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## REGIMES

CRISIS  
POST-SOVIET  
AUTOCRATIZATION  
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MYANMAR  
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RUSSIA  
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INTERESTS

- CRISIS OF GOVERNANCE
- TOOLS OF AUTOCRATIZATION
- DEMOCRATIC RESPONSE



## REGIMES

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**PLEBISCITE ENGINEERING AND AUTOCRATISATION  
IN THE POST-SOVIET REGION ..... 3**  
*Svitlana Kononchuk*

**REBUILDING THE RULES-BASED ORDER: HOW DEMOCRACIES  
SHOULD RESPOND ..... 12**  
*Dmytro Deineko*

**SECURITY VERSUS PROSPERITY: THE FALSE DILEMMA ERODING GEORGIA'S  
DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE ..... 23**  
*Ana Mikautadze*

**THE TRAITS, PITFALLS AND LIMITS OF AUTOCRACY IN MYANMAR..... 33**  
*Olga Rusova*

**WHY DEMOCRACIES MUST LEARN FROM AUTOCRACIES TO WIN..... 44**  
*Maryna Karlevits*

**RIGHT-WING POLITICIANS AND THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR:  
BETWEEN POPULISM AND NATIONAL INTERESTS ..... 51**  
*Hanna Shelest*

# THE TRAITS, PITFALLS AND LIMITS OF AUTOCRACY IN MYANMAR

Dr Olga Rusova

*Why do autocratic regimes appear so resilient, sometimes even expanding their influence, and yet remain so brittle when confronted with internal or external shocks? What explains their rise and where are the limits of their power? These questions will be addressed, using the experience of Myanmar, where recent developments provide a striking case of the seeming durability and deep vulnerabilities of authoritarian governance. It will be shown how a military junta maintains power by means of violence and public control, however being weakened by economic collapse, social resistance, and a persistent crisis of legitimacy.*


## The Global Context of Autocratic Resurgence

The most recently completed decade will be remembered as one of the most controversial and paradoxical in human history. Liberal democracy, once seen as the dominant ideology that was supposed to mark the “end of history,”<sup>1</sup> failed to prove its efficacy, gradually crumbling under the global surge of authoritarian rule.<sup>2</sup>

Regimes in Moscow, Pyongyang, and beyond sought to strengthen their cooperation in the face of what they describe as ‘Western domination’. This dynamic was particularly visible at the latest Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit (31 August – 01 September, 2025, in Tianjin, China), where China, Russia, India (classified as an ‘electoral autocracy’ according to V-Dem Institute), Central and South East Asian states –

Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Indonesia, and Malaysia (the last two described as having weak civil-liberties scores even while being ‘flawed democracies’) reaffirmed their shared interests.

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***Regimes in Moscow, Pyongyang, and beyond sought to strengthen their cooperation in the face of what they describe as ‘Western domination’***

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Authoritarian regimes, despite their assertive rhetoric, are far from being invincible. Their consolidation is often less a sign of strength than of fragility, an attempt to safeguard themselves against both internal dissent and external pressure. Economic downturns, mass

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1 F. Fukuyama, *The End of History?*, “The National Interest” (essay), 1989, p.3.

2 Y. Gorokhovskaia, C. Grothe, *Freedom in the World 2025. The Uphill Battle to Safeguard Rights*, Freedom House, February 2025, [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/FITW\\_World2025digitalN.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/FITW_World2025digitalN.pdf), and V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?*, University of Gothenburg, March 2025, [https://www.v-dem.net/documents/60/V-dem-dr\\_2025\\_lowres.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/documents/60/V-dem-dr_2025_lowres.pdf)

uprisings, and natural disasters frequently expose the structural weaknesses that lie beneath the surface of autocratic stability. Above all, the overriding imperative for such regimes remains the survival of their ruling elites.<sup>3</sup>

## Myanmar's Descent into Military Rule

Since the military coup of the 1st February 2021, Myanmar has been plunged into turmoil: mass protests, brutal crackdowns, civil war, and economic collapse. Despite its military superiority and outward control, the junta has never secured unquestioned authority. Reliance on repression, and failure to respond to humanitarian crises, make its rule unstable, trapping the country in a cycle of revolution and counter-revolution. The current rebellion is also diverse, including the Three Brotherhood Alliance – a coalition of armed ethnic groups (the Arakan Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army), which launched a major offensive in 2023, together with long-standing forces such as the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), and the Karenni National Progressive Party. This fragmentation hinders a unified response to the junta's violence, and shifts the dynamics of the civil war.

