I was appalled that she defended the military's genocidal behavior in Rakhine State, which seemed inexcusable to me. That was the activist part of me that became agitated.

In this piece however, I'm trying to get more in touch with my inner political scientist and have the activist in me sit back and be quiet. The political scientist in me is watching this situation and beginning to realize that some of my Southeast Asia/Burma expert friends were right when I reached out to them 6 or so years ago, expressing disappointment with ASSK, and they told me I was being unreasonable. These were people from the University of Michigan and the University of Washington, who really know the politics of Myanmar much more intimately than I do, and they were telling me that she was boxed in, that she faced a Hobson's choice of either going back to being an outsider with no influence or trying to proceed with the democratization of Myanmar while “dancing with the military”, as I say in the piece.

The political scientist in me is saying, maybe they were right. Maybe these experts on Myanmar had a much more nuanced perspective on what somebody like ASSK could do as the State Counsellor.

Keerthi: Do you see a risk in looking at issues like Myanmar and ASSK through solely a human rights lens? How

can this cloud our political analysis of what is truly going on?

Hatch: This question is what motivated me to write the piece. I define politics as the contest for power and the wielding of power when one has it. Politics is one of the most important human processes that we can talk about in the world. We're constantly strategizing and making choices about what to prioritize and how far to go, and it ends up often resulting in compromise, which for an activist may be equivalent to capitulation, complicity, immorality, or maybe even evil, although I don't tend to use that term. People in the activist community will often frame issues in that kind of Manichean duality of good vs. evil. I think that there is a real problem with the human rights lens being entirely moralistic sometimes. Not that we should be complicit with immorality, but perhaps we should recognize that politicians, like the rest of us, generally are not always able to do what we think is the most righteous thing.

ASSK has revealed that she is a very pragmatic politician. I continue to be disappointed by her lack of action on the Rohingya situation, but what is different for me now is that I am more forgiving of her pragmatism and I have recognized that it probably was a necessary approach.

Keerthi: In evaluating politicians around the globe, do you think it is possible to separate a politician's strategic interests from their personal morality?

Hatch: I honestly don't think we can. Ethics is a major part of politics, i.e. doing the right thing. To use an example closer to home, I'm not suggesting for example that we should ignore all of Donald Trump's lying or sexual assault allegations, nor do I think we should ignore ASSK's failure to speak out on behalf of the Rohingya and take a more just position on their behalf, as I'm still disappointed with her. I just think if everything is viewed through a moralistic lens, the world becomes terribly simple. Our job as political scientists should be to maintain both a morality-based, normative view of the world, but also a more nuanced, political view of the world that recognizes that politics is about the contest for power.

Keerthi: In your piece you had a line that said: "This was more than a disappointment, it was a betrayal". Who did you see as being betrayed when you said this? Was it a personal betrayal, a betrayal of the persecuted Rohingya, or a betrayal of the champions of peace and democracy around the globe?

Hatch: I had hoped to be describing it as a betrayal of human rights advocates and the Rohingya more specifically, but I think that probably I was describing it also as a personal betrayal. Before I studied the Myanmar situation in any depth and before I got to know much about the Rohingya tragedy, I saw ASSK in an equally simplistic, romanticized way, as a kind of superhero, which I think a lot of people in Myanmar shared. She almost seemed like this divine individual who could bring Myanmar out of the terrible situation of being under the control of the military. The "betrayal" stems from the fact that I had put her on a pedestal, and she had betrayed my adulation.

I really do feel like I went from having, Pre-Oak, an incredibly rose-colored glasses view of her to having an almost opposite, ridiculously dark view of her. What I'm wishing is that I had been more balanced and had a more complex view of her from the very beginning. Finding that middle is not always right, and not always where we need to be, but certainly embracing complexity as opposed to just the stick-figure hero vs. anti-Christ characterization of politicians is, I think, very useful.

Keerthi: A recent piece in *East Asia Forum* wrote: "The Japanese government's approach to the coup in Myanmar is in some ways a middle road between the 'distant' Western states that prioritize human rights and democracy and the 'local' Asian states that prioritize stability and development." What are your thoughts on this statement and how does it relate to the geopolitics that are taking place in Asia right now?

