



SUPPORTING  
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT  
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

# Enabling Environment Snapshot

Myanmar/Burma

June 2025



## Context

On 1 February 2021, the military junta, led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, attempted to overthrow the government in response to a landslide [election victory](#) by the National League for Democracy (NLD), which they deemed [unconstitutional](#) and fraudulent. The attempted coup halted [Burma's](#) decade-long democratic transition and sparked large-scale [protests nationwide](#). In the weeks following the attempted coup, tens of thousands of people, including health workers, bankers and teachers, joined a peaceful civil disobedience movement (CDM), refusing to work until the elected government returned to power. The illegal junta responded with a [brutal crackdown](#) on protests by assaulting, arresting and killing activists, journalists, doctors and civilians, drawing condemnation from the United Nations, foreign governments, and rights organisations. This has led to more restricted civic space, and limitations on, or even the absence of, human rights in Burma.

By April 2021, ousted elected lawmakers, protest leaders, and minority group activists formed a parallel government in exile called the [National Unity Government](#) (NUG) to unite people against the junta. The NUG aimed to foster unity among ethnic groups, create a federal democratic Burma, and gain international support. In September, they declared war on the junta and established an armed division called the People's Defense Force (PDF). Many civilians joined the PDF and took up armed resistance by joining Ethnic Resistance Organisations (EROs).

In the months that followed the attempted coup, conflict spread nationwide. As the junta gradually lost territorial control to resistance forces, it continued to commit [widespread atrocities](#) and increased the use of air/drone strikes to target civilian populations. By the end of 2024, the junta fully [controlled only 21%](#) of the country. Four years of conflict, along with the junta's economic interference, have resulted in the country's [economic collapse](#), causing inflation and corruption, which are expected to leave about 15 million people facing [acute food insecurity](#) in 2025. As of 1 June 2025, there had been at least [54,813 junta attacks](#) against civilians, resulting in at least 14,602 civilian fatalities, and displacing over [3.5 million people](#).

The [2008 constitution](#), often referred to as the "military constitution", was drafted without civilian input. It reserves [25% of parliamentary seats](#) for the military, in addition to seats won by the military's USDP proxy party, granting them [significant powers](#) and special privileges, thus [limiting civic space](#). Following the 2021 attempted coup, the junta declared a [state of emergency](#) for one year in February before extending it every six months. In January 2025, the junta extended the state of emergency for a [seventh time](#). The recent extension of the state of emergency bought the junta time to [prepare its sham elections](#), planned for December 2025 and January 2026. By organising sham elections, the junta hopes to give a veneer of [legitimacy to its illegal control over the country](#). In July 2024, Min Aung Hlaing appointed himself as [acting president](#) of Burma, while still maintaining his position of Commander-in-Chief of the junta, which allowed him to exercise broad extra-constitutional powers to suppress civic space through [legislation](#) and attempt to uphold the junta's governance as lawfully legitimate. As the junta prepares for its sham election, it will continuously restrict civic spaces, especially when preparing for polling stations. After the sham elections, the junta will further restrict civic spaces under the guise of a "democratic system".

# 1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

Despite constitutional guarantees of freedoms such as peaceful expression, assembly, and association ([Articles 354a, b, c](#)), these rights have been constantly repressed in Burma. The junta has systematically targeted civil society actors through harassment, arbitrary arrests, and killings. Following the 2021 attempted coup, the targeting of civil society actors and the erosion of freedoms increased significantly. The junta has not only suppressed the freedom of assembly through unlawful arrests and killings of protesters, journalists, and opponents, but also enacted laws that further restricted other freedoms. Some of these include the 2022 “[CSO law](#)”, the 2024 “[Conscription law](#)”, and the 2025 “[Cybersecurity law](#)”.

