

Is Myanmar a Dystopia?

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August 26, 2022

ABSTRACT

This article overviews the Myanmar political transition and the role the military has played in enforcing authoritarian and even “dystopian” measures to remain in power, in spite of the numerous attempts to establish a functional democracy. Dystopian fiction, such as Orwell’s 1984 novel or movies like Outbreak, often portrays the loss of human dignity and political repression. Parallels can be established between these fiction pieces and current affairs regarding the Burmese regime in areas such as information or state control. One of the measures most often mentioned as “dystopian” is the use of disinformation tools and campaigns to shift public opinion. The article assesses the current economic crisis and how the junta is projecting its plans to counter the shrinking effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the economy, and the impact this will have on average citizens.

The Myanmar military has consistently rigged election results to protect its role in political dimensions and its supremacy over the civilian government. Remembering the restart of the country's liberalization journey in 2011 – almost 20 years after 1992 when General Than Shwe and Senior General Saw Maung depicted a form of gold-plated liberalization – helps make such signs discernible.

When the Union Solidarity and Development Party, which is the military-backed party, won a landslide victory in the 2010 general election that was held based on the 2008 constitution, the junta announced the transition from military regime to “civilian democracy.” But certain questions can now be asked: To what extent were Myanmar's prospects restricted by the military under the 2008 constitution, which gave a veto power to the military in parliament? Can Myanmar be assumed to have been in a utopian period between 2010 and 2020 while the country was struggling under civil war, and while the spirit of military control reigned over the civilian government?

During these 10 years, four elections were held. But the liberalization did not yield substantial results. Information continued to come from state-run media, over which the military exercised severe control with a large scale of disinformation. According to [Amnesty International](#), bloggers, reporters and editors were detained even at the outset of the reform in 2011.

The military's information control is not new; it affected elections when the National League for Democracy (NLD) party was a target of disinformation and fake news coming from those linked to the military group. Ever since the 2020 general elections, [the military has disseminated hate speech](#) to reclaim parliamentary seats for its parties.

Similarities to Dystopian Fiction

In retrospect, the period of so-claimed “civilian democracy” after 2011 seems like the preliminary period for Myanmar as a land of dystopia. The word “dystopia” brings forth images exemplifying injustice, bureaucratic, dictatorship and oppressive society, in a constellation that has appeared in science fiction since 1950. The literature of dystopia highlights the threatening effects of the political and social framework on the future of humankind.

One of the most well-known dystopian novels is George Orwell's *1984*. That novel, which depicts propaganda used in conjunction with totalitarianism, surveillance and censorship, brought terms such as “Big Brother” and “Doublespeak” into popular usage. In fictional form, the book illustrated the tragedy of the political system. The film *Outbreak*, directed by Wolfgang Petersen and released in 1995 based on Richard Preston's nonfiction book of the previous year, *The Hot Zone*, is another notable work on dystopia. When the world began suffering under the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, memories of this 1995 film were revived. Structured around actual health disasters, the film chronicled how dystopia can play out in a

society in the form of disease.

These dystopian novels and films prompt the probing question of whether we will experience such political tragedy and health catastrophe in real life. The likelihood, unfortunately, is high. When we use the word dystopia as a metaphor for fearful lives, there are three categories – government, health care and information – where repression plays out in people’s lives. The imaginative themes introduced in novels and films are sometimes found in real life as well. Fascism and authoritarianism can be assumed as common forms of government tragedy. In this context, the accuracy of information arguably becomes of primary concern under a dictatorship.

Orwell presents a society where powerless citizens lacking human dignity are living under constant surveillance, with restrictions on freedom of thought, and wickedly incessant propaganda. Such a society can be found in Myanmar since the coup that took place on February 1, 2021. The military ousted the democratically elected government, having the court accuse it of election fraud. The leaders of the National League for Democracy, politicians, journalists and activists became detainees. The remaining pro-democracy activists and Myanmar people, who desired to restore democracy and resist the coup, took to the streets of not only Yangon, Mandalay but across the country to demand the release of detainees, to sing and to chant anti-coup slogans, flashing three fingers – in the Hunger Games style – to show solidarity in such a dystopian moment. While the Myanmar people stood witness to crimes against humanity, the rising death toll and detention rate signaled a real-life dystopia.

Myanmar became inundated with propaganda on the 2020 election, the National Unity Government, the civil disobedience movement, the economy and Covid-19 control measures. Freedom of expression has been restricted and arrest warrants have been announced for those who express resistance to the military coup on social media. Dehumanizing experiences in Myanmar prisons have been reported, where detainees undergo sexual violence and harassment by police and soldiers of the Myanmar military, according to a [Human Rights Watch report](#). Despite the allegations of the military junta, it is obvious to everyone that the plan to violently overthrow an elected government represents the murky depths of desire on the part of Min Aung Hlaing, the Myanmar military ruler who defined himself as prime minister of the caretaker government formed by the military junta.

Media Control and Disinformation

Although Min Aung Hlaing announced a one-year state of emergency on February 2, 2021, it was he who tried to kill not only the country’s stability but also its democracy. A mere six months after seizing power, Min Aung Hlaing appeared on military-owned TV declaring that the state of emergency would be extended until the election scheduled for 2023.

