



JLPH: Journal of Law, Politic and Humanities

<https://dinastires.org/JLPH> ✉ dinasti.info@gmail.com ☎ +62 811 7404 455

E-ISSN: 2962-2816
P-ISSN: 2747-1985

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38035/jlph.v5i4>
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Conflict Escalation in Myanmar After Military Junta Coup

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Abstract: This research aims to analyze the escalation of conflict in Myanmar after the military coup in 2021 with a research focus on understanding the dynamics of conflict during military junta rule and its impact on domestic and regional situations. This research uses a qualitative method with a descriptive-analytical approach, relying on secondary data sources, namely literature studies from various sources. The results show that the coup carried out by the military junta has overthrown the legitimate government. Instead of creating stability, this attitude triggered massive rejection by the people of Myanmar. This condition was responded aggressively by the junta, thus increasing tension and violence in various regions. ASEAN has attempted to mediate the conflict through the Five-Point Consensus, but it did not produce significant results because the military junta did not show commitment in implementing the agreement. Opposition groups such as the National Unity Government (NUG) and People's Defense Force (PDF) that were previously not major actors in the armed conflict are now increasingly active against the junta, joining forces with armed ethnic groups to overthrow the military government. This resistance has weakened the junta's control over Myanmar, indicating the potential for a greater transition of power in the future.

Keyword: Myanmar, Military Coup, Conflict, Military Junta, ASEAN.

INTRODUCTION

Myanmar is a country with a long history of political instability, largely influenced by the military's dominance in government. Since its independence from Britain in 1948, Myanmar has experienced several military coups that have impacted its political system and social fabric. For nearly five decades, Myanmar was under the rule of a military regime before it finally began transitioning to a more democratic system of government in 2011. One of the main figures in this change was Aung San Suu Kyi. For the past five years, Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), have led Myanmar after winning the 2015 election, which is considered the freest and fairest election in the country's history. However, the Myanmar military again seized control of the government by detaining Aung San Suu Kyi and several other state officials. The coup was carried out on the grounds that there were allegations of fraud in the voter list in the election, although the election commission found no evidence to support the claim. The military also claimed that the government failed to follow up on the

alleged fraud and did not take steps to postpone the election amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Putsanra, 2021).

The international community considers this coup an illegal act aimed at restoring military dominance in Myanmar. The coup sparked massive protests from the people of Myanmar who rejected the junta's rule and demanded the restoration of democracy. The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) consisting of workers, students, and other civic groups began a nationwide strike as a form of resistance against the junta. However, the military's response to these demonstrations was repressive, with the use of force leading to thousands of casualties and arbitrary detention of pro-democracy activists. Since the military junta took control of the government, dozens of citizens, including children, have lost their lives, while around 2.5 million people have been displaced from their homes (Sommerville, 2024).

The situation then developed into an armed conflict, where various opposition groups began to form alliances with armed ethnic organizations to fight the junta. The National Unity Government (NUG) consisting of former NLD MPs and pro-democracy activists was declared as a counter-government. The NUG also formed the People's Defense Force (PDF) as a military wing aiming to overthrow the junta through armed resistance. In addition, ethnic armed groups such as the Karen National Union (KNU), Kachin Independence Army (KIA), and Arakan Army (AA) have become increasingly active in attacking the junta's military outposts, worsening the security situation in Myanmar. The military junta targets opposition groups such as the National Unity Government (NUG) and People's Defense Force (PDF), labeling them as terrorist organizations. The junta uses the counter-terrorism narrative as a political tool to maintain power. It also labeled opposition groups, particularly the NUG and PDF as terrorist organizations, although their actions were more likely to be perceived as a form of resistance to illegitimate rule. This situation has led to domestic and international debates on the definition and handling of terrorism in Myanmar (Sinaga, 2021).

The coup in Myanmar not only impacted the domestic situation, but also affected the stability of the Southeast Asian region. ASEAN as a regional organization is trying to deal with the Myanmar conflict through a diplomatic approach. The Five-Point Consensus (5PC) agreed upon at the 2021 ASEAN meeting contains commitments to stop the violence, hold an inclusive dialog, mediate between various parties, provide access to humanitarian assistance, and send an ASEAN delegation to Myanmar. However, the implementation of this agreement faces many obstacles, mainly because the military junta has not shown a commitment to carry out the agreed points (Fajri, 2022).