Myanmar's lack of unity is historical. Profound ethnic, religious, and regional divisions have shaped its statehood. The Bamar majority dominates politically and culturally, while minorities such as the Shan, Karen, Kachin, Mon, Chin, and Rakhine maintain distinct identities, languages, and traditions, often leading to tension. British colonial rule deepened

these divides, by governing the central lowland and frontier regions separately, fostering mistrust. After independence was gained in 1948, unfulfilled promises of federal autonomy triggered the armed insurgencies that continue today. The failure to build an inclusive national identity fuelled cycles of authoritarianism, as successive military regimes claimed sole authority, to preserve territorial integrity.



***Myanmar's lack of unity is historical. Profound ethnic, religious, and regional divisions have shaped its statehood***

Religious differences, especially between the Buddhist majority and Christian and Muslim minorities further fragment society. Marginalisation and the persecution of groups like the Rohingya underscore contested questions of belonging and citizenship. The absence of a shared national compact has repeatedly undermined democratisation, federalism, and peace-building.

The military regimes that controlled Myanmar from 1962 to 2011 established a highly centralised system. As one of the justifications given for military rule was the need to prevent the breakup of Myanmar, so federalism (as a possible step towards secession) was viewed with suspicion. With the political transition initiated in 2010, federalism ceased to be a taboo subject, but power nonetheless remained centralised under the 2008

3 B. Bueno de Mesquita, A. Smith, R.M. Siverson, J. D. Morrow, *The Logic of Political Survival*, Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology 2003, p. 40.

Constitution.<sup>4</sup> The next decade of limited democratic reforms 2011-2021 (the release of political prisoners, an easing of censorship, the legalization of trade unions, initial ceasefires with armed ethnic groups, etc.) was rather precarious. After nearly fifty years of direct military rule, the generals had reluctantly opened up a political space that allowed opposition figures like Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) to participate in elections. The 2015 victory of the NLD was historic, raising hopes that Myanmar could finally transition towards democracy. But the military, known locally as the Tatmadaw, never fully relinquished control. The 2008 Constitution, drafted under military supervision, guaranteed the army 25% of parliamentary seats, along with control over key ministries such as those of defence, border, and home affairs. This arrangement meant that even during the years of relative openness, the military maintained the ultimate veto.



***The junta retained formal control over the state apparatus, yet its authority failed to extend nationwide***

By 2020, the NLD's second landslide victory threatened the military's entrenched power. For Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing, facing imminent retirement and possible accountability for human rights abuses, the 2021 coup was as much as anything a means of survival and an assertion of dominance. It triggered mass nationwide protests. Civil servants launched a Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), paralysing

the bureaucracy, while ethnic minority groups intensified their armed struggles. The junta responded with arrests, torture, and executions, prompting the UN to describe their actions as crimes against humanity. Unlike in previous decades, this wave of violence did not succeed in pacifying the population. The opposition reorganised, forming the National Unity Government (NUG) in exile, which sought recognition as the legitimate representative of the Myanmar people.

International isolation followed swiftly. The Western governments imposed sanctions, froze assets, and cut off development assistance. However, Myanmar did not collapse entirely, as it managed to retain relationships with other autocracies. China, while cautious, maintained economic ties and influence along the border. Russia stepped in as a major arms supplier. The country's ASEAN neighbours were divided between condemnation and 'non-interference.' Limited external support allowed the junta to survive but not thrive: neither Beijing nor Moscow sought to stabilise Myanmar, treating it as a partner of convenience, while avoiding broader international isolation for themselves (especially in case of Russia, after the launch of the full-scale military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022).

### **An Entrenched but Brittle Regime**

By early 2024, the situation in Myanmar had settled into a grim stalemate. The junta retained formal control over the state apparatus, yet its authority failed to extend nationwide. In areas held by the resistance forces, parallel administrations emerged. The economy contracted sharply, millions were displaced, and the incidence of poverty soared.

