

Some celebrate amid confusions

REUTERS

Swaggering supporters of Myanmar's army chief swung through the streets of Yangon, waving national flags from pickup trucks to cheer on his coup against a democratically elected government.

Footage posted on social media showed a crowd of several gathered in the centre of Myanmar's biggest city to celebrate Senior General Min Aung Hlaing seizing power. But the mood elsewhere in the city was laced with fear, anger and frustration.

"I feel angry. I don't want more military rule," said Zizawah, a 32-year-old commercial director who only wanted to give one name because of fear of reprisals.

"The way they act is like a dictatorship. All of us know who we voted for."

Myanmar's army said it had detained elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi, whose National League for Democracy (NLD) party had won a landslide in a ballot in November that the military disputed.

"Today is the day that people are happy," one nationalist monk told a crowd of military supporters in a video published on Facebook.

Suu Kyi is hugely popular in Myanmar as the figurehead of decades struggling to end previous juntas despite anger in Western countries over her handling of an exodus of Rohingya refugees fleeing an army crackdown in 2017.

"We had a lawful election. People voted for the one they preferred," said Theinny Oo, a development consultant.

"We have no protection under the law now. We feel insecure and in fear."

Pro-democracy activists gave little credence to an army statement that it would hold a fair election and then step down.

"They took power by force," activist Maung Saungkha told Reuters. "Everyone feels angry and upset... I absolutely



Myanmar protesters residing in Japan hold photos of Aung San Suu Kyi as they rally against Myanmar's military after it seized power from a democratically elected civilian government, at United Nations University in Tokyo, Japan, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

'Serious blow to democracy'

World condemns Myanmar military coup; China, Asean's response more muted

REUTERS

The United Nations led condemnation of Myanmar's military yesterday after it seized power, calling for the release of elected leaders, including Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said the developments were a "serious blow to democratic reforms" and urged all leaders to refrain from violence and respect human rights, a UN spokesman said.

The United States, Britain, Australia and the European Union condemned the military's coup and detentions and its declaration of a state of emergency. The army said it had taken action in response to "election fraud".

China's response, however, was more muted. "We have noted what has happened in Myanmar and are in the process of further understanding the situation," Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin told a daily news briefing in Beijing.

"China is a friendly neighbour of Myanmar's. We hope that all sides in Myanmar can appropriately handle their differences under the constitution and legal framework and safeguard political and social stability," he added.

US President Joe Biden has been briefed on

the situation, the White House said.

"The United States opposes any attempt to alter the outcome of recent elections or impede Myanmar's democratic transition, and will take action against those responsible if these steps are not reversed," White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said.

Reflecting similar views of several Western governments, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken called for the release of Suu Kyi and the others detained by the military.

"We call on Burmese military leaders to release all government officials and civil society leaders and respect the will of the people of Burma as expressed in democratic elections on Nov 8," Blinken said in a statement, using another name for Myanmar.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson also condemned the coup. "The vote of the people must be respected and civilian leaders released," he said on Twitter.

Japan said it opposed any reversal of the democratic process in Myanmar.

"We strongly call on the military government to restore democracy as soon as possible," said a Foreign Ministry statement.

That was echoed by the head of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, who called

for the "immediate and unconditional release" of all those detained.

Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne called on the military "to respect the rule of law, to resolve disputes through lawful mechanisms and to release immediately all civilian leaders and others" who had been detained.

Singapore's Foreign Ministry urged all parties to exercise restraint and work towards a positive and peaceful outcome in comments that were echoed by Malaysia and Indonesia.

However, other fellow members of regional grouping, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), took a more hands-off approach. "It's their internal affair," Thailand's deputy prime minister Prawit Wongsuwan told reporters when asked about the coup in the country's northern neighbour. Cambodia and the Philippines made similar comments.

The detentions came after days of escalating tension between the civilian government and the military after the Nov 8 election, in which Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) scored a landslide win.

The army on Monday handed power to military chief Min Aung Hlaing and imposed a state of emergency for one year, according to a statement on a military-owned television station.



don't trust the fact that elections will be held after one year and they will transfer power back."

News of the coup, announced on military-controlled media, broke sporadically because of major disruptions to internet connections for mobile phones that many people rely on for news and keeping in touch.

Queues formed at ATMs, but many stopped working because of the disruptions to the internet while banks announced that they were being forced to close.

Markets were busy as people rushed out to stock up on essentials.

"I went to the market twice this morning. I bought rice and groceries, said one 19-year-old woman in the Yankin district who was afraid to give her name. "I don't know what is happening. I am a bit scared."

There was no sign of any anti-military protests on the streets of Yangon or in the administrative capital Naypyidaw, where parliament had been due to start its first post-election sitting later yesterday.

"Our country was a bird that was just learning to fly. Now the army broke our wings," student activist Si Thu Tun said.