Burma has a [long-standing record](#) of detaining political prisoners. Following the 2021 attempted coup, the number of political prisoners [rose drastically](#), with many journalists targeted for their reporting. Additionally, many prominent political leaders and cultural figures were specifically singled out. Thousands were detained on [false charges](#) and indicted under secret military tribunals without fair trials or legal representation, resulting in harsh prison sentences, including the death penalty. [Many](#) have been sexually assaulted, tortured, or killed in detention. The junta primarily [laid down charges](#) under the penal code for Incitement ([Section 505\(a & b\)](#)) and Treason ([Section 124 \(A, C & D\)](#)), and the 2014 [Counter-Terrorism Law](#) to prosecute civilians. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists’ (CPJ) [special report for 2025](#), the junta had imprisoned at least eight journalists in 2024 alone, with sentences ranging from 15 years to life imprisonment. In 2023, photojournalist [Sai Zaw Thaike](#) was handed a 20-year sentence for sedition while covering a cyclone that resulted in the deaths of over 140 individuals, including many Rohingya. Reports indicate that, since January 2025, he endured “daily physical abuse” and “retaliatory torture” while being held in Insein Prison in Yangon. The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) also [reported](#) that since the 2021 attempted coup, the illegal junta has arrested and imprisoned “over 220 journalists from almost 100 media outlets, charging 175 with a crime under nine separate laws, mainly incitement, ‘false news’, and weaponised counter-terrorism provisions”. Women also faced higher charges and conviction rates. Additionally, based on press freedom and safety, CPJ ranks Myanmar as the [third-worst country](#) for journalists, after China and Israel.

As of 5 June 2025, the [Association for Political Prisoners](#) (AAPP) reported that since the attempted coup, the junta has arrested at least 29,231 political prisoners, with 22,092 still in custody. According to the [UN](#), at least 1,853 people have also died in custody. This is part of an ongoing pattern of repression against freedom of peaceful assembly and expression in Burma – a trend also reported by [CIVICUS](#), [Human Rights Watch](#), and [Freedom House](#) in their latest reports on the country. In February 2024, the junta also revived the dormant “[Conscription Law](#)” to forcibly conscript civilians into its ranks. Since its enactment, the junta has further increased its arbitrary detention and has even selected conscripts from [immigration detention centres](#) in Thailand. Not only has the junta’s violence largely disabled the enabling environment (EE) inside Burma, but they have also curtailed the civic space of Burmese activists and CDMers abroad. The junta has targeted dissidents abroad in acts of [Transnational Repression](#) (TNR), detaining, forcibly disappearing, killing, and terrorising them, particularly in neighbouring countries.

## 2. Supportive legal framework for the work of civil society actors

Burma's 2008 constitution guarantees 25% of parliamentary seats to the military, ensuring its dominance over the country's legal and political systems. Various clauses also [grant the military oversight](#) over the Executive, Legislature, and Judiciary branches, enabling it to veto any constitutional amendments that could limit its influence. The Commander-in-Chief controls key executive decisions and is [immune](#) from civilian judicial oversight, while military personnel enjoy broad impunity under the law. This constitutional framework places the military above legal accountability, allowing it to shape and enforce laws without checks or opposition. As a result, despite Burma's democratic transition, which started in 2010, the junta has still heavily dominated the civilian administration and eroded freedoms without impunity.

Following the 2021 attempted coup, the erosion of freedoms deepened significantly. The junta not only targeted dissidents with total impunity but also [weaponized the legal system](#) to "justify the arrest and oppression of those who oppose them". In the absence of meaningful opposition, the junta enacted and revised repressive, ambiguous, and overly broad laws, manipulating the legal framework to manufacture legitimacy for the suppression and targeting of civil society actors. One such example of this legal repression came in October 2022, when the junta enacted the new [Organization Registration Law](#), commonly referred to as the "CSO law". This law requires non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations (CSOs) and associations to register with local junta authorities in order to operate. It also mandates that these groups disclose their funding sources and operational areas to the junta. Noncompliance with the law can result in fines of around USD 2,400 and up to five years of imprisonment, further constraining the ability of civil society to function. Following the law's enactment, organisations were given just 60 days to register with the junta's Ministry of Home Affairs. However, many have refused to comply, viewing the regime as illegitimate and the law as a tool of control. An activist from [Global Insight](#) stated that his organisation would never be able to register due to its role in reporting human rights violations. He said that the CSO law is an attempt to 'control' such organizations "so that their [the junta] violations will not be reported". [Anne Ramberg](#), Co-Chair of the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute, warned that the law would hinder humanitarian assistance and lead to further suffering, a pattern commonly seen in autocratic regimes.