4 Htet Min Lwin, *Federalism at the Forefront of Myanmar's Revolution*, "Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia", no. 31, September 2021, <https://kyotoreview.org/issue-31/federalism-at-the-forefront-of-myanmars-revolution/>

For the generals, ruling Myanmar became a balancing act: to use enough force to retain control, but avoid a collapse that could open the door to a total defeat. In this sense, Myanmar epitomised the paradox of autocracy: the ability to seize and maintain authority, but the inability to govern effectively or respond to deeper societal needs. Geddes provides a finding: that the military regime is the most unstable and fragile authoritarian regime type<sup>5</sup>, and a couple of follow-up studies confirm her argument – military regimes have a shorter lifespan than other forms of autocratic rule and are likely to democratise.<sup>6</sup> Why, then, has Myanmar's military endured so long? The answer lies in a complex interplay of factors, shaping every dimension of public life.



### ***The core of the junta's authority lies in its monopoly on organised violence***

At first glance, the regime appears immovable. It controls the capital city, Naypyidaw, the key institutions, and an army that has dominated politics since independence. It commands resources, regulates borders, and has decades of experience of suppressing dissent. The military is self-contained and self-reliant, and has developed a long-standing

organisational culture that advances “an abiding sense of the wrongs perpetrated against Burma” and “the myth of an almost superhuman dedication necessary to preserve the nation against over-whelming odds”.<sup>7</sup> Despite this apparent strength, the bottom line is sometimes more about the ability to build a certain image than to fit the reality on the ground.

#### ***1. Monopoly on Violence***

The core of the junta's authority lies in its monopoly on organised violence. The Tatmadaw is one of Southeast Asia's largest standing armies, with an estimated 300,000 active personnel.<sup>8</sup> It controls heavy weaponry, air power, and access to foreign arms supplies — particularly from Russia, Belarus, and China. Unlike the fragmented resistance movement, the military operates under a strict hierarchy, with orders emanating from Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing. For now, loyalty within the officer corps has largely held, giving the junta a centralised capacity to direct nationwide campaigns.

Airpower has been decisive. It includes 26 MiG-29s, 18 Yak-130s, and Mi-24 and Mi-17 helicopters from Russia. It also operates FTC-2000G fighters, K-8W trainers, and Y-8 transport aircraft from China. The Myanmar Air Force officially inducted the first two (Russian) Su-30SMEs into service in December 2022, followed by the second pair in December 2023, and the final two

5 B. Geddes, *Paradigms and sand castles: theory building and research design in comparative politics*, The University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor 2003, p. 32.

6 B. Geddes, J. Wright, E. Frantz, *Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set*, “Perspectives on Politics”, no. 12(2), June 2014, p. 326.

7 T. Lee, *Assessing the Myanmar Junta's Grip on Power*, “Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU”, 15.02.2024, <https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip24018-assessing-the-myanmar-juntas-grip-on-power/>

8 A. Selth, *Myanmar's military numbers*, “Lowy Institute”, 17.02.2022, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/myanmar-s-military-numbers>



were commissioned in December 2024.<sup>9</sup> With this aerial strength, and with the use of drones, the army bombs resistance strongholds, and civilian areas, retaining control of urban centres and key economic corridors.

## 2. Instruments of Repression

Beyond military might, the junta has perfected a system of repression to suffocate dissent. Security forces have carried out mass arrests of activists, journalists, teachers, and anyone suspected of supporting the resistance. Torture, enforced disappearances, and summary executions have become routine.

Censorship is all-pervasive. Independent media outlets have been shut down or forced into exile. By the end of 2024, Myanmar had the third-highest number of imprisoned journalists in the world, after China and Israel.<sup>10</sup> Foreign broadcasters serving audiences in Myanmar include the BBC, Voice of America, and US-backed Radio Free Asia.<sup>11</sup> The state television channel, and newspapers (like Global New Light of Myanmar) broadcast propaganda that portrays the military as the guardian of national unity. Internet blackouts and surveillance restrict communication among dissidents. Fear also remains a powerful weapon. Even when people no longer believe in the junta's legitimacy, they may be too frightened to voice opposition openly. This climate of intimidation provides the regime with a semblance of stability.

