

Military Junta Rule: A Picture of Myanmar from 2021-23

Iqram Hossain Mahboob¹

Introduction:

Myanmar, a Southeast Asian nation, was dominated for 50 years by military rule.² February 1, 2023, marked two years of another military (aka Tatmadaw) dictatorship led by junta chief General Min Aung Hlaing. These two years have been harrowing for the people of Myanmar. The military kept oppressing the people who acted against the coup and crippled the democratic government. In response to the oppressive rule, anti-coup activists are being arrested. These arrests have occurred without any warrant, by ransacking houses and beating. While in detention, they are subjected to torture.³ All these violate the rights of the citizens, for which ensuring human rights remains a question. As for now, neither the state of emergency is going to de-escalate, nor is there any intention of the Juntas to compromise its position. This commentary will discuss the history of military rule of Myanmar in brief, facts and figures of the consequences of military rule, threats and opportunities for big powers and their internal and external (both regional and international) challenges. Moreover, the influence of the Burma Act and the roles of ASEAN on the situation in Myanmar will be analyzed.

History of Military coups in Myanmar:

Since its 1948 independence from British colonial authority, Myanmar has spent a significant amount of time under the control of a military junta. Like most of its newly independent neighbors on the Indian subcontinent, the Union of Burma started as a parliamentary democracy. However, representative democracy was only in place until 1962, after which General Ne Win launched a military takeover and ruled for 26 years. After Ne Win resigned in

¹ Iqram Hossain Mahboob is studying Global Studies and Governance at Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB). He is a research intern at the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS).

² “50 Years of Military Rule over in Myanmar (or Burma)”, March 30, 2016, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/myanmar-burma-htin-kyaw-first-president-new-democracy/>.

³ “Myanmar: Detainees Tortured to Crush Opposition to Coup.”, Amnesty International. August 1, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/08/myanmar-detainees-tortured-to-crush-opposition-to-coup/>.

1989, another military junta took power. The nation’s name was changed to the Union of Myanmar by that government, and Rangoon, the capital, was renamed Yangon. The Nay Pyi Taw metropolis, which the military government constructed in the center of Myanmar, became the administrative capital in 2005. In 2011, the military junta was formally overthrown, and for the duration of the transition, Thein Sein, a former army bureaucrat and prime minister, was chosen to serve as president. Myanmar's first countrywide, multiparty elections took place in 2015. The National League for Democracy (NLD) triumphed by a wide margin. Aung Sang Suu Kyi became the de facto head of the government. In February 2021, she was imprisoned and held without contact in a residence in Nay Pyi Taw following the coup. The military has filed roughly a dozen complaints against her, including ones for corruption, unlawful possession of walkie-talkies, and violations of COVID-19 rules, all of which she has denied.⁴

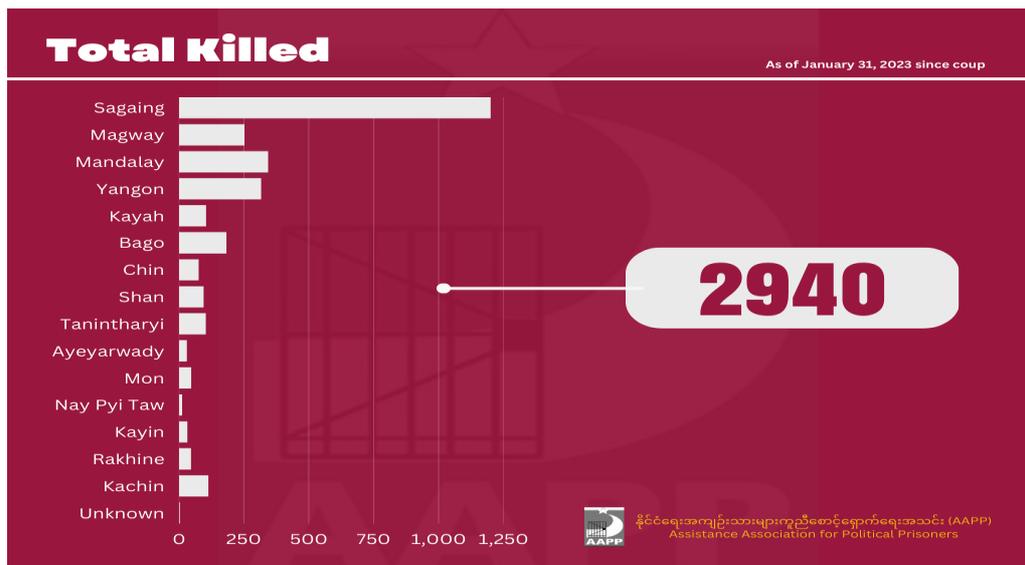
Aim of the Juntas and unintended effects affecting internally:

