



Coup Year in Review Analyses Series

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Political Persecution, Torture, and Detention

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As of February 24, 2022, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners in Burma (AAPP) reported that there have been at least 9,368 political prisoners arrested, charged or sentenced and at least 1,940 political prisoners charged with a warrant but are evading arrest. Among these numbers are prominent individuals such as State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and President U Win Myint, National League for Democracy (NLD) leaders, student activists, celebrities, journalists, and politicians.

Over the past year, the number of people detained in Burma's notorious prisons for political activism has drastically increased. The junta has also been expanding its torture campaigns both in and out of prisons across the country. Some of the detainees have died from injuries obtained after the junta's physical abuses and tortures while many have been enduring mental health issues from prolonged periods of incarceration. Charges against the opponents of the junta range from corruption charges and violation of COVID-19 laws to penal code 505(A) which punishes civilians for spreading false news or rebelling against the junta.

The situation for opponents of the military regime continues to grow dire each day as the junta continues to persecute, detain, and torture politicians, pro-democracy activists, members of the media, and ordinary citizens.

Persecution of NLD Leaders and Lawmakers

In the early morning of February 01, 2021, the military junta detained many prominent NLD members and lawmakers including State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and President U Win Myint. Other NLD members detained included Party Spokesperson U Han Thar Myint, Yangon Region's Chief Minister U Phyo Min Thein, Information Secretary U Monywa Aung Shin, and Mandalay Region's Chief Minister U Zaw Myint Maung, etc. The junta also arrested other politicians and 88 generation activists including Daw Mya Aye. Since then, 573 members of the NLD have been arrested and 12 of those have died while being detained.¹ Seven of them were tortured to death during interrogation while the other five died from either COVID-19 or other causes while in detention. Further, Monywa Aung Shin, the Party's Secretary of Information Committee, died of a heart attack on November 28, 2021, weeks after he had been released from detention for more than eight months.

Many NLD members have also been charged with arbitrary charges. The most prominent one is State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi who faces 10 corruption charges and a prison sentence of six years as

¹ The Irrawaddy. "Myanmar's Ousted NLD Says Over 570 Members Arrested by Junta So Far," December 1, 2021. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmars-ousted-nld-says-over-570-members-arrested-by-junta-so-far.html>

of January 2022.² Some of these charges included illegal import and possession of walkie-talkies and violation of coronavirus restrictions.² The four detained NLD ministers have been charged with violation of the Official Secrets Act and Anti-Corruption Law. The ousted Minister of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement U Win Myat Aye, and ousted Upper House Speaker Mahn Win Khaing have been charged with corruption and high treason.³ Others have been accused of bribery and some face at least two years of prison. Some including the veteran pro-democracy activist U Kyaw Min Yu (Jimmy) and former NLD MP Phyo Zayar Thaw, were sentenced to death in January 2022.⁴

When it comes to spreading terror among civilians, the junta knows no limits. After abducting civilians and activists, the junta would interrogate them through various ways including physical torture. At times when tortures lead to death, victims' bodies that have been cut open and later sewn up are returned to the victims' families the next day. One of the people that fell victim to this horrendous act was an NLD member and Pabedan's ward chairman, U Khin Maung Latt. He was the campaign manager to U Sithu Maung, one of only two Muslim NLD candidates. On March 06, 2021, he was forcefully taken from his home by police and soldiers after 9 pm local time.⁵ His body was returned to his family the next day after being cut open and sewn up. Just two days later, another NLD member, U Zaw Myat Lynn suffered the same horrendous fate.⁶ He was the director of a new vocational college in Shwe Pyi Thar Township and an NLD official. He was abducted by junta police and soldiers and his body was returned to his family the next day. He had been badly bruised and his belly cut open.

In the past year, the junta has targeted NLD officials, lawmakers, and members of parliament by arresting, issuing warrants, charging, and killing them. Instilling terror upon NLD officials and those affiliated with the party has been one of the ways in which the junta is trying to dismantle the NLD.

Persecution of Pro-Democracy Activists, Anti-Junta Activists, and CDMers

Student activists, pro-democracy activists, and participants of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) were largely targeted by the junta since the coup in February 2021. They were usually abducted and detained under torturous conditions.

