

Statement by Pax Christi Asia-Pacific on the “State of Emergency” in Myanmar

The members of Pax Christi Asia-Pacific are deeply troubled by the tragic developments in Myanmar.

On 1 February 2021, the Myanmar military, also known as Tatmadaw, declared a “State of emergency” to remove a legitimately elected government, led by Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD). She has been charged with possession of a handful of imported walkie-talkies, and with her colleagues could face a jail term of three years. Detained, too, are civil society activists and several Buddhist monks, tearing down a decade of democratic reform in the process.

As members and partners of Pax Christi International in the Asia-Pacific region, we are deeply troubled by these developments in Myanmar. It is bewildering to note that Chinese state media, representative of a leading power in Asia-Pacific, has described the takeover by the Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing and the armed forces as “a major cabinet reshuffle.”¹ This “alternative fact” description does not serve the people of Myanmar.

The world knows that what occurred on Monday this week was a coup – not just against a popularly elected government, but even more significantly against the people of Myanmar, their hopes and aspirations, their pride in democratic participation, however flawed, after military rule of several decades. It is tragic that this limited “experiment” was snuffed after a challenging ten-year journey to democracy since 2012.

We deplore that the Tatmadaw resorted to wielding such a hammer blow to democracy, when the Constitution under which the government operated was approved by them in the first place, entrenched their place in the legislature, and gave them control over key ministries. That their preferred party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), performed poorly in the recent elections provides no basis for their action.

People in Myanmar are banging pots and pans to vent their disappointment and frustration, including young people who have high hopes for their country to follow the democratic path. This practice has cultural significance in that it is normally used to ward off evil spirits. That it is widespread now signifies the depth of the people’s ire over the coup.

We are deeply concerned that this coup will further reinforce ethno-religious nationalism in Myanmar. The global community has been pained to witness the atrocities committed against the Rohingya, more than 700,000 of whom had to flee to Bangladesh, and more than another 600,000 remain in Rakhine state. The attitude of the Myanmar armed forces towards this ethnic group is well reported.²

¹ See for example Chinese State Media Calls Myanmar Coup "A Major Cabinet Reshuffle" NDTV (2 February 2021), available at: <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/chinese-state-media-calls-myanmar-coup-a-major-cabinet-reshuffle-2361824>.

² For example, in Human Rights Watch’s recent report “An Open Prison without End”: Myanmar’s Mass Detention of Rohingya in Rakhine State (8 October 2020), available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/08/open-prison-without-end/myanmars-mass-detention-rohingya-rakhine-state>.

The well-being of the people of Myanmar was the focus of Pope Francis' visit in 2017. In his latest encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti* (2020), he writes "peace is not merely absence of war, but a tireless commitment to recognise, protect and concretely restore the dignity . . . of our brothers and sisters."³

We also support the recent statement of the UN Secretary General on the situation in Myanmar urging the military leadership to "respect the will of the people of Myanmar and adhere to democratic norms, with any differences to be resolved through peaceful dialogue." He also stated that "all leaders must act in the greater interest of Myanmar's democratic reform, engaging in meaningful dialogue, refraining from violence and fully respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms."⁴

Coming from different parts of the Asia Pacific region, we ask for attention for the worrying situation in Myanmar and support for its people by:

- Standing in solidarity with and support of the people of Myanmar in a spirit of "vigilance and prayer," as urged by Auxiliary Bishop of Yangon, John Saw Yaw Han; and ask others to join us.⁵
- Calling on the Tatmadaw to restrain from using their forces to punish those who disagree with their action that way violating human rights of those who are standing up for democracy and the rule of law;
- Urging the Tatmadaw to immediately release Aung San Suu Kyi and her colleagues, and enter into meaningful dialogue on constructive and democratic ways forward for Myanmar, including the restoration of democracy;
- Asking relevant governments and powers in Asia Pacific not to exploit the unfolding situation in Myanmar to advance their own political and economic interests;
- Calling on the governments in Asia-Pacific and beyond to stand against the military takeover and press the Tatmadaw to immediately relinquish the power they have illegally seized and release those they have put in prison.
- Calling on the Tatmadaw to heed the words of Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, SVD, Archbishop of Yangon, and President of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences: *I write with prayers and hope that this great nation, this golden land of a graceful people will enter into a global stage as a reconciled community of hope and peace. Let us solve all disputes through dialogue. Peace is possible. Peace is the only way. Democracy is the only light to that path.*⁶

Signed by the Pax Christi Asia Pacific Facilitation Group
4 February 2021

³ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §233. Available at:

http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

⁴ United Nations, Statement attributable to the Spokesperson for the Secretary General - on Myanmar (31 January 2021), available at: <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2021-01-31/statement-attributable-the-spokesperson-for-the-secretary-general-myanmar>.

⁵ For more information, see <https://thecatholicuniverse.com/prayers-needed-for-myanmar-says-yangons-auxiliary-bishop/>.

⁶ "Myanmar cardinal appeals for return to democracy," *The Tablet*, 4 February 2021, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/13823/myanmar-cardinal-appeals-for-return-to-democracy>.