The main intention of the Juntas was to overthrow the democratic government and set up a military dictatorship. Only three things went according to their plan. They are: putting civilian leaders into jail, hindering the freedom of presses and media, and setting strict rules and orders.⁵ De-facto leader of the NDL, Aung Sang Suu Kyi, is now sentenced to more than 30 years.



⁴ Lindsay Maizland, “Myanmar’s Troubled History: Coups, Military Rule, and Ethnic Conflict,” Council on Foreign Relations, January 31, 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/myanmar-history-coup-military-rule-ethnic-conflict-rohingya>.

⁵ Priscilla A. Clapp and Jason Tower, “Two Years of Myanmar’s Junta: Regional Instability, Surging Organized Crime,” United States Institute of Peace, February 1, 2023. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/02/two-years-myanmars-junta-regional-instability-surgin-organized-crime>.



On the other side, the coup triggered a lot of unintended effects. For instance, the Juntas lost territory to powerful the Ethnic Armed Organization (EAO) and People Defense Forces (PDFs). Key outposts were being installed in important locations by the military for the movement of logistics (food and weapons) in different states of Myanmar. Armed groups claim that in the 17 months since the coup, the junta in Myanmar has lost approximately 90 bases in battles with opposition troops and EAOs.⁶ According to EAOs and conflict monitors, the regime has lost at least 20 bases in Kachin state, 3 in Chin state, 19 in Kayah state, 12 in Kareh state, and 36 in Karen state.⁷ Losing grip over the outposts indicates that the Juntas are getting weaker day by day.

Besides these effects, there were socio-economic downfalls. For example, food shortages, extreme regional instability⁸ and near economic collapse. The reasons behind these were the actions taken by the military to counter the opposition. Strongly mentionable is the amount of launching air strikes. In a civil war that has largely come to a standstill and is currently being fought by an air force with roughly 70 aircraft, predominantly of Russian and Chinese

⁶ “Myanmar Resistance Groups Seized Nearly 90 Junta Outposts since Coup: Reports,” *The Business Standard*, September 19, 2022, <https://www.tbsnews.net/world/south-asia/myanmar-resistance-groups-seized-nearly-90-junta-outposts-coup-reports-499262>.

⁷ The Irrawaddy, “Resistance Groups Seized Nearly 90 Myanmar Junta Outposts Since Coup,” *The Irrawaddy*, September 9, 2022, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/resistance-groups-seized-nearly-90-myanmar-junta-outposts-since-coup.html>

⁸ “Myanmar Food Security Threatens Regional Stability,” 2022. Tea Circle, November 30, 2022, <https://teacircleoxford.com/politics/myanmar-food-security-threatens-regional-stability/>

manufacture, this type of airstrike has emerged as a new and lethal tactic.⁹ Since access to much of Myanmar is now restricted, the full toll of the battle lacks transparency for the outside world, making it difficult to quantify how many people have been killed in such air raids.

The state of emergency in Myanmar is not going to stop easily. Even after that, the juntas will hold sham national elections later this year in an effort to gain international legitimacy. The army has stepped up its attacks on areas on the nation's borders with China, India, Thailand, and Bangladesh controlled by significant EAOs in an effort to suppress opposition and force EAOs into backing this sham.¹⁰ This, in turn, raises security concerns in Myanmar's most important neighbors, especially the Indo-Myanmar-Bangladesh trilateral relations are likely to be stained.



