

The Structural Failure of Democracy in Myanmar: Military Power, Ethnic Conflict and the Absence of Federalism

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ABSTRACT

Myanmar's prolonged political crisis presents a significant challenge to theories of democratization and democratic consolidation. Despite periods of parliamentary government, political liberalization, competitive elections, and civilian administration, Myanmar has repeatedly failed to establish durable democratic governance. The military coup of 1 February 2021 demonstrated the fragility of the country's democratic transition, but the coup should not be regarded as the sole explanation for democratic failure. This article argues that Myanmar's inability to consolidate democracy is rooted in a set of interconnected structural conditions: entrenched military power, constitutional constraints on civilian authority, protracted ethnic conflict, and the absence of a genuinely federal political settlement. Drawing on democratic consolidation theory, civil-military relations theory, and federal and power-sharing approaches to divided societies, the article employs a qualitative case-study methodology based on documentary analysis and scholarly literature. It examines Myanmar's political development from independence through the democratic opening of 2011–2020 and the military takeover of 2021. The analysis demonstrates that the 2008 Constitution institutionalized a political role for the military, including guaranteed parliamentary representation and control over key security ministries, while creating substantial barriers to constitutional reform. At the same time, longstanding conflicts between the Bamar-dominated central state and ethnic nationalities remained unresolved. The failure to establish meaningful federalism prevented the emergence of an inclusive constitutional settlement and contributed to persistent mistrust between the centre and ethnic political actors. The article argues that military power and ethnic conflict have reinforced one another: conflict has been used to justify military centralization, while centralized military rule has reproduced grievances and resistance. The experience of Myanmar demonstrates that elections and civilian government alone cannot consolidate democracy where unelected institutions retain autonomous coercive power and where fundamental questions of state structure and ethnic inclusion remain unresolved. Sustainable democratization therefore requires civilian supremacy over the military, comprehensive constitutional reform, meaningful federalism, minority representation, and a negotiated political settlement to the country's longstanding conflicts.

Keywords: Myanmar; Burma; democracy; democratic consolidation; Tatmadaw; military; civil-military relations; ethnic conflict; federalism; constitutionalism

INTRODUCTION

Myanmar provides one of the most important contemporary cases for examining the relationship between democratization, military power, ethnic conflict, and federalism. Since independence in 1948, the country has experienced parliamentary democracy, military coups, socialist authoritarianism, prolonged military rule, political liberalization, competitive elections, and periods of civilian government. Yet these political transformations have failed to produce a stable and consolidated democratic order.

The political opening that began in 2011 generated considerable optimism inside and outside Myanmar. Political prisoners were released, restrictions on political participation were reduced, opposition parties were permitted greater space, and elections became substantially more competitive. The National League for

Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, won the 2015 general election and formed a civilian government. Its victory in the November 2020 election appeared to strengthen the possibility that electoral democracy could become institutionalized.

That expectation was shattered on 1 February 2021, when the Myanmar military, or Tatmadaw, detained senior civilian leaders and assumed political power. The coup demonstrated that the civilian government established through elections did not possess ultimate authority over the coercive institutions of the state. More importantly, it exposed weaknesses that had existed throughout the preceding decade.

The central argument of this article is that **Myanmar's democratic failure is structural rather than merely episodic**. The military coup should therefore be interpreted not simply as an interruption of an otherwise consolidated democratic system, but as evidence of the unresolved institutional contradictions of Myanmar's political order.

The 2008 Constitution is central to this argument. Rather than establishing unequivocal civilian supremacy, the Constitution institutionalized an important political role for the military. Military personnel appointed by the Commander-in-Chief occupy 25 percent of the seats in the national legislatures. The military also retains control over the Ministries of Defence, Home Affairs, and Border Affairs. Moreover, the constitutional amendment procedure gives the military an effective veto over fundamental constitutional change (Crouch, 2020; Harding & Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 2022).

Scholarship on Myanmar's constitutional order has consequently emphasized that the political opening after 2011 was bounded by constitutional arrangements designed to preserve military interests. Crouch (2020) describes this as a form of pre-emptive or authoritarian constitutionalism, in which constitutional design constrained the possibility of a transition toward full constitutional democracy. Croissant and Kamberling (2013) similarly argue that constitution-making and elections can serve as mechanisms through which military regimes institutionalize political influence rather than simply surrender it.

However, military power alone does not explain Myanmar's democratic crisis.