## 3. Control of Economic Lifelines

Autocratic regimes often survive not by delivering prosperity but by monopolising resources. Myanmar's junta has followed this pattern. It controls access to lucrative sectors such as natural gas, jade, timber, and rare earth minerals. Revenues from these industries, though diminished by sanctions, provide a financial lifeline.



**Independent media outlets  
have been shut down  
or forced into exile**

Smuggling and illicit trade also sustain the regime. Cross-border networks with China and Thailand allow the military to bypass international sanctions. These networks benefit not only the junta, but also the local elites and business partners who profit from the shadow economy, creating a vested interest in the regime's survival.

Additionally, the Tatmadaw has long maintained its own sprawling conglomerates, such as Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL) and Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC). Since the conflict curtails business activity, and disrupts trade, the economic interests of Myanmar's elite have suffered, mostly hit by the imposed sanctions. But at the same time these enterprises grant the military direct

9 Russia completes delivery of six Su-30SME fighters to Myanmar for counter-insurgency operations, "Global Defense News", 6.01.2025, <https://www.armyrecognition.com/news/aerospace-news/2025/russia-completes-delivery-of-six-su-30sme-fighters-to-myanmar-for-counter-insurgency-operations>

10 A. Getz, *In record year, China, Israel, and Myanmar are world's leading jailers of journalists*, "Committee to Protect Journalists", 16.01.2025, <https://cpj.org/special-reports/in-record-year-china-israel-and-myanmar-are-worlds-leading-jailers-of-journalists/>

11 Myanmar media guide, "BBC News Asia", 19.05.2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-12991727>

access to revenues and patronage networks, insulating it from economic collapse in ways that civilian governments cannot replicate.

#### *4. Experiencing Financial Hardships and Humanitarian Crises*

If the military might be the regime's strongest card, the economy is its weakest one. Since the coup, Myanmar's economy has contracted sharply. Foreign investment has fled, trade has been disrupted, and sanctions have cut the junta off from international finance. The local currency, the kyat, has lost significant value, triggering inflation that hits ordinary citizens. Fuel shortages are common, and power blackouts affect major cities. Food insecurity has worsened, with millions pushed into poverty.

Besides, the reliance on illicit trade: jade smuggling, narcotics, scam centres (online transnational fraud operations, linked to criminal activities) and cross-border contraband – keeps the generals afloat but corrodes state institutions. For ordinary citizens, economic misery translates into anger at the regime, eliminating whatever passive acceptance might once have existed.

Myanmar's trade initially rebounded in 2022, thanks to all-time high exports. However, this bounce was short-lived, and trade fell again in 2023. Exports declined by about USD 4 billion, and imports by about USD 1 billion. This was partly due to heightened conflict, including trade-related disruptions caused by the ongoing Operation 1027 rebel offensive, and global trends.<sup>12</sup> The World

Bank's Myanmar Economic Monitor (MEM) projects a 2.5 % contraction in GDP in the fiscal year 2025/26.<sup>13</sup> But the Senior General Min Aung Hlaing has dismissed the World Bank's forecast, speaking at an economic coordination meeting held at the SAC (State Administration Council) office in Naypyidaw on the 2nd of July, 2025. He insisted that the international institution's calculations did not reflect the country's true potential, emphasising the fact that economic improvement is possible through collective effort. Also addressing recent reports of rising poverty levels, the general pinpointed two main causes: business failures and the impact of natural disasters.<sup>14</sup>



***If the military might be the regime's strongest card, the economy is its weakest one***

The latter phenomenon carries particular importance in the case of Myanmar, which faced a powerful earthquake in March 2025, as a litmus test for whether the military could fulfil the most basic function – safeguarding its citizens. Autocracies are often judged by their ability to manage crises. While democracies derive legitimacy from elections and accountability, authoritarian regimes rely on performance – the promise of stability, order, and protection. For Myanmar's junta, the earthquake was precisely such a test of competence, and the generals failed it.


