[Khalid Bhatti](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/khalid-bhatti)

February 13, 2021

**Coup in Myanmar**

First of all, I want to express my grief over the death of my friend and comrade Zain. It is hard to believe that comrade Zainul Abedin, op-ed editor of The News, has left us at the young age of 49. We have lost a brilliant editor, loving friend and committed socialist.

Zain upheld the best traditions of leftwing journalism and stood firmly for freedom of media and expression. He promoted alternate ideas in an era dominated by neoliberal ideology and commercialisation. He never compromised his ideas and principles for fame, position and money, and was a man of logic, reason and rationale. My deepest condolences go to his close friends, comrades and colleagues.

On to politics: the military junta in Myanmar has once again ousted the elected government of the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi. The NLD secured a landslide victory in the November 8 general elections last year. The military leadership sees this victory as a threat to its dominance and control.

This coup is a clear violation of the constitution introduced by the military in 2011, when partial power was handed over to the elected government and 25 percent seats in both houses of parliament were reserved for the military junta.

However, the quasi-democratic political structure with the uneasy power-sharing between the NLD and the military, which still held considerable influence in the government, led to a deadlock in the so-called ‘transition into democracy’ in Myanmar. The experiment of a hybrid regime has failed in Myanmar.

The pro-military party suffered a humiliating defeat in the elections and refused to accept the election results. The general elections clearly showed that the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party has lost significant support among the people. The failure of efforts to consolidate their power through the democratically elected parliament has led to this coup.

This coup is then an attempt by the military to regain full control, even though it has little support among the people. The Myanmar military has used the claims of the pro-military party as a lame excuse to overthrow the elected government. The election commission said there was no evidence to support these claims.

An announcement on military television said the move was in response to “fraud” during last year’s general election. A spokesman said power had been handed to the army’s commander-in-chief, General Min Aung Hlaing, who would hold power for one year, after which there would be new elections.

The military-led government has arrested hundreds of political leaders belonging to the NLD and also placed hundreds under house arrest inside government housing compounds.

Protests have erupted in Myanmar, with thousands taking to the streets across the country to denounce the coup. Doctors, nurses, teachers and civil servants have started a civil disobedience movement.

Anticipating a reaction from the people, the military junta will use every tactic to suppress the protest movement. It will end up using brute force against any resistance by the people, as has been often done in the past.

Since taking complete power in 1962, the Myanmar military has a long history of brutally repressing protests. Previous protests against the country's decades-long military rule, in 1988 and 2007, saw large numbers of demonstrators killed by the security forces. According to a BBC report, at least 3,000 protesters died in 1988 and at least 30 people lost their lives in 2007. And thousands were imprisoned during both sets of events.

A mass movement erupted in 1988 against military rule and the decades-long repression. The military used brute force to quell the mass movement. Thousands were killed and imprisoned, while thousands were forced into exile in neighbouring countries. This mass pro-democracy movement forced the military to organise the general election in 1990 which was won by the NLD. The military however refused to hand over power to the NLD and launched a crackdown against it.

Aung San Suu Kyi tried everything to appease the Myanmar military leadership. She made all sorts of compromises and tried to share power with the generals. But her efforts failed and they killed the transition towards democracy halfway through to protect their own economic and political interests.

It is ironic that now, after the military coup, Aung San Suu Kyi is crying out to the people to protest against the brutal military regime while she failed to challenge the military throughout the tenure of her leadership, which had significant mass support. Given the widespread anger amongst the Myanmar people, it is not impossible that they take to the streets in droves, as they did in 1988.

Suu Kyi had always maintained a strategy of cooperation with the military and rejected any antagonistic remarks or actions against them. Despite popular demands to amend the existing constitution that gives too much power to the military leaders, the NLD had largely remained silent on the issue.

Even with a majority in parliament and with full authority to make legislation, the NLD continued with their non-confrontational approach. This inaction by them received widespread criticism amongst the activist layers in Myanmar.

Now the working people of Myanmar are going to pay the price of the refusal of Aung San Suu Kyi’s NLD to mobilise a mass movement to break the power of the generals when they had the chance.

The power-sharing arrangement that was made in 2011 has failed to carry out the transition towards democracy and constitutional rule. Market reforms and liberalization of the economy pose a direct threat to the political and economic domination and control of military junta. The influx of foreign capital and the implementation of policies that create competition between the big capitalists have led to major conflicts among the ruling elite in Myanmar. This coup is the result of the growing fears and insecurity felt by the junta.

The writer is a freelance journalist.