

# CIVICUS MONITOR WATCHLIST: MYANMAR

OVERVIEW OF RECENT RESTRICTIONS  
TO CIVIC FREEDOMS





Myanmar was initially added to the CIVICUS Monitor Watchlist in February 2021, when its military seized power in a coup and arrested the civilian leaders of the national and state governments. More than four months on, fundamental freedoms remain under severe attack.

The military junta has arbitrarily arrested and detained activists, protesters and journalists, with some being tortured or ill-treated in prison. An estimated 863 have been killed and 4,880 currently detained, according to the [Assistance Association for Political Prisoners](#) (AAPP) as of 14th June 2021. The junta has also continued its attack on peaceful protesters and continues to disrupt the internet through blackouts. Civil servants who supported the civil disobedience movement have been suspended from their jobs.

While the UN and numerous countries condemned the coup and some members of the international community such as the EU and US imposed [sanctions](#), there have been weak regional efforts to address the crisis or halt the serious human rights violations. ASEAN adopted a relatively weak [consensus agreement](#) to end the violence and open up dialogue, following a meeting of the regional body in Jakarta on 24 April 2021, but progress has been virtually non-existent.

The junta has [increased attacks](#) against Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) who have backed the civil disobedience movement with expanded airstrikes on Kachin and Karen states, and continued shelling of villages in other regions. According to the Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma (Altsean-Burma), during May 2021 alone, security forces killed at least 125 civilians and displaced over 150,000.

## ARREST AND PERSECUTION OF ACTIVISTS

Since the coup in February 2021, thousands have been [arbitrarily arrested and detained](#). They include human rights defenders, trade unionists, student activists, poets, writers, filmmakers and monks. Many people have been taken in terrifying night-time raids. According to [reports](#), in pursuit of activists and protesters who may be hiding indoors, entire families, including children, were lined up on the street at gunpoint while their IDs were checked. Some have been abducted off the streets and held in secret facilities out of contact with their families and denied access to lawyers. Many activists are facing baseless charges including ‘treason’ which is punishable by up to 20 years in prison or ‘incitement’ which is punishable by up to three years in prison.

Hundreds of political prisoners have been held in Insein Prison, one of Myanmar’s most notorious jails, on the outskirts of Yangon, Myanmar’s largest city. There have been [reports](#) of torture and ill-treatment during interrogation, and of deaths in custody. Political prisoners have been crammed into a single room where it was difficult to move and were forced to eat from the concrete floor with their hands cuffed behind their backs. Human rights groups have [reported](#) the dehumanising treatment of women detainees.

## ABOUT THE CIVICUS MONITOR

The CIVICUS Monitor is a research tool that provides quantitative and qualitative data on the state of civil society and civic freedoms in 196 countries. The data is generated through a collaboration with more than 20 civil society research partners, and input from a number of independent human rights evaluations.

The data provides the basis for civic space ratings, which are based on up-to-date information and indicators on the state of freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression. Countries can be rated as:

CLOSED

REPRESSED

OBSTRUCTED

NARROWED

OPEN

The [CIVICUS Monitor](#) rates civic space – the space for civil society – in [Myanmar](#) as “**Repressed**”.



## **EXCESSIVE USE OF FORCE DURING PROTESTS AND UNLAWFUL KILLINGS**

Since the coup, mass protests and strikes have been taking place across Myanmar by the civil disobedience movement (CDM). Doctors, teachers and other civil servants have mobilised, alongside students and the workers' movement. In order to avoid arrest, protests became progressively more [creative](#).

In response, the Myanmar security forces intensified their [crackdown on protests](#) using violent crowd dispersal techniques like water cannon, tear gas, rubber bullets and sound grenades, and escalating to battlefield weapons including assault rifles, light machine guns, sniper rifles and live grenades. Large numbers of battle-hardened troops were deployed into towns and cities to quell the protests. Establishing forward operating bases in schools, universities and hospitals, these units have been terrorising the public by using harsh tactics.

Facing increasing violence from the security forces, demonstrators attempted to protect themselves with [homemade shields](#) and by constructing barricades across roads. Despite this, hundreds have been killed and thousands injured. As of 26th May 2021, it was [reported](#) that at least 73 children were killed by the junta from 15th February to 15th May.

Scores of activists have also fled from the cities to other regions for training and to learn battle tactics from ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) that have fought against the military for decades.

## **TARGETING OF JOURNALISTS**

Journalists are being hunted down and targeted by the military. On 4th April 2021, the authorities published their [first list](#) of journalists wanted for providing information about the pro-democracy protests. At least 19 journalists were named. According to [reports](#), as of 21st May 2021, 88 journalists have been arrested since the coup, the majority detained during newsroom raids or while covering anti-coup street protests. More than half remain in detention and 33 are in hiding. Two have been released on bail. Dozens have fled the country or have sought refuge in territories controlled by ethnic armed organisations.

Many journalists detained face charges under Article 505(a) of the penal code, a broad provision that criminalises the dissemination of information or "fake news" that could agitate or cause security forces or officials to mutiny. Convictions under that provision allow for a maximum three-year prison sentence.

## **INTERNET AND TV DISRUPTION**

The internet shutdowns, which began following the coup, have now reached a [new level of severity](#). Multiple telecoms companies have been ordered to shut off various communications services including mobile data, roaming and public wi-fi for varying lengths of time. The efforts appear designed to interfere with protestor organising and to make it harder for Myanmar citizens, journalists and human rights activists to broadcast to the rest of the world what's happening on the ground.

The Myanmar junta added a [ban on satellite television](#) to existing restrictions on the internet, tightening its grip over information in the country. On 4th May 2021, the military announced that anyone using satellite dishes to watch television faces up to one year in prison or a fine of K500,000 (USD 320).

In addition to the communications blackout and physical violence, Myanmar's military is using surveillance drones, phone hacking devices and software for cracking personal computer security as part of a widespread digital offensive against the opposition.



## THE FOLLOWING ARE RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY:

- Call upon the Myanmar military regime to respect the will of the people as expressed by the results of the general elections of November 2020, to end the state of emergency and to restore the elected civilian government.
- Call upon the military regime to release all individuals arbitrarily detained, including government officials and politicians, human rights defenders, journalists, civil society members.
- Immediately refrain from the use of excessive force and firearms against protesters and respect people's right to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly.
- Urge the military regime to allow unfettered Internet access, including on all mobile phone networks and lift all restrictions on access to media sites, social media platforms and refrain from imposing any further restrictions against use of the internet.
- Raise concerns publicly in multilateral fora including the upcoming Human Rights Council.
- Deny recognition of the military junta and instead engage with the National Unity Government (NUG) as the legitimate government of Myanmar, including in multilateral fora such as the UN Human Rights Council and General Assembly.
- Urge the Security Council to immediately impose a comprehensive arms embargo on Myanmar and cooperate fully with UN mandates.
- Take proactive steps in providing humanitarian assistance, particularly in ethnic and ceasefire areas, and ensure there will be no deportation of those fleeing the repression in Myanmar.
- Provide material and diplomatic support to civil society, journalists and activists at risk.