Regional impacts:

⁹ *BBC News*, "Myanmar: Air Strikes Have Become a Deadly New Tactic in the Civil War," January 31, 2023, sec. Asia. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-64397397>

¹⁰ Saifuddin Abdullah, "Sham Election Will Only Prolong Myanmar Civil War: Jakarta Post Contributor," *The Straits Times*, January 12, 2023. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/sham-election-will-only-prolong-myanmar-civil-war-jakarta-post-contributor>

On China

The Myanmar juntas are continuously trying to regain their lost territory from the EAOs. Along the border of China, the military took an attempt to crush two EAOs.¹¹ This resulted in the destabilization of trade routes between the countries along northern Myanmar. On January 8, China opened three border gates for Myanmar. However, after promising to do so, Myanmar refused to open the gates on its side of the border. Concerns over rising COVID-19 infection rates in China led the Myanmar government to halt opening the border gates. The busiest border crossing points for trade between China and Myanmar are Nandaw, Sinphyu (White Elephant), and Manwein. The 105-Mile Border Market in Muse is where the goods that pass through these gates are handled. Following the February 2021 coup and COVID-19 limitations, trade at the 105-Mile Border Market, which had reached over \$4,800 million in the 2019–2020 fiscal year, fell to just over \$300 million in the 2021–2022 fiscal year.¹² These differences in statistics prove that the economic ties between the two countries heavily deteriorated. However, both countries share a good relation in terms of military, for which the Juntas are getting support from China. Even though many countries have withdrawn their investments from Myanmar, China did not do that. China continuously supported the military regime to achieve its strategic position and strengthen its economic corridor.¹³

On India

An attempt to attack one of the EAOs in Chin State alongside Indian border, raised security concerns in Indian territory. The Juntas targeted the headquarter of Chin National Army, who had been acting against the Junta government to restore democracy. As a result, during an airstrike two bombs dropped inside the Indian terrain and the territorial integrity of India was threatened. However, India did not take any actions against it as it wants peace to prevail with

¹¹ Bertil Lintner, “Guest Column | Kokang: Caught Between Myanmar and China,” *The Irrawaddy*, January 18, 2023, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/kokang-caught-between-myanmar-and-china.html>.

¹² “Myanmar Junta Keeps Border Gates with China Closed Following COVID-19 Surge,” *Mizzima Myanmar News and Insight*, January 10, 2023, <https://mizzima.com/article/myanmar-junta-keeps-border-gates-china-closed-following-covid-19-surge>

¹³ Joshua Kurlantzick, “China Goes All in with Support for Myanmar’s Military Regime,” *The Japan Times*, April 14, 2022, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2022/04/14/commentary/world-commentary/china-backs-myanmar/>

Myanmar.¹⁴ It is to be mentioned with utmost importance that one of the origins of India's "Act East Policy" is Myanmar, whose components are now part of the larger multinational Indo-Pacific policy. Since Myanmar is the only nation in Southeast Asia that shares a land border with India, internal stability in that nation becomes crucial to the seamless implementation of India's Act East Policy. A number of battles took place between the Arakan army and in southern Chin State. These grew concerns for India as its transportation routes are being planned with Myanmar along that region.¹⁵

On Thailand:

Due to the heavy fighting between the military and the rebel groups, there has been number of displaced persons flowing into the neighbors of Myanmar. Thailand has become one of the victims as there were intense clashes in the Karen state of Southern Myanmar. Attacks also were there in Payathonzu and Kyandedoe, which is the Thai-Myanmar border area. These resulted Thailand to open their borders as more and more people could enter for shelter.¹⁶ Moreover, the Commander-in-chief of Myanmar Army has been found affiliated with criminal activities in Thailand. For instance, Dr. Tun Min Latt, a well-known Myanmar military arms dealer, and his accomplices were recently detained by Thai officials in Bangkok after being accused of using his enterprises in Tachileik, Shan State, to channel illegal monies. They have enabled atrocity crimes in addition to the alleged crimes for which they were detained and are business partners with the Myanmar military.¹⁷ Not only this, the junta leader's family was directly engaged with Tun Min Latt, a Myanmar tycoon. Acquisition of illegal assets by the son and daughter of the General were found by the Thai officials in Latt's house at Thailand.¹⁸