In addition, Myanmar has seen a decline in regional counter-terrorism cooperation, which was previously conducted through mechanisms such as the ASEAN Convention on Counter-Terrorism (ACCT) and the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC). Before the coup, Myanmar was active in various regional security programs, but post-coup, the military junta focused more on maintaining its power domestically, reducing engagement in the ASEAN security agenda. ASEAN countries are divided on how to respond to the Myanmar crisis. Some countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore refuse to grant legitimacy to the junta, while others such as Thailand and Cambodia tend to be more accommodating to the military government. Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the conflict escalation in Myanmar after the military junta coup, focusing on its impact on political stability, national security, and Myanmar's relations with ASEAN.

METHOD

This research uses descriptive analytical method, which is an approach that aims to describe and analyze a phenomenon systematically. This method is used to examine the dynamics of conflict that occurred in Myanmar after the military junta coup, threat patterns and their impact on political stability and security at the national and regional levels. Furthermore, it analyzes the various factors that influence the escalation of conflict as well as the response of

relevant actors, both at the domestic and regional levels, in easing tensions and restoring political stability in Myanmar.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Myanmar experienced nearly five decades of military rule before it began the process of transitioning to a more democratic system of government in 2011. This process brought new hope for political stability and democracy in the country. On November 8, 2020, Myanmar held another general election that will determine its political direction. In the election, the National League for Democracy (NLD) party led by Aung San Suu Kyi won a major victory, defeating the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), a party with strong affiliations with Myanmar's military, the Tatmadaw. However, the NLD's victory was seriously challenged when the military alleged fraud in the election process. This accusation became a pretext for the Tatmadaw to reclaim control of the government through a coup carried out on February 1, 2021. The military eventually declared a one-year state of national emergency and arrested a number of important government figures, including State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint, as well as several ministers, members of parliament, and senior NLD figures. The coup ended civilian rule and solidified military rule under the leadership of the Commander-in-Chief of the Myanmar Armed Forces, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, who was then sworn in as the de facto head of government (Garyland, 2021).

The military junta's coup sparked widespread anger among the people of Myanmar. The majority of the people rejected military rule and in less than a week after the takeover, massive demonstrations began, starting in Yangon before spreading to major cities across the country. The initially peaceful demonstrations soon received a repressive response from the military junta. Security forces used violence to disperse the crowds resulting in casualties and massive arrests of demonstrators and pro-democracy activists. The violence perpetrated by the military junta continued to escalate. More than 6,000 Myanmar civilians were reportedly killed in the first 20 months. A study conducted by the Peace Research Institute Oslo noted that from the coup to September 30, 2022, at least 6,337 civilians were killed and 2,614 injured as a result of political conflict (Mardhana, 2023). The coup not only failed to create political stability, but also further exacerbated social and economic tensions in Myanmar. This situation shows that military domination in a democratic country has the potential to weaken the democratic system itself and destabilize the country's political, social and economic situation (Yuliana Anggun Pertiwi, 2024).

ASEAN as a regional organization that is committed to creating a peaceful, safe, stable and prosperous Southeast Asian region has taken various steps/efforts to find the best solution. This includes encouraging the military junta to implement the 5 (five) ASEAN consensus points which include (Aldila, 2021):

- a. Violence must stop immediately in Myanmar and all parties must exercise complete restraint;
- b. Conduct constructive dialog among all parties concerned to find a peaceful solution for the benefit of the people;
- c. The special envoy of the ASEAN Chairperson will facilitate the mediation of the dialogue process with the assistance of the ASEAN Secretary-General;
- d. The special envoy and delegation will visit Myanmar to meet with all relevant parties;
- e. ASEAN will provide humanitarian assistance through the AHA Center.

However, it is unfortunate that the Myanmar military has not shown commitment to implementing the five points of the ASEAN consensus. In fact, two days after Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen's visit to Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi was given an additional four-year sentence (Rizky, 2022). The implementation of this consensus has not been effective, while Justice For Myanmar highlights the alleged conspiracy between ASEAN and the military junta

in defense cooperation. This shows that the Myanmar crisis is far from being resolved and requires more concrete steps from the international community (Ahmad, 2022).

The rule of the military junta has had a significant influence on the country's policy direction at the regional level. In the context of regional cooperation, Myanmar is active in various regional security programs including being one of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries that ratified the ASEAN Convention on Counter-Terrorism in 2012 and legislated the Strategic Anti-Money Laundering and Countering the Financing of Terrorism (AML/CFT) policy in 2011. The Myanmar government through its law enforcement agencies cooperates closely with Interpol, ASEAN-pol, UNODC and other international bodies (Sari, 2017, p. 24). However, post-coup, the military junta has been more focused on maintaining its power domestically, resulting in less involvement in the ASEAN security agenda. This was due to the escalating conflict situation in Myanmar. The junta also imposed restrictions on independent media, banned satellite broadcasting, and threatened prison sentences for violators (Ray, 2021).

