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Burma: Back to Basics

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China's Xinhua news agency tactfully described the Burmese army's seizure of power on Monday as a ?cabinet reshuffle'. This suggests a possible new approach for Donald Trump's legal team as he faces a second impeachment trial, but it won't work, for two reasons. One, Trump's coup attempt failed. Two, people got killed.

Whereas the Burmese army moved with practiced ease to arrest democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi and all the members of her National League for Democracy (NLD) who had been elected to the new parliament by an 80% landslide last November.

The internet and the phones went down nationwide, military snatch squads grabbed the sleeping MPs out of their beds ? they were all in the capital for the official opening of the new parliament later on Monday ? and by the time the rest of the country was awake the job was done. And nobody got hurt.

An impressive piece of work. Eat your heart out, Donald Trump! But the great mystery is why the army bothered.

After all, the army still owned all its money-making commercial enterprises, and it really controlled the government too despite the democratic window-dressing. Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi was in office, but the army was the power behind the throne. That was the deal (hopefully transitional) that she had made with the generals in 2015.

She could not choose who got the three most important cabinet posts in terms of controlling the country: Home, Defence and Border Affairs were reserved for serving generals. And one-quarter of the seats in parliament were reserved for unelected military officers, which was enough to veto any changes in the constitution.

It was a rotten deal, but Suu Kyi could not just force the army from power. The military had ruled Burma since 1962, and they had simply ignored a landslide election victory by the NLD in the past. The generals had all the guns, and that lopsided power-sharing deal was the only alternative to naked military dictatorship.

In fact, it was worse than that. When the army started massacring the Rohingya, a Muslim minority in the state of Rakhine, in 2017, Suu Kyi had to go along with that as well. The Burmese army's main business has always been keeping restive minority populations down, and it would not brook civilian interference in that key role.

?Had to go along with it' may be a bit too generous. Suu Kyi didn't just keep quiet about the genocide that drove most of the Rohingya population (700,000 people) across the border into Bangladesh. She actually went to the International Court of Justice last year and defended the army's actions in person. (That was when her foreign admirers finally cancelled her honorary sainthood.)

No matter. She did it, she still stands by it ? and the NLD got 80% of the votes in the November election, so it worked. She kept her side of the rotten deal. Why did the generals not keep their side? After all, they still really held the final control, and all their investments were safe.

Part of the reason seems to be that the soldiers expected the army's proxy civilian party to do much better in the election because of popular support among the Bamar ethnic majority (66% of the population) for its actions in Rakhine. And at this point it goes very Trumpish.

If you believe you should have won the election, it's a short step to thinking that the vote was rigged, and a longer but still possible step to believing you should use force to reverse this injustice. There was no evidence of fraud and the national election commission said so, but the army started claiming there had been ?massive voting irregularities.?

There has long been dissatisfaction among junior generals and colonels about the army's collaboration with the NLD, profitable though it has been. However, the commander-in-chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, was distinctly less enthusiastic in his claims of fraud in the run-up to the coup.

What happens now? Probably a new president and commander-in-chief to replace Min Aung Hlaing within weeks, and then another prolonged period of military rule. Foreign sanctions? Definitely. Popular protests? Almost certainly. Massive bloodshed and repression? Quite possibly; the army has done that before. And Aung San Suu Kyi gets another crack at sainthood.