Prior to the coup, Min Aung Hlaing and his followers spread disinformation related to the 2020

Myanmar election, trying to undermine democracy in a way that is common for a dictator who suffers an election loss. The military put their efforts into religious matters as well, to manipulate the people with fake news about the Rohingya Muslims. This was an example of a dictator's use of disinformation as a weapon to put democracy at risk.

As soon as they staged the coup, the junta imposed internet restrictions with cuts to internet service and a night-time internet curfew across the country. They also introduced new laws to block websites and shut down the internet for reasons of national security, even though they themselves were the primary source of fake news, disinformation and misinformation. The junta accused and detained journalists including the Japanese journalist Yuki Kitazumi, who was charged with spreading fake news when he was working to cover the protest in Yangon. The junta's intention was to make it known that anyone who provides coverage of the protest and brutal crackdown would be charged with spreading fake news.

In such circumstances, the role of the independent media becomes substantial in reducing fake news and disinformation. In spite of the challenges, [journalists and citizen journalists](#) are still working to record local information and share true stories with the world, and serve as witnesses to the coup through outlets such as Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), Mizzima and Myanmar Now.

Health and Economic Crises in Myanmar

Although the third wave of Covid-19 was also reaching Myanmar at the time of the coup, health care workers were detained, attacked and killed by the junta for showing their resistance to the coup. Even while the military was asserting the need for international assistance to deal with Covid-19, they imposed restrictions on oxygen supply for Covid-affected people, and military-run hospitals refused patients. The failure of the health care system extended to prisons holding politicians, students, activists, teachers, journalists and artists who participated in the protest to resist the military coup. According to [Human Rights Watch](#), there are over 600 Covid-19 cases in the prisons of Myanmar.

While the [World Bank](#) predicts Myanmar's economy to shrink by 18% as it confronts the double impact of the concurrent coup and Covid-19, the junta's minister for Investment and Foreign Economic Relations U Aung Naing Oo said that "Efforts will be made to recover the businesses that faced heavy losses caused by Covid as quickly as possible," according the [Bangkok Post](#). Moreover, the junta's minister gave a telephone interview to [Japan Times](#) concerning investment from Asian countries. In that interview, he replied that, "Given the situation, we expect traditional investors will continue to do business here. Their respective governments do not tell their companies not to invest or do business in Myanmar, so we expect investors from these countries will continue to come here."

One would wonder why the military junta put their hopes on Asian countries for investment to recover business, and how they can reach out to investors even while the junta is committing human right violations

and a brutal crackdown. This is merely ungrounded propaganda with the purpose of protecting the situation of economic collapse. The [Voice of America](#) reported the World Bank's warning that the Myanmar economy would be one-third smaller in 2021 than in 2019, as a stark indicator of the deep gouges made in all areas of economic life. In a clear example of this trend, the Japanese company Suzuki announced it was suspending production at its two Myanmar factories, which produced 13,300 vehicles in 2019, mostly for the local market, according to the [Star](#). A source from the law group [LALIVE](#) also described that investors from other Asian countries may resort to arbitration proceedings to reclaim the losses incurred by the coup. Dictators are never afraid of lying to the people and to the world.

The military junta does not deserve to hold the authority of the nation's law-making, governance and jurisdiction. An OECD working paper entitled "[Governance Responses to Disinformation](#)" describes public communication efforts, direct response, regulatory and legal responses, and media and civic policy responses as a framework for creating policy response to combat disinformation. It also emphasizes the importance of supporting citizen journalists and other independent media outlets to confront disinformation. In contradiction to this approach, the military junta continues to repress journalists, citizen journalists and media outlets.

Dystopia in Real Life

The future of the Myanmar people is still unclear more than one and a half years after the military staged a coup that ousted the elected government. It was indeed a nightmare to face the unjust seizing of power even as the Myanmar people were hoping that a better future would follow the reform process after the 2020 Myanmar General Election in which the National League for Democracy party won a landslide victory.

In the meantime, the fictional society created by George Orwell is similar to what the Myanmar people face in their daily routine, and the current situation in Myanmar can be considered as a dystopia. Although "dystopia" originated in fiction in reference to an imaginary world, for the people of Myanmar it is a very practical concept in daily life as proven by the ongoing political crisis and severe oppression.

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Hnin Htet Htet Aung is a Visiting Researcher at the Graduate School of Law, Hitotsubashi University. Ms. Aung has nine years of experience working in civil society, international non-governmental organizations, and a Singapore-based advisory firm. Before being a visiting researcher, Ms. Aung worked as a program director at Citizen Action for Transparency (CAfT – Myanmar). Prior to that, she was a program manager at the National Coordination Secretariat – Myanmar Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (MEITI) and program officer at Norwegian People’s Aid and other organizations. Through her work, she has supported civil society organizations and their activists. She has published articles about the political situation in Myanmar, women’s rights, transitional justice, collective actions and freedom of expression, in both Burmese and English. She holds a master’s degree in public administration from Aldersgate College, Philippines, and a bachelor’s degree in law from Dagon University, Myanmar.