

00:01 [Adam Westbrook] Welcome everyone. I'm Adam Westbrook and I'm the director of the Center for Community Engagement

00:05 here at Suffolk. Each year the Center for Community Engagement partners with the political

00:09 science and legal studies department to write an alternative winter break service learning program

00:15 and course called Conflict and Development that's taught by one of today's panelists, Professor

00:20 Roberto Dominguez. This course and program is unique in that it includes an experiential

00:25 service learning component, where students actually travel to South East Asia and volunteer

00:30 with local communities on housing and education projects while also learning about the politics,

00:35 history and culture of the region. While the program has been happening for almost two decades,

00:40 the past two years we've taken groups of students to both Cambodia and Myanmar.

00:45 And I've been privileged to co-lead the trip to Myanmar with Professor Dominguez

00:51 for these last two years. While in South East Asia students volunteer with Habitat for Humanity

00:56 and they get to know local community members and experience the culture of communities firsthand.

01:01 Once students return back to Boston they take the on-campus portion of Professor Dominguez' course,

01:06 where they continue to reflect on their experience and also dive deeper into the politics, history

01:11 and culture of the region in their coursework. Experiential community engagement programs and

01:17 courses like this hit on two fundamental pieces of what makes Suffolk special from my perspective.

01:23 Here at Suffolk we're dedicated to experiential learning and we're dedicated to educating students

01:28 to be globally responsibly citizens. So, when news broke on February 1st, the day when the

01:34 newly elected government was supposed to take office in Myanmar, and we learned of the military

01:39 coup d'état, which included the detainment of civilian leaders like the de facto leader and

01:44 State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint as well as writers, activists and others.

01:51 We were shocked and concerned for our partners and for our friends in the region.

01:56 And as those of us who have traveled to Myanmar know, Myanmar was a developing democracy

02:00 with fragile internal dynamics. It was by no means a fully operating democracy.

02:06 Today our hope is to have a conversation that helps the campus community and others joining

02:13 us to begin to make sense of what's happening in Myanmar right now. How it got here and some

02:18 of the connections that Suffolk has to the region. Unfortunately, we only have an hour,

02:22 so, this conversation will hopefully be one of many that I encourage people to continue to have

02:28 about what's happening in Myanmar. And we'll hear from three speakers from Suffolk today,

02:33 Roberto Dominguez is Professor of Government and teaches courses on international relations,

02:38 comparative politics, European and Latin American integration

02:42 and of course, the conflict and development course I mentioned earlier, which the

02:45 alternative winter break program is connected to. And as I mentioned before he's traveled

02:50 and led students on this program for nearly the entirety of the program. Professor Weiqi Zhang is

02:56 Assistant Professor in the political science and legal studies department and focuses on social

03:00 and political liberalization in closed societies with a specific focus on China and North Korea.

03:06 And we're hoping that Professor Zhang can help us understand some of the larger geo-political

03:11 dynamics in the region. Finally, Kevin Luna-Torres is a junior political science major with a

03:16 concentration in international relations and a minor in Asian studies here at Suffolk. Kevin

03:23 was a participant two years ago at our first alternative winter break program to Myanmar,

03:27 and we'll hear from his about his experience in the country and how it's impacted him. And also

03:32 Kevin has a strong disposition for service, he's been involved in all sorts of programs here in the

03:38 Center for Community Engagement and throughout campus. And is also an infantry soldier in the

03:43 Army National Guard, and has been since he started at Suffolk. So, before we start our conversation I

03:48 want to invite our audience to use the chat function to post your questions throughout

03:52 the talk. I just want to remind everyone to please try to keep your questions respectful, thoughtful

03:58 and short so we can get to as many questions as possible in the Q&A session at the end.

04:05 We probably have a variety of people on the call today who have mixed understandings about the

04:11 history, and the culture, and the political dynamics of Myanmar. And so, I'm wondering

04:18 if Professor Dominguez and Professor Zhang can help us paint a picture of what are some

04:24 really important contextual things that we should know about Myanmar as we're reading about what's

04:30 happening in the news and that kind of thing. So maybe we'll start with Professor Dominguez.

