



# Indo-Pacific Monitor No. 15

February 22, 2021 **Michael Sobolik**

**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; China; Turkey; Iran; South Asia; Southeast Asia; Pakistan

## **BURMA'S MILITARY ASSERTS DOMINANCE**

In a move to reassert its dominance over the country's political system, Burma's military staged a coup on February 1st. At issue were the results of the nation's November elections, in which the civilian-led National League for Democracy party won over 80% of available parliamentary seats. In response, the Tatmadaw (as Burma's military is formally known) raised process concerns and flagged what military officials claimed to be over 10.5 million instances of voting irregularities. After civilian authorities dismissed these claims, the Tatmadaw declared a national emergency under Burma's 2008 constitution and, under the leadership of General Min Aung Hlaing, deposed the NLD government and detained State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and dozens of other senior political leaders. The military subsequently brought obscure import violation charges against Suu Kyi that carry a maximum sentence of three years in prison — a sentence that would substantially exceed the current one-year national emergency.

Thus far, the response within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been tepid. Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister, Prawit Wongsuwan, characterized the coup in Burma as "their own business" and "their internal affair," with Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's spokesman echoing the sentiment. Authorities in Malaysia and Indonesia leaned in a bit further, expressing concern and calling on Burma's military to resolve differences peacefully. China, for its part, has been circumspect in its response, calling on all parties to "properly handle their differences under the Constitution and legal framework" — a carefully crafted response, given the military's invocation of constitutional emergency powers. At the international level, both China and Russia have delayed a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning Burma's military for its actions. (*Radio Free Asia*, February 1, 2021; Associated Press, February 2, 2021; *BBC*, February 5, 2021; *New York Times*, February 10, 2021)

## **ISTANBUL, TEHRAN, ISLAMABAD RENEW PLANS FOR ASIAN RAILROAD**

Recently, Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan took steps to resurrect a massive, long-envisioned transnational project: the Istanbul-Tehran-Islamabad (ITI) railroad. The project predates China's current One Belt One Road Initiative, and had its genesis in the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), an entity founded by Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey in 1985 and of which China is not a member. However, the long-moribund project, if fully operationalized, would rebound to China's benefit by supporting OBOR's China-Central Asia-Western Asia Economic Corridor, which runs from Xinjiang to Ankara. Observers also expect that China would look to integrate the railway into the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, its flagship OBOR project. (*Nikkei*, December 29, 2020)

## **THAI PROTESTERS EMBRACE NEW TACTICS**

The protests in Thailand are persisting — and changing shape. In late 2020, Thai protesters signaled their intent to halt large-scale demonstrations against the monarchy — a taboo in Thai political culture — and regroup in 2021. Last month, small pockets of protesters organized smaller flash mobs aimed at garnering publicity through things like replacing the national flag with banners that mock Thailand's *lese-majeste* law in public areas. Combined with social media, these tactics are posing a publicity problem for Thai authorities, who are often unable to arrest the protesters before their actions go viral.

Thus far, law enforcement has arrested dozens of young demonstrators under section 112 of Thailand's penal code, which outlaws defamatory speech about the monarchy. The penalties range from 3 to 15 years behind bars. Although Thai authorities have yet to bring a case against any young protestors to trial, they have begun sentencing older offenders. On January 19th, a court sentenced Anchan Preeleert, a 65-year-old woman, to more than 43 years in prison for sharing social media posts in 2014 and 2015 that criticized the royal family. Although she was arrested in the aftermath of Thailand's 2014 coup, the timing and severity of her sentencing raises questions about how Thai authorities will deal with more recent cases. (*Voice of America*, January 16, 2021; Reuters, January 19, 2021; *CNN*, January 20, 2021)

## **CHINA UPS THE ANTE IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA**

On January 22nd, the standing committee of China's National People's Congress passed a law that authorizes broad use of force in contested waters claimed by Beijing, including the East China Sea and the South China Sea. Notably, the authorization covers engaging in open hostilities with foreign vessels in disputed waters, up to and including boarding and inspecting vessels. The law also authorizes China's coast guard to demolish structures, such as oil drilling platforms, built by rival claimants within Chinese coast guard-designated "exclusion zones."

The law signals a significant escalation on China's part, as the authorized hostile measures go beyond heretofore-favored "gray-zone" intimidation tactics that relied heavily on Chinese fishermen. South China Sea claimant states like the Philippines have resorted on occasion to arresting China's fishermen, but a law enforcement response could prove inadequate in the face of China's coast guard. ( Reuters, January 22, 2021; *South China Morning Post*, January 27, 2021)