Additionally, the "CSO Law" prohibits organisations from providing services to groups deemed opponents of the regime or from operating in regions outside of the junta's control. It criminalises contact with groups the junta labels as "terrorist" or "unlawful," including many ethnic armed organisations that CSOs must engage with to operate in conflict-affected areas, or areas in which the junta no longer controls. Personnel from organisations found in violation face up to five years in prison. Registration is granted only if such contact is avoided, giving the junta full control over who can operate. As a result, many CSOs and NGOs are effectively blocked from forming partnerships or accessing international funding, threatening their survival. Many international donors also require their local partners to be legally registered, meaning organisations that refuse to comply with the junta's law struggle to secure vital funding.

In March/April 2025, during the [Sagaing earthquake](#), the junta denied local and international relief workers access to the hardest hit areas. They also [delayed rescue efforts](#) by forcing locals to register with authorities by submitting lists of volunteers and donation items. This [strategy](#), of overwhelming responders with extensive bureaucratic procedures, is commonly used by the junta to control and limit the activities of local and international aid organisations in the country.

### 3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Funding for civil society in Burma has sharply declined following the attempted coup, negatively impacting civic freedoms. The junta has also consistently [weaponized](#) and politicised aid during and after natural disasters, including Cyclone Moka (2023), Typhoon Yagi (2024), and the Sagaing earthquake (2025). A 2025 report published by the NUG titled “[Aid Under Attack](#)” reveals that the junta has deliberately used disaster relief as a tool for political leverage. Since the 2021 attempted coup, the junta “[has obstructed](#), postponed, and distorted humanitarian assistance to benefit its own agenda”. By manipulating bureaucratic process, aid was intentionally allocated to regions that supported the junta’s interests, while external aid was framed as acts of kindness from the junta.

Despite several [sanctions](#) and public statements, large parts of the international community, including the UN and ASEAN, have continued to collaborate with the junta and refuse to engage with the NUG, community groups, or regional establishing governance bodies, which are the backbones of Burma’s future. This means that resources and aid are largely facilitated through junta channels, denying civil society groups’ ability to reach and utilise them. During the recent [2025 Sagaing earthquake](#), the junta confiscated aid and obstructed response workers from reaching certain areas. [Zachary Abuza](#), a professor at the National War College in Washington, D.C., stated that “the military seeks to take advantage of this horrific catastrophe”. He also noted that “the diplomatically isolated junta is able to garner international support. They are weaponising aid and going to great lengths to deny humanitarian assistance from getting to regions outside of their control”.

However, several aid organisations have found ways to [circumvent restrictions](#) imposed by the junta. Much of the humanitarian aid in Burma operates underground, through local groups that are able to navigate checkpoints and provide aid without drawing junta attention. Additionally, many financial transactions related to humanitarian aid occur outside of Burma’s banking system, allowing organisations to avoid scrutiny from the central bank. In many instances, NGOs, CSOs, and aid groups open bank accounts in neighbouring Thailand to receive funding, which they can then transport into Burma in cash.

### 4. State openness and responsiveness

Due to the junta’s suppression of the EE, there is no space for discussion or cooperation between civil society and the military regime. Civil society members, human rights activists, and CDMers have largely [fled](#) to resistance-controlled areas or abroad to avoid persecution, arrest, and death, including actors such as [labour rights activists](#), [human rights activists](#), and [human rights journalists](#).