04:37 [Roberto Dominguez] Well, thank you very much and welcome everyone. Well, last week President Biden met President

04:45 López Obrador From Mexico and they had a very friendly conversation. And one of the statements

04:50 that caught my attention is that they recalled the early 20th century history, which there was

04:56 a saying among the group of the dictator Porfirio Díaz back then that he said, "Poor Mexico, so far

05:06 from God, so close to the United States." So, this sparked a conversation between President Biden

05:12 and President López Obrador because today they revisit that phrase. And I think this is a good

05:18 way to start to contextualize the current events in Myanmar. And we may say we want to paraphrase

05:28 President Obrador and President Biden, we could say, "Poor Myanmar, so close to China, so far from

05:36 the United States." And somehow this statement remains true because this is a very important

05:43 analytical point to start by the context. This is the 15th year that democracy globally speaking,

05:50 has been on decline, and not only in terms of civil rights. And this virus around the world,

06:00 even consolidated democracies have declined their performance in terms civil political rights. But

06:10 the region, particularly this region in Asia, has experienced very dramatic declines as well. So

06:17 what is happening today in Myanmar somehow reinforces an existing trend

06:24 happening in that area of the world. We may say that there was a coup d'état 10 years ago

06:31 in Thailand, we may say that the elections in Cambodia were the worst, and we have perhaps the

06:38 longest living a dictator in Cambodia, we may say that Malaysia and Indonesia has struggled

06:45 a little bit with inclusiveness, although these are these two countries are models of cruelty in

06:50 many different ways. And India in this in a very worrisome, downhill, paddle practices above all

06:58 regarding the way they understand citizenship, and particularly the case of the Muslim. So the

07:05 entire region somehow has gone into this trench. So, the first point that I wanted to put on the

07:10 table is that somehow, when we see regions that are reinforcing a practice, it's very likely that

07:19 it's harder to make to have a democracy function, so this is the first point. Let me put it another

07:26 way, somehow the democratization in the Western Hemisphere, or the transition of the Eastern

07:32 European countries was faster because of the region, the region somehow influenced in domestic

07:38 processes, so this is bad news. But this is part of a trend that didn't start last year didn't

07:43 start 10 years ago, actually it started 15 years ago as global trade. Number two,

07:50 high expectations. Myanmar became somehow a model of transition if you will, in the region.

08:00 Somehow, they tried to pick and choose from the Chilean model the Spanish model in which you

08:04 have to find some type of transition in which the military regime will be reassured that they will

08:10 behave under different angles. So, this is not the first wave of democracy, the first wave of

08:16 democracy was 1888. The second wave of democracy so called The Saffron Revolution was in 2007.

08:23 And we engaging in that would be the second wave of democracy between 2008 with

08:32 a new constitution of Myanmar. We may say very limited in terms of democratic practices but with

08:41 a rational transition, somehow how to navigate with a military power and how to navigate with

08:49 a democratic forces and political parties. So, a third wave was reinforced by the international

08:55 community, the European Union. The UK was very important in this transition. We shouldn't forget

09:03 that the United States started again providing aid. Since 2012, has provided around \$1 billion,

09:11 how much is that? It depends how you want to see it. 2012 until 2020 divided in eight years

09:20 and based on the needs might be a limited amount, but still it's part of the budget of USA

09:26 also started addressing some dialogue with the government in Myanmar, because one of the main

09:36 threats and challenges for the west and for the region is drug trafficking and human trafficking.

09:41 And there's a liaison somehow working with them, with a government in India. So there

09:48 were expectations and those expectations somehow we're on the right track.

09:53 There were elections in 2015, and we may see that 2015 marked somehow the starting point in what

09:59 could be the third wave of democracy. Which formally speaking, we have an accumulation,

10:05 very interesting accumulation between the military holding 25% of the assembly, and also practicing

10:14 some type of elections and also acknowledging the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi and not only that,

10:19 it was interesting that the military agreed to have her as the first president.

10:24 There are three presidents, but the first president, somehow presidents that

10:28 align somehow with a view of the National League for Democracy. So somehow the transition was

10:35 on the right track. Number three, the crisis. It has been quite difficult, and here I guess

10:45 societal challenges played a significant role in the explanation of what is happening in Myanmar.

10:55 So, the part of the problem was that somehow their unspoken promise since 2015 was to reform

11:05 the Constitution in order to relocate the seat and pass several reforms in order to re-engage

11:12 in Myanmar is something that the Burmese are very proud is this transition to democracy. And

11:18 what happened is that in March last year actually, this was different. Somehow part of the

11:26 law wanted to be or attempt to be part was to reduce the allocation of seats to the military,

11:34 but for that you need somehow a constitutional reform, more than 75% of the votes,

11:39 and that didn't happen. So somehow this was indicating some tensions,

11:44 the second thing and this was perhaps immediate. The current crisis somehow is the result in what's

11:52 come, but somehow there was an answer which is the elections on November 8th. The elections in

11:58 November 8th somehow increased the strength of the National League for Democracy, the party of Aung

12:07 San Suu Kyi. The gain since it was somehow mild but it was somehow significant and somehow this

