Cambodians weigh in on apparent coup in Myanmar

Moeun Chhean Nariddh / Khmer Times
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On February 1, Myanmar’s civilian government was deposed and their leaders were placed under house arrest by the military in an apparent coup. The world has responded with a swift threat of sanctions against the new military regime in Myanmar. Some 1,815 kilometres southeast of Myanmar, in Cambodia, officials, scholars and ordinary Cambodians share their views on the military coup and have different opinions whether the international community should impose sanctions against Myanmar’s military junta.

Sok Eysan, spokesman for the Cambodian People’s Party, says the national election committee of Myanmar had done a good job in organising the election in the country last November. He said Myanmar’s military should respect the will of the people of Myanmar for ensuring a landslide victory for the National League for Democracy party of State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint.
“The best solution is to respect the results of the elections,” he said. “We cannot force them, we can only suggest that they solve the problems peacefully based on the principles of democracy.”

When asked if Myanmar could use Cambodia’s solution in ending its civil war, he said Myanmar’s military coup was an isolated case and could not follow Cambodia’s example to solve the crisis.

“I don’t think the situation in Myanmar can be compared to the actual situation in Cambodia,” the spokesman said. “So, we cannot use any country as a model [for the solution], because it depends on the stance of the leaders of Myanmar.”

Eysan said any use of sanctions by the international community against Myanmar’s military junta would be an ineffective tool to punish the military regime.

“Any international sanctions will affect the living condition of the people, which I think is a serious human rights violation,” he said, adding: “The sanctions against the military will not only affect the military. I think the superpowers should take this issue into consideration.”

Meanwhile, Kin Phea, director-general of the International Relations Institute of Cambodia at the Royal Academy of Cambodia, said the military coup in Myanmar was a historical legacy of the country where the military had had a predominant power over the country’s politics.

“Therefore, democracy in Myanmar cannot progress,” he said.

Phea said the military coup did not only affect Myanmar’s image and economy, but it also affected the entire region, especially the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (Asean).

“Southeast Asia is seen negatively, especially for Asean,” he said.

Phea said some issues that needed to be resolved within the Asean framework could also encounter problems due to the backlash by many countries against the military coup.

“The question is how will Myanmar be invited to a meeting?” he said.

Regarding sanctions against the military regime, Phea said the international community has to make a very difficult decision on whether they needed to do so. He agreed with Eysan that ordinary people in Myanmar would be the victims of any sanctions.

“If there is no pressure on the military, it would seem to be an encouragement for the robbing of power from those who won the elections through democratic means,” he said.

Phea said the international community should continue helping the Myanmar people, but not the military government.

“The assistance can be through civil society organisations or any aid institutions which work directly with the people of Myanmar,” he explained. “I don’t expect there will be any assistance to the [military] government.”
Phea said concerned parties in Myanmar needed to offer concessions to one another by applying the win-win policy.

“We need to acknowledge that the military is still playing an important role within the political arena,” he said. “So, the winning party in the election needs to recognise the role of the military.”

At the same time, Phea said the military also needed to recognise the voice of the people who supported a civilian government.

“You need to share power again in a way that can be accepted,” he said. “All three parties will be the winners, including the civilian government, the military and the people of Myanmar.”

Phea said the international community should encourage all sides in Myanmar to settle the disputes peacefully.

“Make sure that those who have been ousted can return without losing face,” he said. “And the military can also maintain their role in the society without losing face.”

Nevertheless, a Cambodian human rights activist and a political analyst wished to see harsh sanctions against Myanmar’s coup leaders and the military regime.

Chak Sopheap, executive director of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, said Myanmar military’s forceful grab of political power showed the military’s disregard for the people’s rights and freedoms.

“And the lengths it is willing to go to in order to hold on to power, undermining democratic governance and ignoring Myanmar citizens’ will,” she said. “The international community has a responsibility to ensure that this violent assault on democracy is not successful and is prevented from going on any longer.”

While targeted sanctions should be favoured to punish those responsible, Sopheap said the circumstances and the urgency of the situation might call for other options to be considered.

“In any case, action is needed, as a lack of immediate action from the international community would have detrimental and long-lasting consequences for Myanmar, its neighbouring countries and the South-East Asia region as a whole,” she said.

She added: “Asean in particular needs to answer the calls for support coming from Myanmar and to step in to help in line with the Asean Charter which highlights the association’s adherence to “the principles of democracy, the rule of law and good governance.”

Likewise, Sophal Ear, Associate Professor at Occidental College in the United States and Author of Aid Dependence in Cambodia, said the US would be reviewing its foreign assistance and would undertake a broader review of US assistance programmes.
“I imagine the same will happen with the international community,” he said. “Moreover, Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability will be the next step. Last but not least, it will be a likely review of GSP for the country.”

Sophal agreed that economic sanctions would only affect ordinary people, but that they were needed to prevent more coups from happening.

“The idea is to convince the regime to change course or else suffer the consequences,” he said. “If no economic sanctions are credible, then coups would happen even more frequently.”

He said he did not have much hope that Asean had any power to help solve the crisis in Myanmar.

“Anything that happens Myanmar can veto,” he said. “The UN can try to mediate, but it will be hard without carrots and sticks.”

Meanwhile, ordinary Cambodians have also closely followed the military coup in Myanmar and they have also offered their views on the crisis happening in the country which used to share borders with Cambodia in ancient times.

Venerable Try Thaney, a 28-year-old Buddhist monk and a student at Paññāsāstra University of Cambodia, said both the civilian government of Suu Kyi and the military leaders wanted to lead the country in their own ways.

“The military in Myanmar may think that progress in the country has been too slow under the civilian government,” he said. “However, as a Buddhist country Myanmar should adopt Dhamar Thipatay, a Buddhist type of government that puts the interest of the people at the top.”

Venerable Thaney added: “If both sides put the interest of the people at the top, they should sit down and discuss to find the solution.”

Tum Chita, a 42-year-old journalist at a local media outlet, said she agreed with Venerable Thaney and that the two sides should find a peaceful solution to their differences.

“They should learn from Cambodia’s conflict solution during the war,” she said. “I hope they can reach a national reconciliation soon.”

Chita said she didn’t want to see any sanctions imposed by the international community on Myanmar as it would only hurt the people.

“When two elephants fight, the ants will suffer,” she said.

Thy Chantha, a 26-year-old technician at a garment factory, said Myanmar’s crisis reminded him of the tragedy that Cambodian people had experienced during the war.

“During the war, Cambodian people were so miserable,” he said. “So, I don’t want to see the people of Myanmar have the same misery.”
Chantha said he hoped the international community would impose targeted sanctions that did not affect the people of Myanmar.

“The people of Myanmar have experienced suffering for so long,” he said. “Now, it should be an end to their suffering.”