

## Research Briefing

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# One year on from Myanmar's military coup

## Summary

Myanmar's military, the Tatmadaw, [seized power on February 1, 2021](#). Since then, thousands of civilians and soldiers have been killed and many more arrested, including civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

This briefing looks at the events over the last year, and the international response to the crisis, including:

- The military's role in Myanmar;
- The 2021 coup;
- The protest movement in response;
- The growth in armed resistance to the military;
- The formation of an opposition National Unity Government (NUG);
- The NUG's declaration of war and its interaction with armed ethnic groups;
- The economic and humanitarian crisis in Myanmar;
- Aung San Suu Kyi's convictions;
- UK sanctions on Myanmar; and
- What happens next.

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## One year on from Myanmar's military coup

### The military's role in Myanmar

Myanmar's military first seized power in a coup in 1962. A transition to democracy began in 2008 under a new constitution drafted by the military, and nationwide parliamentary elections were held in 2015.

The 2008 constitution still granted wide powers to the military, and it maintained its influence by controlling significant parts of the economy.

### The 2021 military take over

The progress of democratisation was abruptly halted when the Tatmadaw seized power in the February 2021 coup, only three months after Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party achieved a [landslide victory in parliamentary elections](#). The military claimed there was widespread fraud in the election to justify the coup, [claims not backed up by international observers](#).<sup>1</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi, the country's de facto leader, along with other senior members of the NLD were detained, and the [internet and social media was shut down](#).

### Protest movement grows

Protests against the military takeover started within days of the coup, building to [mass protests](#), as part of a wider peaceful civil disobedience movement that included [strikes and blocking of roads](#).

In April 2021, ousted NLD members of parliament, protest leaders, and activists from several minority groups established a parallel government known as the National Unity Government (NUG).

A spokesman for the NUG said at the time [its objective was to end violence, restore democracy and build a "federal democratic union"](#).<sup>2</sup> They also said the NUG intended to form a federal army and were in talks with minority ethnic forces. In a July 2021 report, the Foreign Affairs Select Committee [called for the UK Government to support to the NUG, and treat it as a "government-in-waiting"](#) (pdf).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Myanmar coup: Does the army have evidence of voter fraud?](#), BBC News, 5 February 2021.

<sup>2</sup> [Opponents of Myanmar coup form unity government, aim for 'federal democracy'](#), Reuters, 16 April 2021.

<sup>3</sup> [The UK Government's Response to the Myanmar Crisis](#), Foreign Affairs Committee, HC 203, 13 July 2021, p6.

## Armed resistance

The opposition to the Tatmadaw has now morphed from protests into organised armed resistance.

In the months following the mass protests, which were largely ended by a crackdown by security forces, civilians, mostly young adults [started to take up weapons](#), joining local militia groups.<sup>4</sup>

Many of these young people are from the Bamar ethnic majority coming from the central plains and cities. This is the first time in Myanmar's recent history that the armed forces have faced violent opposition from young Bamars.<sup>5</sup>

The Tatmadaw has been engaged in [military operations against armed ethnic groups for decades](#) in Myanmar's border states, home to most of its minority ethnic populations.<sup>6</sup> These include operations in Rakhine state, home to most of the Rohingya Muslims, [nearly 900,000 of whom have fled to Bangladesh](#).<sup>7</sup>

The civilian-led government initiated a peace process in 2011 that resulted in many armed groups signing ceasefires. Most groups suspended negotiations after the 2021 coup and now many have resumed attacks on Tatmadaw forces, which has escalated military operations in return.

## National Unity Government declares war

In September 2021, the NUG declared war on the military junta and formed an armed division known as the People's Defence Force, though it mostly [appears to be an umbrella organisation](#) for the various militias.<sup>8</sup>

The NUG and armed ethnic groups have a shared enemy in the Tatmadaw. However, the International Crisis Group (ICG) has said a united front comprising all of Myanmar's armed ethnic groups joining the NUG against the military regime is "[not a realistic prospect, given their diversity and the historical rivalries among them](#)".<sup>9</sup> But, according to the ICG at least four groups have emerged as important partners of the parallel government, and another half-dozen or so have engaged with the NUG to some degree.