12 J. Bissinger, *Challenges and Priorities for Myanmar's Conflicted Economy*, "Fulcrum: Analysis on Southeast Asia", 11.03.2025, <https://fulcrum.sg/challenges-and-priorities-for-myanmars-conflicted-economy/>

13 Press release, *Earthquake compounds Myanmar's economic challenges*, "World Bank Group", 12.06.2025, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/06/12/earthquake-compounds-myanmar-s-economic-challenges>

14 Min Aung Hlaing rejects World Bank's economic forecast for Myanmar, "The Nation Thailand", 05.07.2025, <https://www.nationthailand.com/blogs/news/asean/40052159>

This humanitarian catastrophe came as a further layer atop an existing political crisis. Instead of mobilising relief swiftly and transparently, the junta militarised aid distribution, while soldiers were dispatched not only to deliver supplies but also to monitor gatherings, and to suppress dissent. The generals feared that international organisations might empower the opposition, or expose the scale of devastation, so they limited access to the hardest-hit regions. Meanwhile, the Three Brotherhood Alliance declared a unilateral pause in hostilities. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing stated that he would persist in attacking groups that had declared a ceasefire, despite their efforts to facilitate relief in earthquake-affected areas.<sup>15</sup> But being aware of the real situation on the ground, the SAC finally announced a temporary ceasefire from 2nd April to 22nd April 2025, which was then repeatedly violated.

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***Instead of mobilising relief swiftly and transparently, the junta militarised aid distribution, while soldiers were dispatched not only to deliver supplies but also to monitor gatherings, and to suppress dissent***

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Under the pretext of coordinating reconstruction efforts, the military junta accelerated its offensives, yet no decisive gains followed. But what the earthquake did alter was the military's capability. Damage to munitions factories and supply chains pushed the junta towards a heavier reliance

on airpower. So, as for the moment, the conflict in Myanmar ranks third globally for the number of drone events recorded by ACLED, only behind Ukraine and Russia.<sup>16</sup>

## **Legitimacy Lost, Recognition Sought**

Perhaps the most fundamental weakness of the junta is its utter lack of legitimacy. Unlike other authoritarian governments that cloak themselves in ideology, populism, or economic development, Myanmar's military has almost nothing to offer in exchange.

The 2020 general election, widely judged to be free and fair, gave the NLD a clear mandate. By overturning that result, the generals destroyed the existing social contract. Former supporters started to view them as usurpers. So, even the symbolic public trust should have been returned in kind if the military regime wanted to hold onto power. For this reason, the Myanmar leadership has started to plan another general election, which has been repeatedly delayed due to the struggle against the growing insurgency that controls much of the country. This renewed push comes amid a boost in the morality of the military, slight battlefield gains, and support from the regime's autocratic partners, mostly from Beijing, Moscow, and Minsk.

At ASEAN's Six-Country Informal Consultation on Myanmar (19th December 2024, Bangkok), Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Than Swe outlined the junta's 2025 election roadmap. Opposition forces, including the ethnic armies and the NUG, rejected it as illegitimate. China, however, has pressured its Southeast Asian neighbours to accept the junta's election as a

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15 Myanmar's military leader states that he will continue attacking groups despite their ceasefire declaration, "Mizzima: News from Myanmar", 04.04.2024, <https://eng.mizzima.com/2025/04/04/20995>

16 Su Mon, *The war from the sky: How drone warfare is shaping the conflict in Myanmar*, "ACLED Report", 01.07.2025, <https://acleddata.com/report/war-sky-how-drone-warfare-shaping-conflict-myanmar>

quick solution<sup>17</sup> and a tool to 'legitimise' it on the regional scale, as well as to avoid any further international blockade and sanctions. Beijing's endorsement of the junta's plan reflects its broader strategic calculus: stabilising Myanmar under military control secures China's economic corridors, shields its border provinces from prolonged conflict, and ensures a compliant partner in the region. On the other hand, for ASEAN states already fatigued by the protracted crisis, the embracing of an election designed by the junta risks normalising impunity and weakening their own commitments to democratic principles. It also signals that powerful actors can dictate the terms of regional crisis management, side-lining both the Myanmar people and the broader international efforts to restore legitimate governance.