NEWS IN BRIEF



Over 5,300 detained in Russia protests

Russian police have detained more than 5,300 people across the country in a massive clampdown on anti-Kremlin protests, as prosecutors backed a request to imprison opposition leader Alexey Navalny. OVD Info, which monitors arrests at opposition protests, said yesterday more than 5,300 people had been detained, including nearly 1,800 people in Moscow and almost 1,200 in Saint Petersburg, Russia's second city. The protests that witnessed a rare lockdown of Moscow centre came ahead of Navalny's court hearing which could see him imprisoned for several years. Meanwhile, a Moscow court ordered the Navalny's wife to pay a fine of 20,000 rubles (\$265) for violating protest regulations after she attended a demonstration in the Russian capital to demand his release on Sunday.

Black girl, 9, pepper-sprayed by US police

A nine-year-old girl was handcuffed and pepper-sprayed by police in the US city of Rochester, footage released Sunday showed, sparking new outrage over excesses committed by the country's law enforcement. Deputy Police Chief Andre Anderson said Sunday the girl -- who has not been named -- had been suffering from a serious mental health emergency, reportedly threatening to take her own life and that of her mother. Officers called to the scene on Friday eventually responded by handcuffing her, before trying to force her into a car and pepper-spraying her when she resisted, body cam videos showed.

Trump names lawyers for impeachment trial

Former US president Donald Trump announced Sunday he had picked two lawyers to head his defense team days before his historic second impeachment trial, as Republicans braced for a battle over the future of their party. Trump's Senate trial is due to start on February 9, but he had reportedly parted ways with several members of his initial legal team just a day ago. His lead lawyers, David Schoen and Bruce L. Castor, Jr, are "highly respected trial lawyers" with backgrounds in criminal law and defense, according to a statement from Trump.

SOURCE: AFP, NDTV

REPORTS ON FARMERS' PROTEST

Indian journalists accused of sedition

REUTERS, New Delhi

Several senior Indian journalists are facing charges of sedition over their reporting and online posts about a protest by farmers last week, sparking criticism of the legal action from media associations.

The cases have been filed with police in at least five states against the journalists including Rajdeep Sardesai, a prominent anchor on the India Today television channel, and Vinod Jose, executive editor of the Caravan magazine.

The cases, filed by residents of the states, allege that the journalists provoked violence during protests by farmers at New Delhi's Red Fort on Jan. 26 through incorrect posts on Twitter and reports that police had killed a protester.

Tens of thousands of farmers have camped out on the outskirts of the capital for more than two months, demanding the withdrawal of new agricultural laws that they say benefit private buyers at the expense of growers.

The government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi says reform of the agriculture sector will bring opportunities for farmers.



Farmers burn an effigy of Indian PM Modi during a protest against the government's recent agricultural reforms in Punjab, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

The protests turned violent on Jan. 26, when farmers broke into the historic Red Fort complex, with one protester killed and hundreds injured.

At the time, a witness told Reuters the protester was killed when the tractor he was driving overturned and crushed him but there was also talk he had been shot. Police, who had fired tear gas on the day, denied shooting him.

"The accused tried to provoke the

protesters for their political and personal gains by spreading false and misleading information online," one complaint filed against Jose in Uttar Pradesh state said, echoing the language of the other filings.

Jose said his journalists on the ground heard from a witness and a relative of the dead man that he had been shot. "This is an attack on free and independent reporting... Government wants only its official version to be

published," he said in a statement.

A lawyer for Sardesai did not have any immediate comment when contacted on Monday.

The Editors Guild of India, the Press Club of India and several other journalist groups condemned the police complaints and called them an intimidation tactic aimed at stifling the media.

Anand Sahay, president of the Press Club of India, said it was not a coincidence that the cases had largely been registered in states that are ruled by Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The club said "early reports" suggested the protester had been shot dead though later it appeared he was killed when his tractor turned over.

Activists say press freedom has shrunk under Modi's rule, which has been marked by attacks on and intimidation of journalists. The government denies intimidating the press.

India dropped two places to 142nd in the annual World Press Freedom rankings by the group Reporters Without Borders last year, which noted "constant press freedom violations, including police violence against journalists" and increased "pressure on the media to toe the Hindu nationalist government's line".

AUNG SAN SUU KYI

DEFENDER OF MILITARY AXED BY COUP

After a lifetime struggling against Myanmar's military, 75-year-old Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi is back under detention with a junta in power -- although her international image no longer shines.

She swept national elections last November and was preparing to begin another five-year term as the country's de facto leader. But an early morning army raid and her detention in the capital Naypyidaw has brought her time at the helm to an apparent halt.

Suu Kyi, the daughter of independence hero General Aung San, spent nearly two decades enduring long stretches of house arrest under the former military regime.

Her legacy abroad has been deeply tarnished since the landslide election victory in 2015 that vaulted her National League for Democracy (NLD) to power.

There was global revulsion at a military crackdown two years later that saw around 750,000 members of the stateless Rohingya minority flee burning villages to neighbouring Bangladesh.

Suu Kyi defended the army's conduct and even travelled to The Hague to rebut charges of genocide at the UN's top court.

Suu Kyi spent most of her early years outside of Myanmar, first in India, where her mother was an ambassador, and later at Oxford University, where she met her British husband.

Suu Kyi's elevation into a democracy champion happened

almost by accident when she returned home in 1988 to nurse her dying mother. Soon afterwards, at least 3,000 people were killed when the military crushed protests against its authoritarian rule.