Such is the rise in violence, [with over 2,000 people reportedly killed in December 2021 alone](#),<sup>10</sup> that some observers, including UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, have said the conflict should be labelled a civil war that would "[echo the Syria situation](#)" if

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<sup>4</sup> [The deadly battles that tipped Myanmar into civil war](#), BBC News, 1 February 2021

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> [Myanmar's Coup Shakes Up Its Ethnic Conflicts](#), International Crisis Group, 12 January 2022.

<sup>7</sup> [The Rohingya humanitarian crisis and the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic](#), Commons Library, 22 September 2020.

<sup>8</sup> [Myanmar's Coup Shakes Up Its Ethnic Conflicts](#), International Crisis Group, 12 January 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> [The deadly battles that tipped Myanmar into civil war](#), BBC News, 1 February 2021

something wasn't done.<sup>11</sup> Though observers have highlighted [the dynamics in Myanmar are very different to those in Syria](#).<sup>12</sup>

## Economic and humanitarian crises

Disruption from the coup and the Covid-19 pandemic have severely weakened Myanmar's economy. The World Bank forecast that [Myanmar's economy would shrink around 18%](#) between October 2020 and September 2021.<sup>13</sup>

The UN Development Program (UNDP) predicted Myanmar [was set to return to levels of deprivation not seen since 2005](#), before democratic reforms began, and that urban poverty would triple.<sup>14</sup>

Clashes between the military and armed groups have resulted in a huge rise in internally displaced people, [at least 425,000 people have been newly uprooted over the last 12 months](#).<sup>15</sup> Humanitarian access has also been restricted as the military [severs internal supply routes and lays siege to towns](#) to try to quell armed resistance.<sup>16</sup>

The UK Government has said over 14 million people are in humanitarian need, and since the coup [it has provided £49.4m of assistance to people in need](#), with humanitarian programmes reaching over 600,000 people.<sup>17</sup>

## Aung San Suu Kyi convicted

Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been in detention since the February coup, was [convicted in December 2021](#) of inciting dissent and breaking Covid rules. Her sentence of four years was reduced to two by military leader Min Aung Hlaing.<sup>18</sup>

U Win Myint, President at the time of the coup, and U Myo Aung, the mayor of the capital Naypyidaw, were convicted of similar charges alongside her.

In January 2022, Suu Kyi was [sentenced to another four years in jail](#) for the illegal possession and import of walkie-talkies and breaking Covid-19 rules.<sup>19</sup> She is accused of several other charges which have yet to come to court. The

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Kim Jolliffe, [Twitter](#), 4 May 2021, accessed 2 February 2022.

<sup>13</sup> World Bank, [Myanmar Economy Expected to Contract by 18 Percent in FY2021: Report](#), 23 July 2021.

<sup>14</sup> UNDP Asia and Pacific, [Impact of the Twin Crises on Human Welfare in Myanmar](#), 1 December 2021.

<sup>15</sup> [Multiple crises spiral in Myanmar one year after coup](#), The New Humanitarian, 1 February 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> HCWS574, [Myanmar Coup Anniversary](#), 1 February 2022.

<sup>18</sup> [Aung San Suu Kyi: Myanmar court sentences ousted leader in widely criticised trial](#), BBC News, 6 December 2021.

<sup>19</sup> [Aung San Suu Kyi: Ousted Myanmar leader jailed for another four years](#), BBC News, 10 January 2022.

trials have been widely condemned, Michelle Bachelet [described the December 2021 hearing as a "sham trial"](#).<sup>20</sup>

Thousands of [civilians were also arrested](#) in the months after the coup,<sup>21</sup> as well as civil society figures such as trade union leaders, [political activists](#),<sup>22</sup> and [journalists](#).<sup>23</sup> The monitoring group Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, state that as of 1 February 2022, [1507 people have been killed since the coup](#), and a total of 8899 people are currently under detention.<sup>24</sup>

## UK sanctions

Before the February 2021 coup, the UK had imposed sanctions on 16 senior members of Myanmar's military and police for alleged crimes against the Rohingya. The Government also kept in place the arms embargo that it imposed as an EU member.