Myanmar is a deeply diverse country comprising the Bamar majority and numerous ethnic nationalities with distinct histories, identities, languages, territories, and political aspirations. Since independence, armed organizations representing several ethnic communities have challenged the authority of the central state. Their demands have frequently included autonomy, equality, self-determination, and federalism.

This creates a second structural problem. The political system has never fully resolved the relationship between the central government and ethnic nationalities. The Panglong Agreement of 1947 created expectations concerning equality and autonomy, but these expectations were not translated into a durable political settlement. The resulting distrust contributed to armed conflict and provided successive military governments with a justification for maintaining a strong centralized state.

Recent scholarship warns against understanding Myanmar simply through the binary of “democracy versus dictatorship.” Brenner (2024), for example, argues that ethnonational conflict and the structure of the postcolonial state are central to understanding Myanmar's political crisis. His analysis suggests that democratization cannot be separated from the question of ethnic marginalization and state formation.

This article therefore brings together four dimensions of Myanmar's political crisis:

1. military dominance;
2. constitutional institutionalization of military power;
3. unresolved ethnic conflict; and
4. the absence of genuine federalism.

The article's principal proposition is that these factors are mutually reinforcing. Military dominance contributes to centralized state-building; centralized state-building contributes to ethnic grievances; ethnic conflict strengthens the military's claim to be the guardian of national unity; and the absence of federalism prevents the political settlement necessary to break this cycle.

The article consequently asks:

Why has Myanmar failed to consolidate democracy despite periods of competitive elections and civilian government?

The answer proposed is that elections have occurred within a political structure in which the military retained autonomous constitutional, institutional, and coercive power, while the country remained divided over the fundamental question of how political authority should be distributed among its diverse national communities.

Research Problem

The central research problem arises from the contradiction between Myanmar's experience of electoral competition and its inability to establish durable democratic rule.

Between 2011 and 2020, Myanmar developed several characteristics commonly associated with democratization. Elections became competitive, civilian politicians held government office, opposition parties participated in elections, and political freedoms expanded compared with previous decades.

Yet the military remained politically autonomous.

The result was a hybrid political system in which elected institutions existed alongside a constitutionally protected military establishment. The military did not merely influence politics informally; it possessed formal constitutional authority.

The problem was compounded by the unresolved ethnic question. Democratic competition at the national level did not automatically resolve the demands of ethnic nationalities for autonomy, equality and federalism.

Consequently, Myanmar faced two unresolved transitions simultaneously:

a transition from military rule to civilian democracy; and a transition from a centralized unitary state toward an inclusive federal political order.

The failure to complete either transition weakened the other.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to explain the structural causes of Myanmar's failure to consolidate democracy.

The specific objectives are:

1. To examine the historical development of military political power in Myanmar.
2. To analyze the constitutional mechanisms that protected military influence.
3. To examine the relationship between ethnic conflict and democratic instability.
4. To assess the significance of federalism for democratic consolidation.

5. To evaluate the limitations of Myanmar's democratic transition between 2011 and 2020.
6. To determine why electoral competition failed to establish durable civilian supremacy.
7. To identify institutional conditions that could support sustainable democratic transformation.

Research Questions

Primary Research Question

Why has democracy failed to become consolidated in Myanmar despite periods of competitive elections and civilian government?

Secondary Questions

1. How has military autonomy constrained democratic consolidation?
2. How did the 2008 Constitution institutionalize military political power?
3. How has ethnic conflict affected the prospects for democratic governance?
4. Why has federalism remained unresolved?
5. What does the 2011–2020 transition reveal about the limitations of election-centered democratization?
6. What institutional conditions are necessary for sustainable democratic and federal transformation?

Hypotheses

Although the study is qualitative, five hypotheses guide the analysis.

H1: Military Power Hypothesis

The greater the institutional autonomy and political authority of the military, the weaker the prospects for democratic consolidation.

H2: Constitutional Constraint Hypothesis

Constitutionally guaranteed military political power constrains elected governments' capacity to establish civilian supremacy and implement democratic institutional reform.

H3: Ethnic Conflict Hypothesis

Persistent unresolved ethnic conflict weakens democratic consolidation by strengthening arguments for centralized military authority while undermining political trust between ethnic communities and the central state.

H4: Federalism Hypothesis

The absence of meaningful federalism reduces the prospects for democratic consolidation by failing to provide an inclusive political settlement for Myanmar's diverse ethnic nationalities.

H5: Electoral Limitation Hypothesis

Competitive elections are insufficient for democratic consolidation when unelected institutions retain

autonomous coercive, constitutional, and political power.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Democratic Consolidation

Democratic consolidation theory provides the first component of the framework.