In response to the coup and military repression, pro-democracy groups began to build a more organized network of resistance. MPs from the NLD in exile formed the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), which claimed to be the legitimate representative of Myanmar's parliament. The CRPH then established the National Unity Government (NUG) as a shadow government, comprising NLD politicians, ethnic group representatives, and other political parties opposed to the military junta. The NUG immediately sought to garner support from both within the country and the international community. They sought to gain recognition as the legitimate government of Myanmar and challenge the legitimacy of the military junta. Over time, resistance to the junta was no longer limited to political action and peaceful demonstrations, but evolved into armed resistance.

The formation of the People's Defense Force (PDF) civil defense group became a turning point in the escalation of the conflict in Myanmar. Initially, PDF functioned as a civil resistance group that aimed to protect demonstrators from repressive military actions. However, in its development, PDF transformed into an armed resistance force that actively carried out attacks on the junta's military installations. In addition to the PDF, various Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) such as the Karen National Union (KNU), Kachin Independence Army (KIA), and Arakan Army (AA) have also stepped up resistance against the Tatmadaw. These groups had long experience in armed struggle and began coordinating with the NUG and PDF to pound the junta forces in various regions (Padmi, 2024).

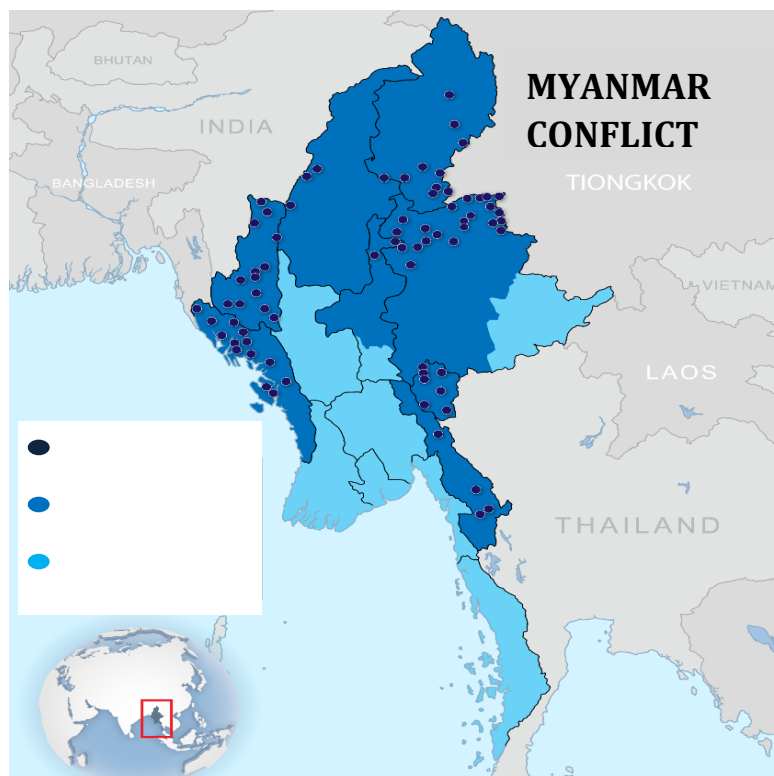
In the face of this resistance, the military junta labeled the opposition government or the shadow government in the National Unity Government (NUG) or People Defense Force (PDF) as a terrorist group. The junta also accused the NUG of being behind a series of bombings, arson, and killings across Myanmar (Ying-ying, 2021). Any membership or organization that opposes the military junta could potentially be charged under the anti-terrorism law. The policy not only prohibits membership, but also any contact with groups that have been labeled "terrorists" (Hidayat, 2021). The Special Advisory Council for Myanmar, on the other hand, stated that the Tatmadaw is a terrorist group that must be brought and tried in an international court, embargoed its weapons, and imposed financial sanctions on its military officials. In response to this statement, General Min Aung Hlaing swore in his speech that he would protect the people of Myanmar from all threats. Even so, the army and police are known to continue to commit various acts of violence against the community (Doherty, 2021).