12:13 put her in a very difficult situation with the traditional wing of the military. And

12:22 an important element here is that there were some tensions also within the

12:27 society in Myanmar and this has to do with three crises. The crisis regarding the minority,

12:36 and here is a combination interesting between 24 armed groups that in their view, the government

12:42 are conducting terrorist attacks, although there is some truth in that. The other one

12:47 is the way they tried to re-engage with the 1/3% that is no Burmese, which is the ethnic majority

12:56 in Myanmar. And there are three problems that in different ways have produced tensions in the

13:03 government. The case of the Rakhine State where everyone knows or has followed the case of the

13:09 Rohingya, the case of the Kachin State, which is at the north. And there is the case of the

13:15 Shan State. The problematic cycle is similar but the one that somehow got out of control was the

13:22 case of the Rohingya because somehow, they moved to other countries and it was somehow international

13:28 displacement. What happened, this produce some tension within the government because

13:34 in the view of many the leader, Aung San Suu Kyi somehow allied with the military

13:40 and these produced tensions in the Burmese society. Nonetheless, the popularity of Aung

13:48 San Suu Kyi somehow remains high. So, number four. The study of the Southeast Asian

14:05 state is very much explained by the theories of elites. So somehow, we shouldn't forget

14:12 that the father of Burma, the father of Myanmar, was the father Aung San Suu Kyi,

14:19 so somehow understanding the military is very, very complex. Because somehow there

14:26 is an association between the business groups, the elites and the military.

14:30 Somehow the military still today is also as part of the nation.

14:38 And this is extremely important to consider, which makes that a very complicated picture. Because you

14:44 have to deal somehow with all these different groups within the military, and it is in this

14:52 regard that the elites are very important. So that societal and institutional role of the Tatmadaw,

15:01 which is the way the military is known in Myanmar is extremely important. And we shouldn't forget

15:08 that still when they are trained or you are part of the military, the motto is the triumphant elite

15:13 of the future. So, they are somehow a metastasizing society, but are part of the nation. We shouldn't

15:21 forget that, that part of those 30 generals in the 60s that liberated Myanmar actually,

15:29 institutionally speaking, is the same group. So here we have a contradiction somehow that

15:36 the leader for democratization has also to build bridges and so they collaborate with the military,

15:42 because this is part of the internal policymaking in Myanmar, and we have to consider that as very

15:49 important. I mentioned that because many demonize in a very romantic western view,

15:54 the role of Aung San Suu Kyi when she went to the International Court of Justice to defend

15:59 the state of Myanmar, this is very important. Not to defend generals, to defend the state,

16:03 and these are two different things. So finally, the fifth point, so this is a very elite problem

16:12 oriented country. The final point that I want to make and with this I close. The international

16:22 instruments, so what to do from this angle? Okay, so if I had the chance to advise President Biden,

16:29 I would say send a special envoy Beijing, it's extremely important on how to build some type

16:39 of bridges and to find some type of connections with Russia and China that have remained silent

16:48 regarding this crisis for economic or political reasons. So, it's very important somehow to sway

16:55 them from the position they have, and this is not impossible, it happened with the Iran deal

17:01 in 2013, 2014. So somehow there is always that capacity of the diplomacy in order to persuade

17:09 others to move in different direction. He will put some pressure on the Burmese Junta today. So

17:18 this is extremely important, the other one is to continue working with The International

17:25 Court of Justice and with International Criminal Court that somehow both open cases

17:31 for different reasons in the International Court of Justice it's a state case that may last several

17:38 years. And this is a state case in which the state will respond, not people. But there is

17:45 another case in The International Criminal Court that is open, and here people can be indicted. So

17:54 in this regard, and this was opened by Bangladesh by the way because it's a state party, Myanmar is

17:59 not a state party, but you have more than half a million Rohingyas on Bangladeshi territory.

18:07 It's very important for Bangladesh to raise the issue to The International Criminal Court. So

18:12 it's very important for the United States somehow to forge this alliance this with these countries.

18:18 And finally, another element that is important to keep in mind is to continue working with the

18:26 allies. Yesterday finally the European Union in the voice of one of the members of the

18:35 military headquarters somehow spoke with a deputy a minister of the Junta

18:42 in Myanmar. So, it's important to keep talking, this is extremely important and it's important

18:47 to reinforce what the European Union is doing, to reinforce with a personal envoy of Secretary

18:54 Guterres from the United Nations is doing, to reinforce what Michelle Bachelet is doing in the

18:59 High Commissioner of Human Rights and they will both work with other countries in potentially

19:04 sparking more other crisis. Which is the case of India and is the case of Malaysia that are

19:10 sending back Rohingyas in this particular moment to a Myanmar, which is nonsense. So, I will close

19:20 with number five and I guess that's the path that somehow the United States should follow

19:28 in order to contribute somehow to ameliorate these problems in Myanmar, thank you.

