[**Myanmar’s miasma**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1605218/myanmars-miasma)

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*There was a young lady of Niger/ Who smiled as she rode on a tiger;/ They returned from the ride/ With the lady inside,/ And the smile on the face of the tiger.*

WITH a couple of judicious amendments — substitute Myanmar for Niger and ‘old’ for ‘young’ — William Cosmo Monkhouse’s notorious limerick pretty much sums up this week’s events in the country formerly known as Burma.

Monday’s coup should not have come entirely as a surprise. There had been telltale rumblings for a while. On Jan 28, the de facto head of the civilian government, Aung San Suu Kyi, received a missive from representatives of the military chief, Gen Min Aung Hlaing, demanding a recount of votes cast in last November’s general election and a postponement of the parliamentary opening scheduled for Feb 1.

Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD) had won that election in an even bigger landslide than in 2015, winning 396 out of 476 seats in both houses of parliament (not counting the 25pc reserved for the military). The opposition Union Solidarity and Development Party, seen as a proxy for the army, captured only 33 seats.

The coup highlights the riskiness of hybrid regimes.

If that was a humiliation for the military, it should have seen it coming. Notwithstanding a plethora of unfulfilled promises, Suu Kyi remains exceedingly popular among the nation’s Bamar majority. Western media outlets often suggest her sustained appeal is a phenomenon that persists ‘despite’ her atrocious endorsement of genocide against the Rohingya and the brutal subjugation of other ethnic minorities, but it would be more accurate to say that her chauvinism, and that of the NLD, resonates with the majority’s mindset.

She certainly did not lose any votes for personally fetching up to defend the Myanmar military’s Nazism before the International Criminal court at The Hague in December 2019. Just six months before that, she found a rare European ally in Hungary’s fascist-minded Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. A joint statement issued after a meeting in Budapest said that the two leaders noted that both Europe and Southeast Asia “have seen the emergence of the issue of coexistence with continuously growing Muslim populations”.

By then Suu Kyi’s star was already decisively on the wane internationally among many of those who had upheld her as a beacon of enlightened democracy and human rights during her years of struggle and incarceration — and not without cause. It was easy to see her as the antidote to the longest lasting military regime in Asia, which had assumed power in 1962, pretended to relent after a popular rebellion in 1988, but doubled down on repression after the NLD won the 1990 elections.

It relented once more two decades later, and the 2015 elections yielded a hybrid arrangement whereby a civilian facade, with Suu Kyi at the helm as state counsellor and foreign minister (she technically couldn’t be president because her two sons are foreign citizens), was instituted, while the military retained the key defence, interior and border affairs ministries.

Some of Suu Kyi’s dwindling band of international admirers claimed that she was obliged to kowtow to the military in order to sustain Myanmar’s progress towards a full-fledged democracy and thwart the likelihood of a return to absolute military rule. It will be interesting to see how they modulate their tune. It’s worth remembering, in any case, that she was reluctant to use the word ‘Rohingya’ even before she acquired a degree of power in a hybrid dispensation, preferring to refer to them as ‘Bengalis’.

The Rohingya who re­­main in Myanmar and various other ethnic minorities were disenfranchised ahead of the November polling, ostensibly because the regions they live in are too volatile — thanks mainly to the military. Obviously, that wasn’t a part of the army’s objection to the elections, although it does help to explain the size of the NLD’s majority.

Among the 70pc of the population that purportedly did vote, however, the election commission sees no substantial evidence of fraud, and the allegations have been described as “Trumpian”. (If it paid any attention to international affairs, the MAGA mob would be drooling at the idea of elected leaders being incarcerated while the losers take office.)

Anyhow, notwithstanding Suu Kyi’s deplorable conduct, or the fact that there was no clear pathway to a demilitarised democracy, the coup is nonetheless a setback and potentially a disaster. Who can say where a year-long emergency will lead to? And despite the predictable flurry of condemnations from the West, Myanmar’s neighbours — notably China and Thailand, neither of which holds a candle for representative rule — have been reticent about condemning the move, mostly condoning it as an internal affair.

Military coups are never a good idea, hybrid dispensations are seldom sustainable, and let us hope Imran Khan is aware of the risk of putting a smile on the face of the tiger.

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