Linz and Stepan (1996) argue that democracy becomes consolidated when democratic institutions become the accepted and legitimate framework for political competition. Consolidation therefore requires more than elections. Major political actors must accept democratic procedures and reject the use of non-democratic institutions to overturn electoral outcomes.

This perspective is directly relevant to Myanmar. Elections became competitive, but the military never fully accepted the principle that electoral outcomes should determine ultimate political authority.

The 2021 coup consequently represents evidence of incomplete democratic consolidation.

Civil-Military Relations

The second component is civil-military relations theory.

Huntington (1957) emphasizes the importance of institutional separation between military professionalism and political authority. Finer (1962), in contrast, draws attention to the conditions under which military organizations intervene in politics.

Myanmar presents a particularly significant case because the military became deeply embedded in political and constitutional institutions.

The Tatmadaw has historically performed multiple roles:

- national defence;
- internal security;
- political governance;
- constitutional guardianship;
- economic activity; and
- national identity formation.

This institutional position made civilian control unusually difficult.

A democracy cannot be considered fully consolidated when the armed forces retain an independent political mandate.

Federalism and Divided-Society Theory

The third component concerns federalism and power-sharing.

Lijphart (1969, 1977) argues that deeply divided societies require institutional arrangements that prevent permanent majority domination and provide minorities with meaningful political participation.

Federalism can provide territorial autonomy and distribute authority between central and subnational institutions.

Myanmar's problem is particularly relevant to this theoretical perspective because ethnic political demands have repeatedly focused on autonomy and self-government.

Crouch (2020) demonstrates that federalism has been a recurring constitutional question in Myanmar's peace processes.

The theoretical implication is that democratic consolidation in Myanmar cannot be reduced to majoritarian electoral competition. A stable democratic order must also address the political status and rights of ethnic nationalities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employs a qualitative explanatory case-study methodology.

Myanmar is selected because it represents a critical case of incomplete democratization. It experienced meaningful political liberalization and competitive elections while simultaneously maintaining significant military autonomy. The case allows examination of whether elections can consolidate democracy when the military retains constitutional and institutional power.

Sources of Data

The study relies on secondary sources, including:

- peer-reviewed academic articles;
- scholarly books;
- constitutional documents;
- historical studies;
- reports of international organizations;
- research reports;
- studies of civil-military relations;
- literature on federalism and ethnic conflict; and
- analyses of Myanmar's peace process.

Primary constitutional provisions are treated as documentary evidence, while scholarly literature is used to interpret their political significance.

Method of Analysis

The study employs qualitative thematic analysis.

Four analytical categories are used:

1. military power;

2. constitutional constraints;
3. ethnic conflict; and
4. federalism.

The analysis then examines the causal interaction among these categories rather than treating them as isolated variables.

The central analytical mechanism can be represented as:

Military autonomy → centralized political authority → ethnic grievances → armed conflict → justification for military intervention → continued military autonomy.

The absence of federalism prevents this cycle from being institutionally resolved.

LIMITATIONS

The study has three principal limitations.

First, political conditions in Myanmar remain fluid.

Second, reliable primary research inside conflict-affected areas is difficult because of security restrictions.

Third, the post-2021 political order is still evolving, making definitive predictions about Myanmar's future inappropriate.

The study therefore focuses on structural patterns rather than attempting to predict the precise outcome of the current conflict.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Military Rule and Political Institutionalization

Myanmar's military has been the subject of extensive scholarly research.

Callahan (2003) demonstrates how military institutions became central to the construction of the postcolonial state. Selth (2002) examines the organizational and political power of the armed forces, while Bünthe (2017) analyzes the transition from direct military rule toward a system in which the military remained an important political guardian.

Croissant and Kamerling (2013) make an especially important contribution by arguing that constitution-making and elections can function as strategies through which military regimes institutionalize power. Their analysis challenges the assumption that political liberalization necessarily indicates genuine democratization. The literature therefore suggests that the military's withdrawal from direct executive rule after 2011 did not necessarily represent its withdrawal from politics.

Constitutionalism and Military Power

Constitutional scholarship provides perhaps the strongest institutional explanation for Myanmar's incomplete transition. Crouch (2020) argues that the 2008 Constitution represents a form of authoritarian constitutionalism. Rather than waiting for democratic actors to constrain military power, the military-sponsored constitutional process established institutional protections before a full transition could occur.