19:35 [Westbrook] Thanks, Professor Dominguez. Yeah, that was great. Just to reiterate some of the things you talked about,

19:41 the importance of understanding that democracy was on the decline through the entire region and

19:48 how that can influence Myanmar as well. Thanks for giving a little bit of an overview about some of

19:53 the internal dynamics in Myanmar as well, and then the importance of international partnerships and

19:59 in working with allies if there's an interest in actually working toward a solution to this,

20:05 so, thank you for that. Professor Zhang, I'd love to hear your perspective on some of these same

20:10 same dynamics.

20:13 [Weiqi Zhang] Yeah, I guess Professor Dominguez already covered pretty comprehensively on

20:18 most of the key points here. So, I think I will just talk a little bit about

20:25 the dominant power of the Myanmar military in a more comparative perspective.

20:33 So, in countries like Myanmar, the military has a lot of power. It's not something that

20:40 that is unique to Myanmar. So, in the neighboring countries, such as China, Vietnam, North Korea,

20:48 or further away in Egypt, because these countries, they have the colonial experience. So, during the

20:58 Cold War, it was politically natural for the military to rise in power and also claim the

21:09 title of being the protector of the nation from foreign colonizers or foreign offering impurists.

21:18 So, in the case of Myanmar, the power of the military basically persisted

21:25 even after the end of the Cold War. And so, at the end of the Cold War, as many of you probably know,

21:32 right? In 1991, there was a breakthrough in terms of democratization process,

21:40 and then the military as an institution in Myanmar had basically the motivation to

21:47 protect themselves by suppressing the protest and the democratization and as a result,

21:54 put Aung San Suu Kyi into house arrest for more than a decade. And so, after the Cold War,

22:04 since the security concern was much mitigated during the post-Cold War era therefore,

22:14 the legitimacy for the Myanmar government or the military government switched progressively from

22:22 being the protector of the nation to more of the economic growth. So as a result,

22:28 if we look at the Myanmar economy in the 1990s, and also in early 2000s, you would see that

22:36 the economy actually performed pretty well, right? So according to some reports, the real GDP

22:47 growth rate for Myanmar in the early 2000s, it was about 7% per year, which is

22:56 pretty awesome for a developing country. But at the same time, we also see that its inflation

23:04 rate is also about 8% a year, which is a little bit high but still, it's acceptable. And because

23:13 the economy was booming, I think that motivated the military government to be able to afford

23:23 to have a little bit more political liberalization and economic liberalization. And as a result of

23:29 that, Aung San Suu Kyi was allowed to play more and more roles in the Myanmar domestic politics.

23:42 However, starting in 2007, the Myanmar economy started to decline and as a result, for some

23:52 reason, I don't know but the government started about, "Yeah it could be a good idea to lift the

23:57 oil subsidies in a country which basically crushed the life of the normal people there,

24:05 which resulted in a nationwide protests in 2007. And that became one of the triggers

24:17 for the later protests and the upset from the society against the military government. And

24:26 as a result of the protests, then there was a constitutional amendment in 2008

24:33 which led to a deal between the camp of Aung San Suu Kyi and the military government. And

24:41 in the new constitutional amendment, the military would preserve 25% of the seats in the parliament,

24:49 and I think that was a compromise or temporary compromise between the military

24:55 and the opposition party, but mainly due to the nationwide protest. And I guess

25:03 the rise of Aung San Suu Kyi's political party or NDP continued to become increasingly popular

25:10 after that, and I think the military was no longer willing to allow the NDP

25:18 to entirely take over the political authority in the country, because in the most recent election,

25:30 the NDP won by a landslide. And that would mean that in the parliament, the military will lose

25:38 most of the control and also based on some anecdote, there was a negotiation between

25:45 the military generals, and Aung San Suu Kyi Mostly the difference between them is that the military

25:51 generals wanted Aung San Suu Kyi to promise them that the military will not be prosecuted after

26:02 the election but somehow the deal was not reached was not reached. So, the military

26:08 was encouraged or was forced to make the first move to, to arrest Aung San Suu Kyi again.