¹⁴ Islamuddin Sajid, "Myanmar Military Hits Indian Territory during Strikes on Rebel Camp," January 12, 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/myanmar-military-hits-indian-territory-during-strikes-on-rebel-camp/2785697>.

¹⁵ Riddhik Parashar, "Two Years after Myanmar Coup, India's National Security Still at Risk," February 1, 2023, <https://www.eastmojo.com/neighbourhood-watch/myanmar/2023/02/01/two-years-after-myanmar-coup-indias-national-security-still-at-risk/>.

¹⁶ "Fighting Flares between Junta and Rebels in Southern Myanmar," The Star, January 24, 2023, <https://www.thestar.com.my/aseanplus/aseanplus-news/2023/01/24/fighting-flares-between-junta-and-rebels-in-southern-myanmar>

¹⁷ "Myanmar Arms Broker Arrested in Thailand," Myanmar NOW, September 21, 2022, <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/myanmar-arms-broker-arrested-in-thailand>.

¹⁸ Panu Wongcha-um and Poppy McPherson, "Myanmar Junta Chief Family Assets Found in Thai Drug Raid," *Bangkok Post*, January 11, 2023, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2480265/myanmar-junta-chief-family-assets-found-in-thai-drug-raid>.

On Bangladesh

More than a million persecuted Rohingya currently reside in Bangladesh after fleeing a deadly military campaign in Myanmar in August 2017. The Rohingya refugee repatriation is now unheard amidst this coup in Myanmar. Sending the Rohingyas back to their country has become more challenging as the juntas are continuously oppressing the people. The south east part of Bangladesh and its people are now victims of this persecution. Numerous families had to evacuate for safety due to panic caused by intense firing from Myanmar along the hills of Bandarban district of Bangladesh.¹⁹ Efforts to repatriate the Rohingya have failed, mostly as a result of the Myanmar regime's resistance and lack of collaboration, which sparked the issue. Consequently, regional players and the international community have failed to exert pressure on Myanmar's various governments. Particularly, the military government that took power after the uprising has showed little enthusiasm for using repatriation to end the Rohingya situation. The prospect of a sustained Rohingya return becomes more remote now that the Tatmadaw is in charge.²⁰

Transnational Impacts:

Due to the horrendous actions from the military junta, the international community is facing immigration pressure from the fleeing Burmese. More than a million people are thought to have been displaced and refugees crossing international borders, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA).²¹

¹⁹ SM Najmus Sakib, "Fresh Shelling Form Myanmar Forces Hundreds of Bangladeshi Families to Flee Border Areas," October 23, 2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/fresh-shelling-form-myanmar-forces-hundreds-of-bangladeshi-families-to-flee-border-areas/2718649>.

²⁰ Delwar Hossain, "Diminishing Junta Power and Rohingya Repatriation," *New Age*, October 13, 2022, <https://www.newagebd.net/article/183485/diminishing-junta-power-and-rohingya-repatriation>.

²¹ "Humanitarian Crisis Spiraling Two Years into Myanmar Coup - Myanmar | ReliefWeb," January 31, 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/humanitarian-crisis-spiraling-two-years-myanmar-coup>.

A number of growing economies are investing in Myanmar for goods and services. Mentionable are Japan²², Singapore²³ and South Korea²⁴, who are now actually concerned about their investments and future economy.