In February 2021, the Government announced [two rounds](#) of sanctions on senior military figures involved in the coup in February 2021,<sup>25</sup> with further sanctions in [April](#) and [January 2022](#),<sup>26,27</sup> bringing the [total number currently targeted to 27](#) (pdf).<sup>28</sup>

These sanctions freeze any assets held by these people in the UK and bar them from travelling there. These sanctions may have limited utility if the individuals don't hold assets in the UK, or the desire to travel to the countries sanctioning them.

During 2021 the Government also announced several rounds of sanctions on Myanmar-based companies, including [military owned conglomerates](#),<sup>29</sup> state-owned enterprises responsible for [extracting gemstones](#),<sup>30</sup> [timber and](#)

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<sup>20</sup> UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, [Myanmar: Bachelet deplores conviction and sentencing of Aung San Suu Kyi](#), 6 December 2021.

<sup>21</sup> [Myanmar military junta arrests prominent trade union leader](#), The Guardian, 19 April 2021.

<sup>22</sup> [Myanmar junta arrests 88 Generation leader Ko Jimmy](#), Myanmar Now, 24 October 2021.

<sup>23</sup> [How Myanmar became the world's second-worst jailer of journalists](#), Committee to Protect Journalists, 8 December 2021.

<sup>24</sup> [The deadly battles that tipped Myanmar into civil war](#), BBC News, 1 February 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, [UK sanctions Myanmar military generals for serious human rights violations](#), 18 February 2021; and HCWS802, [Update on Myanmar](#), 25 February 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation HM Treasury, [Financial Sanctions Notice: Myanmar](#), 21 June 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, [UK announces new sanctions against Myanmar ahead of 1-year anniversary of coup](#), 31 January 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation HM Treasury, [CONSOLIDATED LIST OF FINANCIAL SANCTIONS TARGETS IN THE UK](#), Last updated 31 January 2022, accessed 2 February 2022.

<sup>29</sup> HCWS898, [Myanmar update](#), 25 March 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, [UK announces sanctions on gemstone company linked to the military regime in Myanmar](#), 17 May 2021.

pearls,<sup>31</sup> as well as [companies said to have extensive links to military](#).<sup>32</sup> Many of these sanctions were placed in concert with UK allies such as the United States and Canada.

Such sanctions may make life more uncomfortable for the Tatmadaw. However, while countries such as [China, Thailand and Singapore are still willing to invest heavily in the country](#), they are not likely to be decisive.<sup>33</sup>

## What next?

The Tatmadaw has claimed it plan to hold elections in mid-2023, after which it will supposedly hand over power to an elected government.

As the military is looking to ensure it holds the balance of power by [planning to dissolve the NLD and introducing a new electoral system](#) to prevent the emergence of any dominant party, it seems unlikely that elections can be held while large parts of the country are suffering from armed conflict.<sup>34</sup>

Neither the Tatmadaw nor the various armed resistance groups [appear to have the resources to defeat the other](#).<sup>35</sup> Without a concerted and coordinated international peace effort, it seems likely that the conflict will grow in the months and years, pushing Myanmar further into crisis.

## Further reading

- [Myanmar's Coup Shakes Up Its Ethnic Conflicts](#), International Crisis Group, 12 January 2022
- [Myanmar's Troubled History: Coups, Military Rule, and Ethnic Conflict](#), Council on Foreign Relations, 31 January 2022.
- [One Year On from the Myanmar Coup](#), International Crisis Group, 25 January 2022.
- [The deadly battles that tipped Myanmar into civil war](#), BBC News, 1 February 2022.

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<sup>31</sup> Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, [Foreign Secretary announces further sanctions on companies linked to Myanmar's military regime](#), 21 June 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, [Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab announces new Myanmar sanctions](#), 2 September 2021.

<sup>33</sup> [Myanmar coup: Could sanctions on the military ever work?](#), BBC News, 9 April 2021

<sup>34</sup> [One Year On from the Myanmar Coup](#), International Crisis Group, 25 January 2022.

<sup>35</sup> [Myanmar's National Unity Government and Its Prospects for Military Victory](#), Wilson Center: Asia Dispatches, 22 June 2021

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