26:18 That's how I view the political mechanism in Myanmar history. To some extent, it's not very

26:28 unique to Myanmar, in Egypt we see the same thing, in North Korea even though there was no political

26:35 opposition but still the military not only performs the national security function, but also

26:43 the military also performs economical function as Professor Dominguez mentioned that the military

26:49 in Myanmar also run huge businesses, right? So, part of the reason is that the Myanmar military

26:59 totally controlled the country for decades therefore the military generals, they have

27:04 the motivation and the power to enrich themselves. And another reason is that Myanmar does not have a

27:12 lot of money to fund the military, which faces a lot of domestic security issues to deal with. So

27:23 instead of asking the government to pay for the military, the military actually was allowed to

27:31 run business in order to sustain themselves. In North Korea and Egypt, they are still doing

27:41 the same thing in China during the time of 1990s, the military also could run businesses

27:48 but in the late 1990s, military was banned by the government from doing businesses. So

27:56 I guess there's also an economical reason behind the dominant position of the Myanmar military.

28:06 And a little bit about the international perspective, the relationship between Myanmar

28:12 and China is a little bit complicated. Myanmar's position is like the position of North Korea,

28:19 as Professor Dominguez said, they are too close to China, which means that they have to have

28:26 positive or friendly relationship to begin with, with China. They cannot afford to have

28:33 bad relations with China to begin with, and from the Chinese perspective, Myanmar has

28:40 a very strategic position for the Chinese national security. Specifically, China would

28:48 need Myanmar to bypass especially the American naval blockage in the South China Sea and also

28:58 in the Pacific Ocean. So, Myanmar could provide China a pretty safe and reliable access to oil

29:07 from the Middle East, and also Myanmar itself has a lot of oil, even though it's quite

29:12 small comparing to the OPEC countries, but Myanmar does have quite a sizable amount of

29:18 oil reserves but Myanmar has not industrialized enough to process its own oil reserves. So,

29:27 Myanmar could export a lot of crude oil, but it does not have the capability to process them

29:35 to produce actual petroleum or oil related products. So, Myanmar also rely on China for

29:44 industrialization in terms of, in terms of economic cooperation. And there is actually

29:52 one oil pipeline from Myanmar to China that is under construction and Myanmar also has created

30:01 multiple special economic zones specifically targeting at attracting Chinese foreign direct

30:08 investment in order to boost local economic growth. So, to some extent, Myanmar is put in

30:15 a pretty tough position because on the one hand, they need China for economic growth, that's one.

30:24 And China also need Myanmar for national or energy security. So, they have a common

30:31 interest to begin with, but at the same time, similar to other neighboring countries of China,

30:38 Myanmar government is also a little bit concerned about the Chinese dominance and rising power in

30:44 the region. So very interestingly, I think recently the Myanmar military government

30:52 said that they are willing to work with the US government to adopt an anti-China policy, and

31:00 the reason that they arrested Aung San Suu Kyi was that she was too pro-China. So, I think both sides

31:07 in Myanmar in terms of foreign policy, they are pretty close. They want to have good relationship

31:16 with China, but also, they are afraid of China as well so the best strategy for them is to play off

31:24 between China and the US at the same time in order to get some independence, that's my thought.

31:37 [Westbrook] Great, thank you Professor Zhang. I think that was really helpful, especially

31:41 how much you went into the dynamic between the military and the civilian parties and the history

31:47 of the military. And like you said, the strength of the military in Myanmar's is not unique

31:53 to countries around the world. But maybe for some of our maybe American students on the call,

32:00 that might sound like a relatively foreign thing is in the United States our commander in chief is

32:04 a civilian and not part of the military specifically. So, I think that's really,

32:10 really helpful to understand this dynamic as well. So, I want to shift a little bit,

32:16 we've been talking about high level political dynamics and geopolitical dynamics. And I want to

32:24 zoom in and go down to the ground and turn it over to Kevin, who spent two weeks in Myanmar a couple

32:31 of years ago, and who has been in touch with some of our partners there since February 1st. Kevin,

32:39 I'm hoping you could just tell us a little bit about your experience when you were in Myanmar,

32:46 what were some of your biggest takeaways about the country, the people, what was happening there?

32:53 [Kevin Luna-Torres] I would say my experience started prior to going to Myanmar, not knowing anything about the country

33:00 prior. I had to ask people around me, "Do you know anything about this country?" And the thing that

33:07 came up the most was the presence of the military in Myanmar and since they've taken matters

33:21 into their own hands, how many casualties have happened? How many arrests? How many killings?

33:26 How many rapes? How many lootings? How many burnings of villages have happened? And prior to

33:31 going on this trip, thinking those things you get very nervous before you go to a place like this.