Many pro-democracy activists including Wai Moe Naing and Zin Linn have been detained, among which Zin Linn and his group members received ten-year prison sentences. Many detained activists faced harassment by the military junta during their trials. For instance, the junta forces detained the former chair of the Dagon University Students' Union Min Thukha Kyaw. He was denied access to a lawyer during his three-month trial. He was sentenced to ten years in prison.

² The Irrawaddy. "Myanmar's Ousted NLD Says Over 570 Members Arrested by Junta So Far," December 1, 2021. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmars-ousted-nld-says-over-570-members-arrested-by-junta-so-far.html>; Press, The Associated. "Myanmar's Suu Kyi Sentenced to 4 More Years in Prison." NPR, January 10, 2022, sec. Asia. <https://www.npr.org/2022/01/10/1071769164/myanmars-suu-kyi-sentenced-to-4-more-years-in-prison>.

³ The Irrawaddy. "100 Senior NLD Leaders Arrested and Charged Since Myanmar Junta's Coup," September 1, 2021. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/100-senior-nld-leaders-arrested-and-charged-since-myanmar-juntas-coup.html>.

⁴ Myanmar NOW. "Democracy Veteran Ko Jimmy and Former NLD MP Phyo Zayar Thaw Sentenced to Death." Accessed February 25, 2022. <https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/democracy-veteran-ko-jimmy-and-former-nld-mp-phyo-zayar-thaw-sentenced-to-death>.

⁵ BBC News. "Myanmar: The Mysterious Deaths of the NLD Party Officials," June 8, 2021, sec. Asia. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57380237>.

The vice president of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU), Wai Yan Phyto Moe, was charged with violating Section 505(A) of the Penal Code.⁶ This penal code prohibits causing fear, spreading false news, and causing crimes against the government or the state. This charge is punishable by three years in prison and the military junta had been using this law to penalize and persecute opponents of the military regime.⁷ Over the past year, many youth activists and pro-democracy activists have been charged with the same Penal Code. In another case, Aye Nandar Soe, a student union leader from Sagains University of Education was arrested on September 19 but her whereabouts were unknown.⁷

While the junta had periodically released student activists from prisons during the earlier months of the coup, the conditions inside the prisons continue to remain dire for those unjustly detained. Relatives of detained youth activists reported that the activists are put into solitary confinement and are physically tortured during interrogations.⁸

Another group of people who were consistently targeted by the military junta over the past year was those who participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). From doctors and nurses to railway workers and engineers, CDMers consist of individuals from a diverse range of occupations and sectors. Since the beginning of the CDM campaign, the junta has charged at least 19 government doctors including a director of the health ministry, several medical superintendents, and specialists across the country for opposing the military takeover. Most of them have been charged under Article 505(A) of the Penal Code and face up to three years in prison.

One prominent case was when junta forces stormed the home of a striking orthopedic surgeon, Dr. Kyaw Min Soe, and abducted him. Another striking physician Dr. Maw Maw Oo was arrested on April 12, 2021.⁹ Many striking railway workers were also targeted. Hundreds of soldiers and police were deployed to Ma Hlwa Gone railway station in Yangon to forcefully evict families from their housing compounds.¹⁰

Many CDMers fear for the safety of their families and arrests. At the same time, losing a regular source of income is detrimental to the financial stability of their families.

⁶ “Repression of Activists and Journalists Persists in Myanmar despite ASEAN Rebuke - CIVICUS - Tracking Conditions for Citizen Action.” Accessed February 25, 2022. <https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2021/11/09/repression-activists-and-journalists-persists-myanmar-despite-asean-rebuke/>.

⁷ Press. “Myanmar: Analysis of the Military’s Changes to the Penal Code.” Centre for Law and Democracy (blog), May 10, 2021. <https://www.law-democracy.org/live/myanmar-analysis-of-the-militarys-changes-to-the-penal-code/>.

⁸ Myanmar NOW. “Student Activists, Journalists Being Mistreated in Insein Prison, Say Family Members.” Accessed February 25, 2022. <https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/student-activists-journalists-being-mistreated-in-insein-prison-say-family-members>.

⁹ The Irrawaddy. “Myanmar Junta Charges and Arrests Striking Doctors and Senior Medical Staff,” April 14, 2021. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-charges-arrests-striking-doctors-senior-medical-staff.html>.