***Internationally, the generals aim to create diplomatic ambiguity: supplying enough procedural mimicry to allow certain states to justify re-engagement, by creating a favourable legal ground***

The junta formally ended the state of emergency on 31st July 2025, triggering a constitutional requirement to hold elections within six months, now scheduled for 28th December 2025. New laws now criminalise 'undermining the election,' allowing harsh punishments for speech, protest, or publications deemed disruptive. The Union Election Commission is fully controlled by the military; civilian oversight has been dismantled.<sup>18</sup> The census remains

incomplete, opposition parties are banned, and their leaders imprisoned. Under such conditions, elections risk deepening the conflict rather than resolving it. Many citizens will likely boycott or be unable to vote, and international recognition will be uneven. Nevertheless, the junta aims to transform de facto rule into de jure acceptance. Even if pro-military parties prevail, governance challenges like civil war, humanitarian crises, and economic collapse will persist.

It is clear that the generals seek to 'return to the official status' more than to genuinely re-establish democratic governance. While on paper there is a framework for legitimate elections, they have become a tool of the counterinsurgency: governance by registration, mapping, and coercive order. Internationally, the generals aim to create diplomatic ambiguity: supplying enough procedural mimicry to allow certain states to justify re-engagement, by creating a favourable legal ground. In short, the junta's planned elections represent not a transition from dictatorship, but a recalibration within it: an effort to cloak intimidation in the language of consent.

### **From Nobel Peace Prize to International Court of Justice**

Myanmar's political trajectory from the long-awaited democratic transition to renewed military dictatorship is one of the most striking reversals in recent history. Once hailed as a success story of peaceful democratisation, symbolised by Aung San Suu Kyi's 1991 Nobel Peace Prize – the country's gradual erosion of democratic norms culminated in the 2021 *coup d'état*, returning power to the generals, and abolishing a decade of progress.

17 Nyein Chan Aye, *China-backed election raises fears of 'negative peace' in Myanmar*, "Voice of America", 01.01.2025, <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-backed-election-raises-fears-of-negative-peace-in-myanmar/7921313.html>

18 Myo Pyae, *How the Myanmar Junta's Election Laws Are Stifling Dissent Ahead of Polls*, "Irrawaddy", 08.10.2025, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/politics/how-the-myanmar-juntas-election-laws-are-stifling-dissent-ahead-of-polls.html>

This decline was not sudden. It reflected a deeper degradation of institutional checks, moral credibility, and civilian control, in which both domestic compromises and international complacency played crucial roles. The symbolic distance between Myanmar's Nobel moment and its appearance before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for alleged genocide encapsulates the collapse of the very ideals that once defined its democratic experiment. Although inside Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi remains a deeply respected figure for many pro-democracy supporters – once revered, but later discredited, and now again persecuted – she embodies the cyclical tragedy of Myanmar's politics.



***Western governments,  
captivated by the image  
of reconciliation, mistook  
form for substance***

The transition in the 2010s, often praised as a triumph of dialogue over dictatorship, was structurally flawed, and in fact turned out to be a colossus on legs of clay. Civil-military relations were never institutionalised; they rested on the balance in personal terms between Suu Kyi's prestige and the army's entrenched use of force. Thus, the transition created a hybrid regime, not a democracy, dependent on the goodwill of the military and the moral capital of its civilian leadership. So, when the National League for Democracy defended the military's operations at the ICJ, Myanmar's democratic project lost its principled foundation. This episode normalised exclusion, militarised nationalism, and discredited the country internationally. In such a way, the similar mechanisms that justified repression in Rakhine later enabled the junta in 2021 – as a continuum of impunity rather than a rupture with the past.

Western governments, captivated by the image of reconciliation, mistook form for substance. Sanctions were lifted, investments flowed in, and diplomatic recognition grew, even as democratic backsliding accelerated. International actors equated elections with democracy, and moral leadership with institutional strength. In doing so, they failed to anticipate how easily the military could reclaim control once civilian legitimacy faltered. When the military seized power in 2021, it merely confirmed the fact that the framework built around one leader and one army proved inherently unsustainable. On the contrary, these are the key features of totalitarian rule.