33:39 And another aspect I also found prior to going was the diversity of Myanmar, there are 135 ethnic

33:47 groups in Myanmar. 136 since Myanmar doesn't recognize the Rohingya. But going to Myanmar,

33:58 it's very different, culturally the people are different and the religion is different. So

34:09 being there, I got to see a lot of what I don't see here in America

34:16 and it goes with simplest things as gestures, things of those sorts. These people want to leave

34:27 that good impression to you when you go there as a visitor. But as far as their daily life,

34:36 the Burmese people faced so many challenges already as they go through a monsoon season

34:44 yearly that affects their homes, their daily lives as they have to constantly prepare for this. So

34:52 to think about this monsoon, these things that are happening with the military

35:00 and so many different things going on in their life you start to think that these people are so

35:05 strong. And living with so many ethnic groups, you have to learn about these different ethnic

35:11 groups and respect each other in a sense. And as we've seen with his military coup,

35:17 a lot of these ethnic groups have come together, so it's interesting to see these things. And

35:23 another aspect, as I was there was the position on the military. A lot of the people that I talked to

35:36 and to the people I talked to now, they were very fearful I would say, of the government/military

35:47 and that was just because of the history. In a sense they were silent, I would say.

36:00 And they were afraid to speak out, but this military coupe has allowed so many people to

36:05 speak out and tell their stories especially for the Rohingya, they've been spoken out

36:11 a lot during these times about things that's happened to them. And it reminds me

36:19 as Professor Dominguez and Professor Zhang talks about the protests that happened in 2007, where

36:27 it was student led. A majority of the protests in 2007 around August, September where 31 civilians

36:38 died during these protests and it's similar to what I'm seeing now. So, there is definitely

36:52 a lot of similarities in that aspect and I could see the effects of the history. I was there on

37:02 the ground, and it played a huge role within everyone's everyday life in Myanmar, I'd say.

37:12 [Westbrook] Yeah, and Kevin, I know once you returned back, you ended up switching your major? Or your minor?

37:19 To study political science and with the concentration in Asian Studies.

37:24 Can you talk a little bit about what pushed you and what motivated you to switch what you were

37:29 studying as a result to your experience?

37:32 [Luna-Torres] Yeah, I was previously a psychology major

37:36 with no minor and going to Myanmar and seeing how the history has impacted their everyday

37:46 life and their life now, was interesting to me. And I wanted to do something about it.

37:54 When you introduced me, service is a huge part of my life. So, to be able to,

38:00 at some point in my life provide for these people, whether it's by educating other people or by

38:10 constantly doing things with Habitat for Humanity or keeping in contact

38:14 is important to me. So, I thought changing my major to study international relations, to not only

38:23 know the history, but know how it's impacting it now. And I also added the Asian studies minor,

38:30 to strengthen that knowledge as well around Asia.

38:36 [Westbrook] Awesome, thanks Kevin. So, I'm curious to shift to where do we go from here? And where does Myanmar

38:45 go from here? I don't expect anybody to make any predictions, because I think that's a dangerous

38:51 game to play. But I'm curious to hear a little bit about what are the dynamics we should be

38:58 paying attention to? Both professor Zhang and Professor Dominguez, you both started

39:02 to touch on the international dynamics. But what should we pay be paying attention to,

39:10 to better understand this as things unfold from both the international perspective but then also

39:15 from the domestic perspective inside Myanmar? Maybe we'll start with Professor Dominguez.

39:23 [Dominguez] Well, without having a crystal ball and not attempting to do any type of forecasts as

39:32 you mentioned, but a to pay attention or what should be emphasizing, any type of collective

39:39 effort in order to ameliorate the collateral damage. 60 people have been killed so far, and

39:45 hopefully it will not reach the level of the 3000 civilians in the first wave of 1988. But

39:53 it's a region that the rationale about the use of force is very different. The first element to pay

40:01 attention is international coordination, and it plays a significant role. I guess that here

40:10 the work of the European Union is significant. We shouldn't forget that in the aftermath of the

40:16 coup, actually the US Embassy with the European Union and all their embassies in Yangon somehow

40:24 tried to turn with collective press releases. So somehow, they try to coordinate their actions

40:32 in the field, I guess that this is important and should continue along the same lines. The second

40:39 one is the case of sanctions, so far, the smart sanctions somehow have been in place. Last year, I

40:49 guess that the only few sanctions of the military generals in Myanmar from the United States,

40:57 freezing his assets in the United States is actually to the general that was in charge of the

41:04 operations in the Rakhine State in 2017. So, this is an important message, is this significant or

41:11 not? Maybe he has his money China or other places, but somehow those sanctions that are targeted

41:18 to people should continue. The third element that we should continue paying attention is a

41:29 snowball that is somehow gaining more traction which is somehow an arms embargo,

41:38 there are some conversations within the Security Council, it seems that is not at the top of the

41:44 agenda, it's a little bit wait and see. But it has been part of the conversation arms embargo to

41:53 Myanmar, it's very important that in any collective embargo,

41:57 which is not targeted to individuals, you have everyone on board. If in 2012

42:07 the United States and Europeans were able to bring Iran to the negotiating table it's because

42:12 sanctions were very strategic. And somehow you have to continue develop externalities,

42:18 you don't develop someone somehow feeling the blank that the sanctions are being implemented.