¹⁰ Limited, Bangkok Post Public Company. “Myanmar Security Forces Target Striking Railway Workers.” Bangkok Post. Accessed February 25, 2022. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/2081407/myanmar-security-forces-target-striking-railway-workers>.

Persecution of Journalists

As of February 01, 2022, 57 journalists were detained by the junta in Burma.¹¹ Reporters Without Borders ranked Burma as the second biggest jailer of journalists in the world. Since the coup, 115 journalists and media professionals have been arrested.¹²

Journalists in Burma have been targeted by the junta for their work in exposing and reporting the human rights abuses and the situation on the ground. With the junta's crackdown on independent media, many journalists have had to flee to rural areas or abroad. The junta-controlled Ministry of Information issued a warning to independent media by pressing to stop describing them as an illegal junta and stop spreading what they deemed fake news to the world on June 30, 2021.¹³ Many news outlets were threatened or intimidated by the junta since the coup. 12 news outlets have been banned by the junta so far.¹⁴

Since the beginning of the coup, several journalists and media professionals including Kaung Myat Hlaing, Min Nyo, and Thet Naing Win from Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), and freelance photographer Htoo San have been detained and charged under section 505(A).¹⁵ May Thwe Aung, another DVB reporter, was sentenced to one month in prison under penal code section 188. She also learned that her husband, *The Voice Daily* reporter Min Min Aung was also arrested a few days later.¹³ The junta not only targets people working in the media but also their close family members.

Arbitrary arrests and detentions were not the only dangers facing journalists in Burma. Journalists in Burma operate under deadly circumstances. One of the most brutal cases was when freelance photographer Soe Naing was killed while being held in prison by junta forces on December 15, 2021.¹⁵ He was detained on December 10 while documenting the nationwide "Silent Strike" campaign. In another case, when journalist Aung Kyaw was forcefully taken to an interrogation center by junta forces, he was immediately abused. Soldiers repeatedly beat him, burned his face and hands with a cigarette, stepped on his fingers, and placed plastic bags over his head.¹⁶ As of February 04, 2022, three journalists including Soe Naing have been killed by the junta since the coup.¹⁷ Torture campaigns against journalists have been common over the past year.

Journalists detained over the past year were not only limited to local media professionals. Danny Fenster, an American journalist, faced three charges and was given an 11-year prison term. He was later released on November 15, 2021, after Bill Richardson, former governor of New Mexico and diplomat, secured his

¹¹ RSF. "Figures for past year;s persecution of journalism in Myanmar | Reporters without Borders," February 01, 2022. <https://rsf.org/en/news/figures-past-years-persecution-journalism-myanmar>

¹² RSF. "Figures for past year;s persecution of journalism in Myanmar | Reporters without Borders," February 01, 2022. <https://rsf.org/en/news/figures-past-years-persecution-journalism-myanmar>

¹³ Human Rights Watch. "Myanmar: Junta Escalates Media Crackdown," July 27, 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/27/myanmar-junta-escalates-media-crackdown>.

¹⁴ RSF. "Figures for past year;s persecution of journalism in Myanmar | Reporters without Borders," February 01, 2022. <https://rsf.org/en/news/figures-past-years-persecution-journalism-myanmar>

¹⁵ Radio Free Asia. "Photographer Dies in Custody in First Journalist Death since Myanmar Coup." Accessed February 25, 2022. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/death-12142021171637.html>.

¹⁶ Paddock, Richard C. "'I Didn't Look Like a Human': Journalist Tells of Myanmar Torture." *The New York Times*, December 17, 2021, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/17/world/asia/myanmar-journalist-kyaw-torture.html>.

¹⁷ RSF. "Figures for past year;s persecution of journalism in Myanmar | Reporters without Borders," February 01, 2022. <https://rsf.org/en/news/figures-past-years-persecution-journalism-myanmar>

release.¹⁸ Additionally, Japanese journalist Yuki Kitazumi was detained twice and was charged with spreading fake news in April 2021.¹⁹ He was also later released with the help of Japanese diplomats.²⁰ Editor-in-chief of Kamayut Media Nathan Maung, who holds US citizenship was also detained for three months where he was horrendously tortured. He was later deported to the US. Another fellow journalist Hanthar Nyein who was arrested together with him faced the same charges and torturous treatment. However, he is yet to be released at the time of this writing.²¹

Torture Techniques

For decades, the junta used torture techniques during interrogation and detention to extract information and dehumanize detainees. These practices were widely implemented after the coup. According to AAPP, the techniques that the junta continues to use to torture detainees include violent abuses where prisoners were routinely subjected to physical abuses, sensory deprivation, sleep deprivations, threats against their loved ones, stress positions, and tick-tock tortures.²² These torture tactics were widely used by the junta's security forces to inflict immense physical and mental pain to political prisoners and detainees since the coup.