As this [Stimson report](#) highlights, the military’s history of constitutional authority in political affairs has allowed them to implement policies that prioritize the military’s interests over all else, even during the period of quasi-civilian rule. The junta is listed as one of the [most corrupt](#) governing bodies in the world, and its [control over banks](#), the tax system, and the profits of state-owned enterprises has restricted the general public from accessing military and governance information. Therefore, military control has meant that civil society has no involvement in the decision-making procedures in junta-controlled areas. This is, however, not the case for resistance-held areas, where civil society groups hold a much more influential and [active](#) space in governance affairs. In resistance-controlled areas, the NUG, pro-democracy forces, ethnic armed organisations and CSOs [actively participate in governance](#) through local administrative councils and national policy-making bodies such as the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) to shape democratic reform and federal policies. The NUG has also frequently engaged with the [international community](#) and the [diaspora](#) to seek recognition, garner support against the junta, and secure funding for



humanitarian aid, especially for internally displaced people. However, it is important to note that the NUG is largely based abroad and that the immediate impact for people on the ground has been limited.

## 5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

Civil society in Burma is largely underground or operating outside of the country, as there is no space for civil society to engage in Burma. [Severe media restrictions](#) have also made it increasingly difficult for news to reach the public or abroad. The junta has villainised civil society, often labelling organisations and members as [terrorists](#).

In the past years, [anyone](#) linked to the democracy movement, CDMers, or individuals opposing the junta have faced arrest, forced exile, sexual assault, or murder. In 2025, the junta [labeled](#) news services Radio Free Asia (RFA) and Voice of America (VOA) as “divisive foreign propaganda that fuelled unrest and weakened national unity”. Additionally, in September 2024, the junta [labeled](#) three influential and long-established ethnic armed organisations as “terrorists”, criminalising membership and association with the groups.

Minorities, [women](#), and members of the [LGBTQ+](#) community have also traditionally faced severe repression and discrimination in Burma. The Rohingya community in particular has faced [decades of discrimination](#) and racially based restrictions in law, policy, and practice. In 1982, Burma’s military government [stripped](#) the Rohingya of access to full citizenship, making them one of the world’s largest stateless populations. In [2017](#), an escalation in violence, including murder, rape and arson attacks by the military junta forced [over 742,000 Rohingya](#) – half of them children – to flee to Bangladesh. This has been concluded to be a genocide. Since the 2021 failed coup, the Rohingya have often been targeted by the junta and the Arakan Army (AA) found themselves caught in the crossfire of fighting in Arakan State (their homeland) and forced into military conscription. In 2024, an estimated [70,000](#) additional Rohingya fled into Bangladesh due to rising violence and worsening food insecurity. Today, [Bangladesh hosts over 1 million](#) Rohingya, with the majority sheltering in Cox’s Bazar refugee camp. Within Burma, over [100,000 Rohingya still reside](#) in internal displacement camps, many of whom have been living there for over a decade, facing severe limitations on access to healthcare, education, and freedom of movement.

Since the attempted coup, discrimination and [violence](#) by the junta against other minorities have [worsened](#), with reports of arrests, rape, assaults, and torture. According to a [report](#) by the NUG, five months after the attempted coup, at least 12 LGBTQ+ members were shot dead during protests; 73 have been arrested and/or charged under [Section 505 \(a\)](#); 65 are still in detention; and 28 others are either in hiding or have fled junta-controlled areas. Since 2021, these groups have been at the forefront of the democratic revolution, advocating for their rights, increased representation, and a federal democratic Burma.

## 6. Access to a secure digital environment

Burma’s military has implemented [extensive digital surveillance](#), both before and after the attempted coup. Social media platforms, notably Facebook and Telegram, were monitored and weaponised to spread hate speech, disinformation, and propaganda, especially towards minority groups such as the Rohingya. The junta also regularly imposed internet shutdowns to control the flow of information and [prevent the documentation](#) of war crimes and human rights violations. Since 2021, the junta has imposed [internet shutdowns](#) in all 330 townships, with more than 50 townships experiencing blackouts for over a year. By the end of 2021, the junta ordered all mobile service providers to [double their data prices](#), with 1 GB of

nonpackaged data costing MMK 10,000 at the time (USD 4,70), forcing poorer people to reduce their internet usage or stop it altogether. Additionally, there have been reports of [China's involvement](#) in assisting the junta with equipment and technology to expand its internet censorship and surveillance efforts. Since the attempted coup, the junta has also expanded its network of [Chinese-built cameras](#), equipped with facial recognition technology, across major cities to crack down on dissidents and resistance groups.