42:25 The fourth element is that it reaches a time where the International non-governmental organizations

42:34 rather than shying away should be more committed, and here I would say that one

42:40 of the key organizations are, I don't recall the acronyms which is lawyers for political prisoners.

42:50 This is a local based NGO that is working and they are openly talking today about the cases of

42:59 1800 people that have been incarcerated. I guess that these are important developments

43:08 that we should pay attention. And the final one, I would say that it's a little matter of concern,

43:15 the position of Malaysia. I guess that it's reckless where they are doing

43:21 in terms of deportations, I guess that there must be some type of pressure on these

43:26 countries and I guess that based on that what would be in rational terms the decision tree,

43:33 these should be consolidated and to see what's the next step. But we should understand very

43:38 clearly that very much this is in hands of the Burmese people and this in hands of the people

43:45 inside a country and we have to be very careful in the way we influence our domestic processes.

43:52 [Westbrook] Yeah, again just to reiterate a couple things that stuck out to me on what you just said

43:57 strategic sanctions targeted, right? Because there's a difference between providing sanctions

44:02 on particular people, particular leaders, and then sanctions on the country as a whole which often

44:08 have the impact of really negatively impacting the people in general, right? Versus

44:15 targeting specific leaders to make them budge. And then the second piece that you ended on, the

44:23 importance of this is something that the Myanmar people are going to have to do, and they're going

44:31 to have to be self-determined on this. It's going to be up to them with international support. But

44:37 the international community can't necessarily orchestrate the entire thing

44:42 from here. Professor Zhang, I'd love to hear your perspectives.

44:46 [Zhang] So, I think that my view is even more pessimistic. So, I don't think much will change in Myanmar

44:54 for a couple of reasons. One reason is that China is willing to work with anyone

44:59 who is willing to work with China. So, as I said that both sides the military

45:07 and the Aung San Suu Kyi party NDP they both cannot afford to become the enemy of China. So

45:15 in terms of foreign policy, they have to work with China. So, from the Chinese perspective,

45:20 which one leads the country does not really matter too much however, it is

45:27 in the interest of China to have a stable Myanmar and that's the traditional Chinese foreign policy

45:34 principle which is, first China does not want to interfere with other country's domestic affairs,

45:44 mainly because China has its own domestic issues to be concerned about.

45:50 And recently, I think yesterday Chinese Foreign Minister said that China is willing to mediate

46:01 in order to solve the differences in Myanmar. So, I think that they will

46:07 probably find some power sharing solution between the military and Aung San Suu Kyi but

46:16 definitely guaranteeing the military dominance in the future Myanmar, I think that's pretty

46:22 sure. And the instruments of sanctions, I guess as long as the military generals are willing to

46:28 work with China, then international sanctions will have little to no effect at all. And also

46:37 from the international perspective, especially from the US perspective, I guess after the

46:44 Cold War in the 1990s, when the US was the only superpower in the world and the US focused a lot

46:55 on international affairs and during that 10 years, the US did not really do anything to rescue

47:03 Aung San Suu Kyi. So, I don't think at this point where the world is trapped in a pandemic

47:12 and the US domestic issues are everywhere, I don't think the Biden administration would

47:20 be focused too much on doing something to make changes in Myanmar given the rise of China in

47:31 the region. So, the global power balance in Asia already changed, and also domestically speaking

47:40 not only in the US, but also in European countries or in general in the developed world, or in

47:47 democracies, there has been a stronger wave of more domestic oriented view. So, I don't think

47:59 much will change in Myanmar, that's my view.

48:04 [Westbrook] Go ahead, sorry.

48:06 [Zhang] Yeah, I also see Amy asked the

48:08 question about Buddhist nationalism. So, Buddhism is the dominant religion in Myanmar, so the monks

48:18 there, they were highly respected in society. And the monks also they represent the general

48:28 public interest, so when you see monks coming onto the streets that means it's a really big issue.