The Myanmar crisis has rapidly expanded criminal activity involving nationals from other countries. Drug production and trafficking has risen sharply and has become a great concern for the internal security of every nation. As the military regime took power in the post COVID-19 period, crimes were run through online affecting young people from different countries. As a result, these lucrative employment sectors lured them and made subject to unimaginable tortures when refused orders.²⁵ The people are being subjected to work in the ungoverned enclaves. Laos and Cambodia have likewise seen the emergence of lawless enclaves. An estimated 50,000–100,000 persons have been enticed by criminal networks in Cambodia alone into slave-like conditions outside the reach of the law. The number in Myanmar may be two or three times greater, with the majority of them being lured there by social media advertisements offering lucrative office work in Thailand.²⁶

²² “Concern Expressed Over Japanese Companies Continuing Business in Myanmar | Justice For Myanmar,” April 20, 2022, Accessed February 13, 2023, <https://www.justiceformyanmar.org/press-releases/concern-expressed-over-japanese-companies-continuing-business-in-myanmar>.

²³ “Myanmar’s FDI Stands at \$1.4 Billion for 7 Months with Singapore Main Player,” Mizzima Myanmar News and Insight, 26 November, 2022, Accessed February 13, 2023, <https://mizzima.com/article/myanmars-fdi-stands-14-billion-7-months-singapore-main-player>.

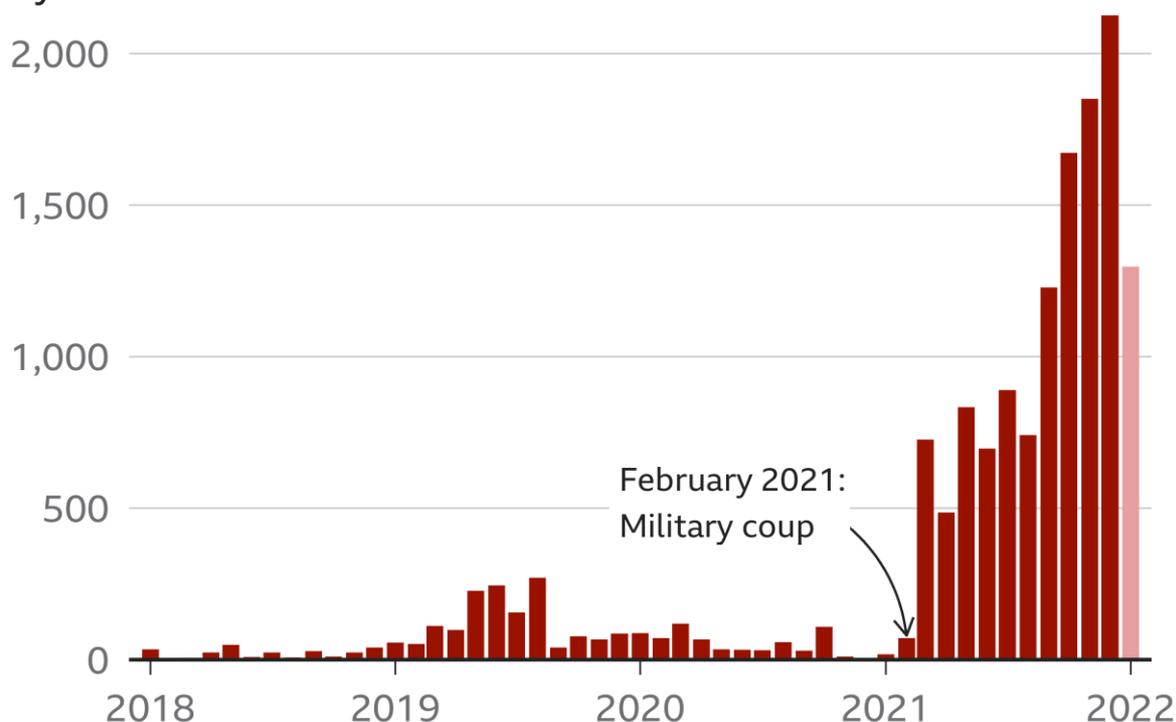
²⁴ Troy Stangarone, “Why South Korea Matters for Post-Coup Myanmar,” *Korea Economic Institute of America*, February 22, 2021, <https://keia.org/the-peninsula/why-south-korea-matters-for-post-coup-myanmar/>.