The bloodshed was the catalyst for Suu Kyi. A charismatic orator, she found herself in a leading role in the burgeoning pro-democracy movement, delivering speeches to huge crowds as she led the NLD to a 1990 election victory.

The generals were not prepared to give up power, ignoring the result and confining to her home in Yangon, where she would live for 16 of the next 20 years.

She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize while detained in 1991, for her "non-violent struggle for democracy and human rights."

She was released in 2010 and swept the poll five years later, prompting jubilant celebrations by massive crowds across the country, and increased her party's majority in 2020. After taking office, some critics have accused her of behaving in an authoritarian manner and political prisoner advocates say her government has prosecuted and jailed dozens of rights activists.

"Myanmar people will remain supportive" of Suu Kyi in the wake of Monday's coup, said Yangon-based political analyst Min Zaw Oo. But he added that her future and that of the country's fitful transition to democracy was "uncertain".



MIN AUNG HLAING

REBUFFED IN POLLS, HE STAGED COUP

After taking credit for restoring Myanmar's democracy but then watching the military get smashed in elections, the country's top general has seized power just months away from official retirement.

General Min Aung Hlaing is an international pariah who has been condemned for presiding over a brutal crackdown on the country's stateless Rohingya population in 2017.

He has been banned from Facebook for stoking hate speech against the persecuted minority, and UN investigators have called on him and other top army leaders to be prosecuted for genocide.

The 64-year-old was tapped to head the country's armed forces in 2011, just as a previous generation of military leaders were transitioning the country to a parliamentary system after decades of junta rule.

He has embarked on an ambitious and expensive programme to outfit the army with modern equipment, sourcing new weapons and hardware from China, Russia, Israel and other big arms sellers.

But he has also hinted at his own political ambitions after he turns 65 later this year -- the age he would have been subject to mandatory retirement.

"He had flirted with the idea of running for election himself as a civilian," said Myanmar analyst Herve Lemahieu from Australia's Lowy Institute.

Lemahieu said the general had probably hoped for a path to higher office with the help of a military-backed political party, which was routed in an election last November.

"He's probably calculated now that... there is no electoral means by which he could stay in power," Lemahieu said.

The November poll was won in a landslide by Suu Kyi but the military has disputed the results of the vote.

Before the vote, Min Aung Hlaing had pledged to honour the outcome of the election. But he dramatically raised tensions last week when he suggested the country's constitution could be "revoked" if the political impasse could not be solved.

Now that he has taken charge, the general is likely to move quickly and stage a new vote that will "stack the game in his favour," Lemahieu said.

"I think he will try to put the country back on track towards some kind of on-paper election in which the major players including... Aung San Suu Kyi will be barred from running," he added.



MYANMAR'S FRAGILE DEMOCRACY

The people of Myanmar are no strangers to military rule. Here is a timeline of its troubled history:

1947: Aung San, who fought against the Japanese and led the country to independence from Britain, is assassinated. Aung San Suu Kyi, is his only daughter and youngest child.

1948: Myanmar achieves formal independence under President U Nu.

1962: The military under General Ne Win takes power in a coup. All opposition parties are banned.

1988: Pro-democracy protests in August are met with a brutal military crackdown and as many as 5,000 people are killed. In September, Suu Kyi founds the National League for Democracy (NLD).

1990: Under international pressure the military calls an election, which the NLD wins by a landslide. The military refuses to recognise the results or hand over power and Suu Kyi is arrested and placed in house arrest.

1995: In July, Aung San Suu Kyi released from house arrest.

2002: Suu Kyi released again and allowed to travel around the country.

2007: Thousands take to the streets of Yangon in protests led by Buddhist monks, after the military government removes fuel subsidies. Dozens are killed in the subsequent military crackdown.

2008: The process of democratisation begins with a controversial constitutional referendum that took place only two days after Cyclone Nargis swept across the Irrawaddy Delta leaving tens of thousands dead.

2010: The USDP wins elections that are boycotted by the NLD. Aung San Suu Kyi is freed from house arrest in November.

2015: The NLD wins a general election by a landslide and Suu Kyi becomes leader in a specially created role of state counsellor.

2016-18: Unrest flares again in Rakhine after Rohingya fighters attack three police border posts, killing nine police officers. A brutal military crackdown in Rakhine drives more than 730,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh. The United Nations says the campaign of mass killing, rape, and arson was carried out with "genocidal intent", which Myanmar denies. Suu Kyi later defends Myanmar against genocide charges brought at the Hague.

2019: Fighting begins in Rakhine between government troops and the Arakan Army (AA), an ethnic Rakhine group seeking greater regional autonomy. Suu Kyi urges the army to "crush" the rebels.

2020: The NLD claims a resounding victory in parliamentary elections taking more votes than it did in 2015. The USDP demands a rerun of the election and calls for military help to ensure fairness, alleging irregularities.

2021: The military imposes a state of emergency and says power has been transferred to military chief Min Aung Hlaing, after Suu Kyi and other senior government officials were arrested in a series of early morning raids.

SOURCE: AGENCIES