48:38 That's the general truth in Southeast Asia, in Thailand or in Myanmar. So, the monks came onto the

48:48 street in 2007 protests when the government lifted oil subsidies, but this time monks, they were much

48:58 quieter according to news reports. I don't know the political calculation in the minds of the

49:08 religious leaders there, but maybe they think that this time is more about a political struggle

49:14 instead of fighting for the people's interest, I think that may be one of the concerns.

49:21 [Westbrook] Do you imagine seeing the monks potentially playing a role, leveraging the power that they do

49:28 carry? As you talked about, they have this great legitimacy and reverence in Myanmar's culture

49:36 yeah, do you see any role for them?

49:39 [Zhang] I think if more people are killed, then maybe monks will come out onto the street.

49:47 [Westbrook] Earlier I was going to say you preempted a question that I had written down earlier,

49:52 which was why should American representatives, American students, et cetera take an interest in

50:00 Myanmar, and do you think they will? It sounds like from your perspective Professor Zhang,

50:06 at this moment there might not be much from the American side,

50:13 but I'm curious Professor Dominguez, do you agree? Do you have a different perspective on that?

50:22 [Dominguez] Well, I guess that we should be pragmatic, not romanticize what we can do from a distance.

50:34 I guess that if we examine what happened at Suffolk University, and you can go to the Suffolk

50:45 journal archives on the 70s and the 80s. And you will notice that actually students were quite

50:52 active in the 70s about the Vietnam War, extremely active. It was not from the couch, it was going to

51:01 the streets and somehow challenging the police in the streets and they were debating about the

51:11 involvement of the US in Asia. They were quite active in the case of El Salvador another place

51:21 with a Center for Community Engagement, we have taken the students to do community work there.

51:27 And in some cases, they helped to contribute to some change. In the case of El Salvador actually,

51:33 it was a representative of Massachusetts that somehow tried to

51:40 narrow the scope of the Reagan administration in terms of arms transfers to the government

51:46 in El Salvador. So, I guess that what is more important is the local communities in

51:54 Massachusetts should engage active and if you feel that you can contribute write to your senator,

52:02 put pressure on them, that's the most effective vehicle. I guess that they will be able to

52:09 steer the agenda, we have seen cases that in the way that the democracy works in the United States

52:17 with constituents that it can be positive, but also its vicious in many different ways.

52:24 You can use the vicious and somehow put pressure on your representatives at the House or the Senate

52:32 saying, "What are you doing in order to address these issues?" And send letters, you know,

52:37 they have a lot of power in that regard to steer somehow some change. The other one

52:42 is that remain active, this is not the time to stop travelling there, as a general

52:50 we have to see when things go down to certain a stability but this is not the time to say,

52:57 "No, we have to abandon them" No, this is the time to figure out different ways of collaboration.

53:03 We should not forget, and Adam you remember the part of the

53:11 local people working for NGOs there. They have been working for 30 years,

53:17 even under the military Junta not only in the process of democratization, they have been there

53:24 and ...I know that the university there is always that risk management and all these policies that

53:33 they have are rational. But if you're talking at the personal level and you want to engage,

53:38 there are plenty of NGOs that are still some conducting in one way or the other. Sometime

53:44 from Thailand, from other place close by. You can contribute in many different ways, so I guess that

53:51 there are multiple ways to remain active it's just a matter of being willing to be active.

53:59 [Westbrook] I think that's a really great note to end on. The work that we've done there, we've tried to

54:07 do work on the ground with Habitat for Humanity and with local schools in Myanmar, and in Cambodia

54:13 over the last several years. Obviously, we couldn't go this past year because of the

54:16 pandemic. But we're also exploring more ways to stay involved from a distance and finding ways

54:27 as you were mentioning, Professor Dominguez, to get involved with local Burmese communities here.

54:33 I know in Lowell and Lawrence and that Eastern Massachusetts, there is a large Southeast Asian

54:41 population. So, for those interested in staying involved, there will be more information coming

54:48 out from the Center for Community Engagement about how you can get involved if this are

54:53 issues that you're passionate about and interested in and working with. But I really want to thank

54:59 our speakers today. Thank Professor Dominguez, Professor Zhang and Kevin Luna-Torres. Thank

55:05 you for this great thought-provoking conversation today. Like I said at the beginning, I hope this

55:10 is the first of several conversations that you all will have about what's happening in Southeast

55:17 Asia. And I hope today helped to provide a little bit more context for you as you're reading, and as

55:25 you're trying to understand what's happening in Myanmar, so that you're going in with a little

55:30 bit more understanding of what's happening. So, thank you all, have a wonderful rest of your day

55:35 and I'll be looking for more opportunities to get involved. Thanks.