²⁵ Sushil Rao, “Telangana: Myawaddy Returnees Share ‘water Jail’ Horror,” *The Times of India*, October 5, 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hyderabad/telangana-myawaddy-returnees-share-water-jail-horror/articleshow/94653053.cms>.

²⁶ Priscilla A. Clapp and Jason Tower, “Myanmar’s Criminal Zones: A Growing Threat to Global Security,” United States Institute of Peace, November 9, 2022, Accessed February 13, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/11/myanmars-criminal-zones-growing-threat-global-security>.

The conflict in Myanmar has grown deadlier

Number of reported deaths from conflict and demonstrations, by month



Note: Data up to 21 January 2022

Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)



Fractured interests among the big powers:

Countries having any relations with Myanmar are now emphasizing on their self-interests rather than considering the disastrous impacts by the mil. The junta has recently been planning to hold a sham election to bolster its rule. At one side, some countries are supporting the regime, on the other side, there are sanctions from the super powers. The coup leader Min Aung Hliang continues to hold onto power with the support of his international allies, Russia, China, and to a shorter range, India, despite the swift international condemnation of the power grab and the imposition of sanctions by the United States and the European Union that have isolated Myanmar's military.²⁷ Most notably, around 13 countries are supplying weaponries to Myanmar. Though there are Western sanctions intended to ostracize Myanmar, the USA, along

²⁷ "China, Russia, India Enabling Myanmar's Military Rule: Report," November 2, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/2/china-russia-india-enabling-myanmars-military-report>

with France, India, and Japan are named among the countries.²⁸ They are supplying machineries, raw materials and providing training to the juntas. These in turn are assisting the military to produce lethal weapons, grenades, rocket launchers, anti-aircraft guns, landmines, and so on.

Countries who are supporting the military rule in Myanmar think that the return of juntas will defeat their opponents and will facilitate mutual relations. For example, India and China are all time competitors in the South Asia. For that reason, they want to maintain good ties with Myanmar for gaining geostrategic upper hand. Japan, on the other hand is an East Asian rival of China. Both the countries want their influence in South Asia through investments in Myanmar. Now, the two big powers are also interested in enhancing cooperation with Myanmar. Russia, which maintains tight ties with both China and India, has become more and more popular as a source of high-level political backing and armaments. On the contrary, the US, as a plan for its Indo-Pacific strategy, finds Myanmar to be utmost important geo-strategically.

The Burma Act in play:

The Burma Act of 2021, which seeks to hold the military regime in Myanmar accountable for violations of human rights, is being considered for passage into law by the US House of Representatives in December 2022. The 2023 National Defense Authorization Act's Myanmar clause increases the U.S. government's ability to impose sanctions upon the post-coup ministries and aid the opposition and resistance groups in Myanmar.²⁹

US policies on Myanmar have now become challenging. As per the assistant provisions of the Burma Act, the USA is interpreting on how and what they will provide as non-lethal support to the EAOs and PDFs. The USA, being a democratic country would always want democracy to prevail in other countries. Through Burma Act, the USA can support the pro-democracy groups in Myanmar and help the country to return to democracy. Also, Myanmar is

²⁸ *BBC News*, "Global Firms Help Myanmar's Military Make Weapons, Says Report," January 16, 2023, sec. Asia, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-64250674>.