Hatch: Probably the biggest issue is that Myanmar, like many Southeast Asian countries, has become a kind of proxy for conflict between China on the one hand and the U.S on the other over influence in the region. China has really got the upper hand in Myanmar and has for quite some time. China's economic influence is huge, with the Belt and Road initiative for example, which has provided funding for infrastructure projects there. The government in Yangon really appreciates Chinese support even though there have been some border issues that have plagued relations between the two countries.

Japan tends not to approach these issues from as hard-edged a human rights perspective as the U.S does. Japan has had some influence in Myanmar traditionally, and – though it belatedly suspended aid after the coup – it would like to renew that aid to maintain its influence. Unlike Western powers, Japan has not strongly criticized the military over its human rights record or even the recent coup. It is obvious that there is an ever-present competi-

tion taking place between China and Japan over influence in Myanmar.

That quote citing the different perspectives between an East Asian Perspective and a Western Perspective on human rights is generally correct. The U.S and the Europeans tend to elevate these issues, whereas Myanmar's neighbors, including Japan and China, tend to talk more about good governance and development with the belief that human rights are likely to be improved after a country becomes stable and developed.

Keerthi: What would you say to the critics of those countries like Japan and Myanmar's Asian neighbors for not having a hard-edged approach in dealing with the human rights situation in Myanmar?

Hatch: I think Japan is in a somewhat peculiar position, being a subordinate or junior partner to the United States in its foreign policy. It has tried to adopt a sort of omni-directional foreign policy that doesn't signal out particular countries except of course North Korea and China. I don't fault the Japanese as much as some human rights advocates would for trying to stake out a more independent position than the United States. Japan wants to have influence in the region and what that means politically is maintaining relations with the current military junta for example. If I were in charge of the world or Japan, I might do things differently, but one can certainly understand their desire to have influence in a place like Myanmar.

The big divide in the region has been for quite some time between China and the United States. On the economic front it used to be more clearly between China and Japan, but Japan's economic influence relative to China has waned rather dramatically, it really is more of a China vs. US and Japan game right now.

Keerthi: How do you see the situation in Myanmar playing out, based on your personal evaluation of ASSK and also your political analysis?

Hatch: I think the Junta is operating on borrowed time; I really don't think the status quo can hold. They've killed around 750 people so far and have detained around 3,000 Burmese citizens. You have almost all of society opposed to this coup; a parallel government has emerged in exile. I honestly believe the Junta can hang on for a while, but not for long. Everyone that has participated in these past two big elections understands the relative unpopularity of the military in Myanmar. There will be more brutality and violence to suppress unrest, and then a period of time

where people are just waiting to get rid of the military.

Neither of us has a crystal ball, and while I hate saying "we'll just have to wait and see," we really can't say how this situation will pan out. What we do know however is that based on other experiences with democratization, when people experience a little of it and it seems to go relatively well, they want more. If you create opportunity for people, you have rising expectations, and it makes it very difficult to go back. This was essentially the lesson from the Soviet Union in the mid 1980s under Gorbachev, when things changed thorough economic reforms as well as diplomatic opening and they just did not want to go back to the old ways of communist rule. I'm not saying that Myanmar's junta is the same as the Soviet military and bureaucracy, but I do think citizens tend to become more vigilant when they experience opportunity.

Keerthi: How does the Myanmar case show some of the pitfalls of the process of democratization?

Hatch: I think that is exactly what happened with the Rohingya response from ASSK and the National League for Democracy (NLD). I think the democratically elected leaders realized that the Rohingya were a small minority and that the military's policy of extermination and ethnic cleansing/genocide was relatively popular with the majority. This is a good example of everything that is wrong with a sort of "Tyranny of the majority" approach to democracy. A better approach is a robust equal rights democracy where minority groups – and there are many in Myanmar -- have the same rights as the Bamar majority. That would be a movement from a simplistic democracy where the majority simply dictates policy to a robust equal rights democracy where minority groups aren't oppressed on a regular basis.

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ou look at a case like India for example, which had one of the most robust democracies in the world, but it hasn't always worked out for them in terms of economic development. Democracy in the case of India was not so great during the Indira Gandhi years where her populism ended up hollowing out the civil service administration. The bottom line is that democracy can have a number of adverse consequences, you have to look at it through multiple lenses in order to understand its true meaning.