The Constitution therefore established democratic institutions while simultaneously limiting the capacity of those institutions to challenge military authority. Harding and Nyi Nyi Kyaw (2022) document repeated attempts to reform the Constitution and the rigidity of the amendment process. They demonstrate that constitutional reform became a prolonged political struggle rather than a normal democratic process.

Recent scholarship likewise describes the 2008 constitutional system as establishing a stable arrangement in which military and elected political actors shared political authority, with significant implications for the military's subsequent intervention.

Ethnicity, Nationalism and State Formation

A second body of literature emphasizes that Myanmar's crisis cannot be separated from ethnic conflict. Kipgen (2016) demonstrates the centrality of ethnic politics to Myanmar's political history.

Walton (2013) examines the interaction between nationalism, religion and political identity.

Brenner (2024) provides a particularly important recent critique of the conventional democracy-versus-dictatorship framework. He argues that Myanmar's crisis must be understood through the deeper structure of ethnonational conflict and the postcolonial state.

This literature supports the argument that ethnic conflict is not a secondary problem that can be solved after democratization. Instead, it is one of the principal structural conditions affecting the possibility of democratization.

Federalism and Constitutional Reform

Federalism has been a persistent issue in Myanmar's constitutional history. Crouch (2020) demonstrates that federalism has been repeatedly connected with peace negotiations and constitutional reform. Kipgen (2019) argues that federalism offers an important mechanism for addressing ethnic grievances.

More recent research suggests that the political meaning of federalism changed after the 2021 coup. Myat et al. (2023) find that political discourse among opposition forces shifted toward a more decentralized conception of federal democracy after the coup. This development is important because it suggests that the post-2021 crisis may have altered political relationships between Bamar democratic forces and ethnic organizations.

Historical Foundations of the Crisis

Myanmar's contemporary political crisis has deep historical roots.

The 1947 Panglong Agreement represented an attempt to establish cooperation between Bamar political leaders and several ethnic nationalities. The agreement was associated with expectations of autonomy and equality within a Union. The 1947 constitutional settlement contained federal characteristics, but political instability and armed conflict soon undermined the democratic system. After independence in 1948, the state confronted communist insurgency, ethnic rebellion and political instability. These conflicts strengthened the military's political position. The decisive turning point came with General Ne Win's military coup in 1962. Parliamentary democracy was abolished, and military institutions became the central mechanism of state power.

The military subsequently developed a political narrative in which national unity and territorial integrity required strong centralized authority. This created a structural dilemma. The military argued that centralization was necessary because the Union faced internal fragmentation. Yet centralization also contributed to ethnic grievances, which in turn sustained armed resistance.

Thus: ethnic conflict strengthened military power, while military centralization reproduced ethnic conflict.

The 2008 Constitution and the Institutionalization of Military Authority

The 2008 Constitution is perhaps the most important institutional explanation for Myanmar's failed democratic consolidation. The Constitution created elected legislatures and an elected executive, but it also ensured a formal political role for the military.

Twenty-five percent of seats in the national legislatures are reserved for military personnel appointed by the Commander-in-Chief.

The military also controls the ministries responsible for defence, home affairs and border affairs.

This arrangement creates a fundamental distinction between **electoral authority** and **coercive authority**.

Civilian politicians may win elections, but the military retains substantial control over the institutions that administer coercion and internal security.

The amendment procedure creates another obstacle. Fundamental constitutional changes require more than 75 percent parliamentary support, meaning that the military's 25 percent parliamentary bloc can prevent amendments.

Crouch (2020) therefore argues that constitutional design was used pre-emptively to constrain future democratic transformation.

This helps explain why the NLD government could not simply legislate away military prerogatives after winning elections.

The Democratic Opening, 2011–2020

The political transition beginning in 2011 was nevertheless significant. The government of President Thein Sein introduced reforms that created greater political openness. The NLD entered formal electoral politics. The 2015 election represented a major turning point because the NLD won sufficient seats to form a civilian government. However, the system remained hybrid. The military retained its constitutional powers. The NLD therefore governed within a constitutional framework that it had not designed and could not easily change. The 2020 election produced another decisive NLD victory. The result created an increasingly difficult relationship between the military and the civilian government. Harding and Nyi Nyi Kyaw (2022) demonstrate that constitutional reform had already become a deeply contested issue before the coup. The 2021 coup consequently occurred within a pre-existing constitutional conflict.

Ethnic Conflict and the Failure of Democratic Consolidation

The second major structural barrier was the persistence of armed ethnic conflict.