²⁹ Sauid Ahmed Khan, "Can the BURMA Act Coagulate the Frozen Conflict in Myanmar?" *Modern Diplomacy*, February 1, 2023, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2023/02/02/can-the-burma-act-coagulate-the-frozen-conflict-in-myanmar/>.

strategically important for the Indo-pacific strategy of the USA.³⁰ Moreover, Russia and China will be under pressure as they support the present regime. The people of Myanmar are hopeful that the role of USA would play great in reforming the democratic government of Myanmar.³¹

Role of ASEAN:

The Myanmar junta signed the Five-Point Consensus (5PC) at an urgent meeting in Jakarta in April, 2021, just after two months of the military overtook the power. Indonesia, which is this year's ASEAN rotating chair, says it will pressure the junta to uphold the 5PC. It should be clear to everyone by now that the generals in command in Naypyidaw have no intention of carrying out the agreement since, more than 20 months later, the military administration has not complied with any of the five conditions.³²

Realistically, ASEAN can't do much more to help Myanmar, not just because it is constrained by the "non-interference" principle³³ but also because the military junta has refused to accept outside assistance, including from its neighbors, even as it continues to kill and persecute its own citizens who disagree with its rule.

Conclusion:

Restoring peace and security in Myanmar has become an urgent need for the Southeast Asian region to avoid global threats. Situation in Myanmar has already created adverse impacts both internally and regionally. Democracy has been disrupted and various powers are utilizing the country for facilitating their interests. The forces, namely EAOs and PDFs, who are fighting

³⁰ Pawan Amin, "Myanmar in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy," <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Aug/26/2002840261/-1/-1/1/AMIN%20&%20TOURANGBAM.PDF>

³¹ Michael Martin, "What the BURMA Act Does and Doesn't Mean for U.S. Policy in Myanmar," February 6, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-burma-act-does-and-doesnt-mean-us-policy-myanmar>.

³² Endy Bayuni, "ASEAN Needs to Look beyond Myanmar's Five-Point Consensus," The Jakarta Post, January 9, 2023, Accessed February 13, 2023. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/opinion/2023/01/08/asean-needs-to-look-beyond-myanmars-five-point-consensus.html>.

³³ Mieke Molthof, "ASEAN and the Principle of Non-Interference," *E-International Relations*, February 8, 2012, <https://www.e-ir.info/2012/02/08/asean-and-the-principle-of-non-interference>

against the juntas are now trying to form independent states.³⁴ At this, the sovereign authority of Myanmar is being questioned. Military might has overpowered the intellectual ability in the decision-making processes. As a result of the absence of peoples' mandate, adverse effects will be there more often. Amidst the military led domination, politics has been underestimated. All the criteria for good governance have been hampered, for which the citizens' rage is turning into a state rebellion. Moreover, the actions of the juntas are being addressed as war crimes, because the basic human rights are violated. People of Myanmar are not able to speak for themselves, their rights and choices. Besides refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, immigration pressures and so on will be a heavy toll on international community. Myanmar's economy will be crippled because of more budget on excessive military spending. Moreover, other countries would not go for commerce, trade, and diplomatic relations. Therefore, all these factors would impact the overall development of the nation.

Recommendations:

- a. Following the carrot and stick policy, economic and military sanctions must be brought over Myanmar. For example, the recent measures likely to be taken by UK and Canada to prohibit the export, sell, supply, or shipment of aviation fuel to the Myanmar military can be an effective initiative to disrupt the Juntas' cruel activities.
- b. ASEAN should play a revolutionary role to stop the crisis in Myanmar. If required, it should expel Myanmar from the membership and handicap the country to restrain from further atrocities.
- c. The best democracies should come forward to overthrow the military dictatorship and hand over the power to a democratic party.
- d. The United Nations, the European Union and other Inter Governmental Organizations along with powerful countries should pressurize Myanmar to solve the Rohingya refugee crisis.
- e. The United Nations Human Rights Council should promptly act to safeguard the basic human rights of the citizens of Myanmar, which are being openly subdued by the Juntas.

³⁴ Michael Martin, "News from the Front: Observations from Myanmar's Revolutionary Forces," December 5, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/news-front-observations-myanmars-revolutionary-forces>

- f. Countries should provide training to the EAOs, PDFs and all the anti-coup activists to de-escalate the dominance of the military. For example, strong militarily trained countries can help the revolutionary forces by improving their command structure and supplying with advanced weaponries.
- g. Proper steps to be taken to address and asses the regional lawless zones, governance gaps and ultimately to shut off the criminal opportunities such openings create.