For instance, a teenager reported that he was beaten by the junta forces for days while being blindfolded. He was then forced into a pit and buried up to his neck.²³ Journalists Han Thar Nyein and Nathan Maung reported that they were severely beaten, burned with cigarettes, and forced to kneel during interrogations.²¹ A young man who was randomly arrested with a friend reported that he was forced to kneel on sharp rocks, a gun shoved into his mouth, and a baton rolled over his shin bones.²⁴ A report also stated that junta forces placed a plastic bag over the head of a detainee to suffocate them while they were held at gunpoint.²⁵ These accounts of torture in prisons and interrogation centers are some of the many tortures and abuses committed by the junta's security forces since the coup.

Torture and Abuses Against Women in Detention

In addition to physical and mental abuse, women detained by the junta have gone through tremendous pain in the hands of the junta. Women detainees reported that they have been physically tortured, sexually harassed, and threatened with rape. A woman who was detained reported that she was repeatedly interrogated about her sex life and sexually assaulted while being blindfolded. Later on, her captor shoved

¹⁸ Paddock, Richard C. "U.S. Journalist Danny Fenster Is Freed From Myanmar Prison," *The New York Times*, November 15, 2021, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/15/world/asia/myanmar-danny-fenster-release.html>.

¹⁹ BBC News. "Myanmar: To Release Arrested Japanese Journalist," May 14, 2021, sec. Asia. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57110486>.

²⁰ AP NEWS. "Myanmar Frees Japanese Journalist as Gesture to Tokyo," May 13, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/myanmar-tokyo-japan-journalists-7e90e258489afe0609798a621b5b776d>.

²¹ The Irrawaddy. "Interview | Released Myanmar Editor with US Citizenship Fears for Other Detainees," June 30, 2021. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/interview/released-myanmar-editor-with-us-citizenship-fears-for-other-detainees.html>.

²² AAPP | Assistance Association for Political Prisoners. "Torture in Prison," June 26, 2017. <https://aappb.org/?p=6431>.

²³ Human Rights Watch. "Myanmar: Teenager Describes Torture, Mock Burial," June 22, 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/06/22/myanmar-teenager-describes-torture-mock-burial>.

²⁴ AP NEWS. "Myanmar Military Uses Systematic Torture across Country," October 28, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/myanmar-torture-military-prisons-insein-abuse-390fe5b49337be82ce91639e93e0192f>.

²⁵ Human Rights Watch. "'They Held Mock Executions' - New Reports of Torture in Myanmar," October 28, 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/28/new-reports-torture-myanmar>.

a gun into her mouth when she refused to provide details about her contacts.²⁶ Another woman reported that she was forced to raise the three-finger salute for more than an hour while a guard repeatedly stroked her hair as an intimidation tactic. Additionally, it was reported that during interrogation, women were pulled out of a room in which some of them came back with their clothes undone or missing, signs of sexual abuse.²⁴

Women detainees were also put into solitary confinements for more than 40 days at times. Many are denied access to sanitation including menstrual products, daily showers, and toilets.²⁷

Conclusion

The junta has deployed a wide array of political, legal, and security tools to punish and clamp down on those who opposed the military regime. Political opposition and established political forces such as the NLD have been systematically persecuted by the junta in an attempt to remove them from Burma's national politics. Independent media and journalists are forced to operate in hostile circumstances as the junta tries to cover up its brutal crackdowns on the civilians. Junta's security forces continually dehumanize political detainees and tortured them in prisons and interrogation centers. Numerous accounts of abuses and violations have been reported since the coup and these numbers will continue to rise as the junta is set on instilling fear and terror on its population.

²⁶ BBC News. "Myanmar Coup: The Women Abused and Tortured in Detention," December 9, 2021, sec. Asia. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-59462503>.

²⁷ Maung, Manny. "Rights of Women Violated in Myanmar Prisons," June 8, 2021, Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/06/08/rights-women-violated-myanmar-prisons>