Myanmar's ethnic conflicts involve more than disagreements over government policy. They concern fundamental questions of political authority, territorial control, citizenship, resource distribution, autonomy and identity.

Many ethnic armed organizations have historically demanded some form of federal political structure.

This is significant because it means that democratization cannot simply mean replacing military rule with majority electoral rule.

If a Bamar-majority electoral system simply reproduces centralized political authority, ethnic communities may continue to perceive the state as exclusionary.

The result would be a democratic system without sufficient political inclusion.

Brenner (2024) argues that this is precisely why interpreting Myanmar's crisis solely as a battle for democracy can obscure the central importance of ethnic marginalization.

A sustainable democracy must therefore answer two questions simultaneously:

Who governs the Union?

and

How is political authority distributed among the Union's constituent communities?

The first question concerns democracy.

The second concerns federalism.

Myanmar has failed to resolve both.

The Absence of Genuine Federalism

Federalism represents the central unresolved constitutional question.

Myanmar has administrative states and regions, but administrative decentralization does not necessarily constitute federalism.

A genuine federal system requires constitutionally protected distribution of authority between central and subnational governments.

Relevant areas include:

- legislative authority;
- taxation;
- public expenditure;
- education;
- natural resources;
- local administration;
- policing;
- cultural affairs; and
- political representation.

Myanmar's constitutional structure has historically concentrated much of this authority at the centre.

Crouch (2020) shows that federalism has been repeatedly discussed in peace and constitutional negotiations without becoming fully institutionalized.

The result is a persistent gap between the federal aspirations of ethnic actors and the centralized structure of the state.

The 2021 Coup as Evidence of Institutional Failure

The military coup of February 2021 provides the strongest evidence for the article's argument.

The NLD won the November 2020 election.

The military disputed aspects of the electoral process.

Rather than resolving the dispute through ordinary judicial or electoral mechanisms, the military seized political power.

Harding and Nyi Nyi Kyaw (2022) demonstrate that the military's constitutional position had already created a profound struggle over the meaning and limits of constitutional government.

The coup demonstrated that the military remained capable of overriding electoral institutions.

This does not mean that elections were meaningless.

On the contrary, the elections demonstrated strong public support for civilian government.

The problem was that electoral legitimacy was insufficient to overcome military institutional power.

This supports H5: elections cannot consolidate democracy where an unelected institution retains autonomous coercive authority.

The Post-2021 Transformation of the Federal Question

The post-2021 period has nevertheless produced an important political development.

Following the coup, sections of the Bamar-majority population increasingly cooperated with ethnic organizations opposing military rule.

This created a possibility that had previously been difficult to achieve: a broader political coalition linking democratic demands with ethnic federal aspirations.

Myat et al. (2023) find evidence of a shift in opposition discourse from a more centralized conception of democratic federalism toward a more decentralized form of federal democracy.

The Federal Democracy Charter adopted by anti-coup political forces similarly articulated a vision of replacing the 2008 constitutional system with a federal democratic framework.

This does not guarantee a successful political settlement.

However, it demonstrates that the meaning of democracy in Myanmar is evolving.

The central political question is increasingly understood not simply as whether military rule should end, but also what political structure should replace it.

Integrated Analysis

The evidence supports an interpretation of Myanmar's democratic failure as an interconnected structural process.

Military dominance and ethnic conflict are not independent variables.

They form a feedback mechanism.

Military dominance

The military claims a special role in protecting the Union.



Centralized state authority

Political and security powers remain concentrated at the centre.



Ethnic grievances

Ethnic communities perceive insufficient autonomy and political equality.



Armed resistance

Ethnic organizations challenge central state authority.



Military justification

The military presents conflict as evidence that strong centralized authority remains necessary.



Expanded military authority

The military maintains or expands its political role.



Continued grievances

The underlying ethnic and constitutional issues remain unresolved.

This cycle explains why neither military withdrawal nor elections alone have been sufficient.

The democratic transition of 2011–2020 addressed the **governmental dimension** of the problem but did not adequately transform the **state-structural dimension**.

This distinction is central.

Changing the government does not necessarily change the political structure of the state.

Myanmar changed governments.

It did not sufficiently transform the institutional relationship between:

- military and civilian authority;
- centre and periphery;
- majority and minorities; and
- Union and constituent nationalities.

DISCUSSION OF THE HYPOTHESES

H1: Military Power Hypothesis — Supported

The military's constitutional and institutional autonomy clearly weakened civilian authority. The 2021 coup provides direct evidence that the military remained capable of overriding elected institutions.