Myanmar's case is a stark warning for fragile democracies worldwide that symbolic legitimacy, however luminous, cannot substitute for the strong architecture of democratic resilience. As for the prestige of the Nobel Prize, it does not vary depending on whether its holder comes from a democratic or an autocratic state; what matters is the substance of their contribution, not the political system they represent. The most important factor is that the award cannot become the embodiment of populist, self-promotional politics, seeking validation through global recognition.

### **Myanmar as a Case Study of the Limits of Autocracy**

For the democratic world, Myanmar underscores two key lessons. *First*, authoritarian fortitude should not be taken for stability; and *secondly*, an adopted long-term approach that prioritises supporting civil society, local governance, and economic sanctions against Myanmar, has achieved mixed results. In policy terms, Myanmar showcases the fact that sustained international pressure, combined with targeted humanitarian aid, can help to create the conditions for eventual political transition. But the situation in Myanmar

was addressed by almost ignoring the global context of this perplexing issue. The junta's reliance on external actors – such as China and Russia for military assistance, nuclear cooperation (for instance, in 2023 Myanmar's junta established a 'Nuclear Technology and Information Centre' in collaboration with Russian Rosatom State Corp. in Yangon; in 2025 Russia and Myanmar signed an intergovernmental agreement to build a small modular reactor on Myanmar territory), and financial support – increased as Western countries withdrew from the Burmese market, and the opposition successfully launched Operation 1027 in 2023.



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***The isolation of Myanmar's generals only deepened their dependence on fellow autocracies, which were pursuing their own regional interests***

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The isolation of Myanmar's generals only deepened their dependence on fellow autocracies, which were pursuing their own regional interests. At the same time, the new geopolitical reality is one where fake elections, the illegal occupation of territories and severe violations of basic human rights have become a sort of 'normality', while the democracies have been stepping back to avoid further escalation. That only appeases the aggressors and demonstrates to potential ones where the new 'red lines' are drawn.

The struggle between democracy and autocracy, fuelled by hybrid warfare, is now even more perilous than it was during the Cold War. The struggle against the junta in

Myanmar in particular should pursue both internal and external goals. Firstly, it must come about not only through immediate pressure, but sustained engagement with civil society, the independent media, and diaspora networks. Secondly, the coherence of policy tools matters. Fragmented or inconsistent sanctions risk enabling authoritarian adaptation, while well-coordinated international measures that target the military's revenue streams can constrain the regime's capacity to sustain repression.

Thirdly, value-based diplomacy remains crucial. Democracies must resist the temptation of pragmatic normalisation with illegitimate regimes under the guise of 'stability', which in the long run only legitimises violence and undermines democratic credibility globally. As for Myanmar and its closest partners, the West must focus on the joint efforts to degrade the coalition's ability to project authoritative power and subvert rules-based order, as well as to shrink its political and economic space. This is a contest of capabilities, legitimacy, and influence, not merely of arms. So, the application of sanctions to all SAC-controlled entities, including banks, and blocking its access to billions of dollars of the State of Myanmar's foreign exchange reserves, can be as efficient as banning the direct and indirect supply, sale, transfer (including transit and transshipment), provision of insurance and reinsurance, and brokering of aviation fuel to Myanmar.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, a reassessment of the international strategy towards Myanmar is required; otherwise the continuing conflict and cross-border humanitarian spill-overs will be constantly challenging the sustainability of the whole region of South East Asia. In

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<sup>19</sup> Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, *Banking on the Death Trade: How Banks and Governments Enable the Military Junta in Myanmar*, "Human Rights Council", the 56th session, 18 June – 12 July 2025, <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/banking-death-trade-how-banks-and-governments-enable-military-junta-myanmar-special-rapporteur-situation-human-rights-myanmar-ahrc56crp7>

theoretical terms, Myanmar exemplifies the dual nature of authoritarianism: its deceptive steadiness masks deep structural vulnerability that becomes visible only when international and domestic pressures converge. The case highlights the fact that the fragmented or reactive policies of democratic actors tend to reinforce, rather than compromise authoritarian resilience. A more integrated and context-sensitive approach, which combines economic, informational, and institutional instruments, is necessary not only for the restoration of Myanmar's prospects for democratic transition, but also for opening broader debates on how the international community can effectively respond to authoritarian consolidation in the 21st century.

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