In 2021, the military [amended](#) the 2004 “[Electronic Transactions Law](#)” to include provisions regarding personal data, fake news, and cyberattacks. This seriously [threatened](#) the country's right to freedom of expression and privacy. The amended law allowed the military to block over 200 websites, including those of ethnic and mainstream media. Several amendments were poorly defined, leaving many [vague exceptions](#) that the junta could use to suppress civil society. The ambiguous and broad definitions of the new crimes, along with their lengthy prison sentences, posed a serious threat to free speech, digital rights, and the overall enabling environment.

On 1 January 2025, the junta enacted the [unconstitutional](#) “[Cybersecurity law](#)” in an attempt to further [suppress dissidents](#) and erode freedom of expression by increasing social media monitoring, [clamping down](#) on the use of virtual private networks (VPNs), and using online surveillance to arbitrarily arrest or punish anyone deemed subversive. Although the law was enacted in 2025, the junta had, since the attempted coup, consistently targeted online platforms and social media channels by imposing internet shutdowns and blocking access to these sites and independent websites. Previously, in May 2024, the junta also officially announced a [ban](#) on the use of VPNs. During 2024 alone, at least [351 people were arrested](#) for anti-regime posts, comments, and shares on social media.

## Challenges and Opportunities

One of the major challenges that is expected to arise in the following months is the junta's promised sham “[elections](#)” planned for December 2025 or January 2026. As the junta only fully controls about 21% of the country, their attempts to hold any semblance of an election to appease the international community and enhance their tarnished reputation are likely to result in immense violence and a bloody crackdown on dissidents. According to [Human Rights Watch](#), “it's clear that holding an election currently is only about the military's interest. For ordinary people in Myanmar it must be a terrifying prospect”. During the junta's sham census last year, many feared to answer questions, while those conducting the census also feared being targeted by anti-junta groups. During its 2024 sham census, the junta [only managed to access](#) 44% of townships (145 of 330) and failed to reach about 19.1 million people. Debbie Stothard, founder of ALTSEAN-Burma, [reported](#) that “we can already see that preparations for the election have involved a significant increase in violence—2024 has seen more airstrikes than 2021, 2022, and 2023 combined. Areas beyond the junta's control are being bombarded with airstrikes—they are literally trying to kill off the opposition”. Additionally, increased cooperation between the junta and neighbouring countries, particularly [Thailand](#), may raise difficulties for Burmese nationals abroad, including denying them work, study, or living documentation and forcing them to [return](#) to Burma, into the hands of the junta.

In light of the ongoing crisis in Burma, urgent and coordinated action is needed from all relevant actors to protect civilians, uphold human rights, and support democratic governance. The Burmese military junta must immediately cease all forms of violence against civilians and halt attacks on civilian infrastructure, including schools, hospitals, and internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. It is equally critical that all political prisoners are released without delay, as a step toward restoring basic freedoms and accountability.

At the same time, the National Unity Government (NUG) and resistance organisations should establish and enforce clear policies that enable the formation and operation of civil society organisations. They must also ensure inclusive participation in governance for all civilians, regardless of race, gender, religion, ethnicity, or their involvement in the Civil Disobedience Movement. The 1982 Citizenship Law should be repealed immediately to guarantee full rights for the Rohingya and other ethnic minorities.

The broader international community including the EU are urged not to recognise or legitimise the junta's planned elections and instead acknowledge the NUG as the legitimate representative of the Burmese people. Humanitarian aid should be directed to local CSOs operating in affected regions and cross-border areas, with donor requirements streamlined to allow for flexible and effective funding. In addition, targeted sanctions must be imposed on junta leaders and affiliated businesses, alongside a comprehensive and enforceable global embargo on arms and aviation fuel to Burma.

*This publication was funded/co-funded by the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union*