H2: Constitutional Constraint Hypothesis — Strongly Supported

The 2008 Constitution institutionalized military representation and authority while making fundamental constitutional reform exceptionally difficult.

H3: Ethnic Conflict Hypothesis — Supported

Ethnic conflict has historically strengthened the military's justification for political intervention, while military centralization has contributed to continued ethnic grievances.

H4: Federalism Hypothesis — Supported

The absence of a genuine federal settlement has prevented Myanmar from addressing fundamental demands concerning autonomy, equality and political representation.

H5: Electoral Limitation Hypothesis — Strongly Supported

The 2015 and 2020 elections demonstrated that competitive elections could occur without eliminating military political power. The 2021 coup confirmed that electoral competition alone could not establish civilian supremacy.

FINDINGS

The study produces four principal findings.

Finding 1: Myanmar's democratic failure predates the 2021 coup

The coup was a dramatic rupture, but the underlying institutional weaknesses existed before February 2021.

Finding 2: The 2008 Constitution produced an incomplete democracy

The Constitution allowed meaningful elections while protecting military autonomy.

Finding 3: Ethnic conflict is central to the democratic question

Myanmar cannot consolidate democracy without addressing the political grievances and aspirations of ethnic nationalities.

Finding 4: Federalism is not separate from democratization

Federalism is part of the institutional solution to the problem of political inclusion.

These findings indicate that the restoration of elections alone would not necessarily solve Myanmar's political crisis.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that Myanmar's failure to consolidate democracy is best understood as a structural problem involving military power, constitutional constraints, ethnic conflict and the absence of genuine federalism.

The military's role in Myanmar's political system is historically rooted. Since independence, periods of political instability and ethnic armed conflict strengthened the military's claim to be the guardian of national unity. The 1962 coup transformed this claim into direct political rule, and subsequent constitutional arrangements preserved military influence even when direct military government receded.

The 2008 Constitution was particularly significant. It created elected institutions but simultaneously institutionalized military power. Military representatives received guaranteed parliamentary seats, the armed forces retained control over key ministries, and constitutional amendment procedures protected military interests.

The democratic opening after 2011 therefore represented real but incomplete democratization.

The NLD's victories in 2015 and 2020 demonstrated popular support for civilian political authority. Yet elected civilian institutions operated within a constitutional system that prevented them from achieving full control over the military.

The 2021 coup exposed this contradiction.

However, the military dimension represents only one part of the problem.

Myanmar's democratic crisis is also inseparable from the country's ethnic conflict. The central state has historically struggled to establish political arrangements acceptable to the country's diverse nationalities. The failure to translate the principles of equality and autonomy associated with the Panglong settlement into a durable federal political order contributed to decades of conflict.

Consequently, Myanmar's democratic challenge is simultaneously a **civil-military problem, a constitutional problem, an ethnic problem, and a state-structure problem.**

The article therefore rejects a purely election-centred conception of democratization.

Elections are necessary, but they are not sufficient.

A sustainable democratic order requires:

1. **civilian supremacy over the military;**
2. **constitutional reform;**
3. **independent and accountable political institutions;**
4. **genuine federalism;**
5. **meaningful representation for ethnic nationalities;**
6. **protection of minority rights;**

7. **decentralization of political and fiscal authority; and**

8. **a negotiated settlement to Myanmar's armed conflicts.**

The most important theoretical implication is that **democratization and state restructuring cannot be separated in deeply divided societies.**

Myanmar's experience demonstrates that democratic institutions can remain fragile when an unelected military retains autonomous political authority and when the political relationship between the central state and ethnic communities remains unresolved.

The 2021 coup should therefore be interpreted not simply as the destruction of democracy but as the exposure of the limits of a democratic transition that never fully transformed the underlying political structure.

The future of democracy in Myanmar consequently depends on more than restoring elections or civilian government. It requires constructing a political order in which no institution stands above constitutional democracy and in which the country's ethnic nationalities have a meaningful stake in the Union.

The most sustainable model would therefore be neither centralized majoritarian democracy nor military guardianship, but **a federal democratic Union based on civilian supremacy, constitutionalism, political equality, minority protection, and negotiated power-sharing.**

Whether such an order can emerge remains uncertain. Nevertheless, the structural evidence suggests that without such transformation, Myanmar is likely to remain vulnerable to recurring cycles of military intervention, ethnic conflict and incomplete democratization.

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