

Myanmar coup shows struggle for democracy

Written by Tommy Lin 林國祥

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Since Myanmar's general election in November last year, the Burmese military had refused to rule out a coup if its complaints about election fraud were not addressed. In a series of predawn raids in Naypyidaw on Monday, soldiers detained Burmese State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and Burmese President Win Myint, along with other National League for Democracy (NLD) party leaders.

Soon after, the military announced that it was imposing a one-year state of emergency, making Burmese Vice President Myint Swe acting president, who then handed power to Senior General Aung Hlaing. The news shook the world.

Myanmar's democratization process began on Aug. 8, 1988, with the 8888 uprising, about the same time as in Taiwan, where things started happening after the lifting of martial law on July 14, 1987. Several decades later, there is a vast difference in the outcome of the movements in the two countries.

While Myanmar is back under military control and the Burmese public continues to struggle with poverty, Taiwan has completed its transition to democracy and per capita income has exceeded US\$30,000, while the nation's COVID-19 pandemic prevention record is the envy of the world, while Germany is lobbying the Ministry of Economic Affairs to help address a chip shortage in its auto industry, thanks to the status of Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co.

Aung San Suu Kyi returned to Myanmar to care for her ailing mother in 1988, and joined the 8888 movement. The protests were suppressed and Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest, where she remained until 2010. In 2012, she led the NLD's successful bid in the 2012 parliamentary by-elections, winning 43 of 45 vacant seats. In 2015, she led the party to a landslide victory, winning 86 percent of the seats.

Despite its hold on government power, the NLD has been unable to rid itself of military control from behind the scenes. Beginning in 2016, Myanmar became mired in accusations of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya ethnic group in Rakhine State, the seeds of which were sown during British colonial rule and then exacerbated by the military.

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Aung San Suu Kyi's image was severely damaged, and there were calls to revoke the Nobel Peace Prize and human rights awards she had received.

The NLD won another landslide victory in last year's general election, but the military claimed that there was massive vote fraud and demanded that the election be invalidated. When the request was rejected by the Burmese Union Election Commission, the military staged a coup, taking Myanmar back to square one.

The collapse of Myanmar's democratization process follows the failure of the Arab Spring democratization movements in north Africa, once again showing the difficulty of democratization and highlighting the exceptional achievement of Taiwan's quiet revolution.

Taiwan's democratic achievement under former president Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) is a miracle from an international perspective. Democracy developed almost without Taiwanese noticing it, and it was just taken for granted that every country would become democratic.

However, in most cases democracy is either the result of bloody battles or a cyclical state in a constant revolution.

Compared with Myanmar, Taiwan has been fortunate. If Taiwanese do not want to squander the heritage of Lee, all should value democracy and work together to further deepen and consolidate it, and use democratic procedures to resolve disagreements and move forward in unity.

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Translated by Perry Svensson

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