In strengthening its influence, Myanmar's military junta uses the Counter-Terrorism Law called Pyidaungsu Hluttaw Law No. 23/2014 which was revised through State Administration Council Law No. 21/2021. The Counter-Terrorism Law is used as a tool to deal with the problem of terrorism in the country, which now focuses on domestic movements against the military junta. In fact, anyone who is associated with organizations or movements that are considered against the government will be considered participating in the terrorism movement

(Lipes, 2022). In addition to using military force in dealing with terrorism, the military junta also asked for help from the international community in fighting terrorism, one of which was Interpol. The response submitted by Interpol explained that the Myanmar junta's request for assistance to fight terrorism was officially rejected by the global police agency. Interpol emphasized that it will not provide assistance to countries that are in domestic political problems, including dealing with political opponents, government critics, or in the context of a coup (Prihastomo, 2022).

Since 2023, the momentum of resistance has strengthened. Armed movements led by PDF and EAO managed to seize control of a number of strategic areas in Myanmar. In fact, several major cities began to experience direct attacks from resistance groups. In early 2024, Karen ethnic groups captured a trading town on the Thai border, while attacks on the capital Naypyidaw using drones began to occur. The prolonged escalation of the conflict led to a worsening humanitarian crisis. Tens of thousands of people have been killed in fighting between the junta and resistance groups, including civilians caught in the crossfire. In addition, around 18.6 million Myanmar citizens are struggling to meet their basic needs, due to the collapse of the economic system and the increasing number of internally displaced people. Many civilians, especially from the middle class, choose to leave their normal lives and join armed resistance groups in the jungle. Young men prefer to join the PDF or EAO rather than submit to conscription imposed by the junta (Forum, 2021).

Since October 2023, Myanmar's military junta has faced increasing pressure. PDF and EAO have captured large swathes of Myanmar, putting the military junta in an increasingly precarious position. Attacks on the junta's strategic infrastructure have continued, forcing them to endure increasingly difficult conditions. The resistance coalition has liberated 75 cities, is fighting to liberate another 75 cities and has surrounded another 105 cities. That means less than 100 of the country's 352 cities (28% of the country's cities) are under military junta control as of mid-August 2024 (Byrd, 2024).



Source: (Byrd, 2024)

Figure 1. Control of the Resistance Coalition as of August 3, 2024

The success of resistance groups in capturing key areas shows that the military junta no longer has full control over the country. This situation has the potential to lead to a major shift in Myanmar's political dynamics, either in the form of the junta's downfall or a transition to a new form of government. The military junta coup has had far-reaching impacts on various aspects of life, such as political, social, economic and domestic and regional security. From a political perspective, the military junta's rule has significantly hampered Myanmar's democratic transition and brought uncertainty to the direction of Myanmar's political policies. At the same time, the junta's dominance of military power triggered the escalation of complex conflicts. This not only affects the actors involved in the conflict but also has a significant impact on the socio-economic conditions of the people of Myanmar.

The resistance movement against the military junta in Myanmar opens up the possibility of several scenarios that will determine the future direction of the country. First, the junta's attempt to maintain its power through repressive measures. In this context, the military government will continue to use force to suppress the opposition movement, including through arrests and violence against civilians. If the international community does not exert strong enough pressure or support from the junta's strategic allies, this scenario has the potential to prolong the period of authoritarian rule in Myanmar. Second, the success of the resistance movement in overthrowing the junta and restoring democracy. This could occur through massive mobilization of pro-democracy groups, internal divisions within the military, or a combination of effective domestic and international pressure. In this scenario, Myanmar will face major challenges in the transition process, including national reconciliation, institutional reform, and rebuilding an inclusive political system to avoid repeating the pattern of coups. Third, there are political negotiations that result in a compromise between the military junta and the opposition. In this scenario, both parties agree on power sharing or a more gradual form of political transition. However, the success of this scenario depends on the military's willingness to negotiate and assurances from pro-democracy groups that the compromise will actually bring about meaningful political change. Whatever the scenario, Myanmar continues to face major challenges in achieving stability and sustainable democracy. Factors such as divergent political interests, the role of ethnic minorities in the conflict, and the influence of international actors will largely determine the direction of change in the country.

In the long term, the situation in Myanmar also depends on the response of the international community, ASEAN, and domestic forces that continue to struggle to end the conflict that has lasted for more than three years. If the conflict continues without a clear political solution, Myanmar risks a prolonged civil war that further worsens social, economic, and security conditions in the Southeast Asian region (Pادمi, 2024). The active involvement of regional and international actors is essential to address this political crisis through a more assertive and coordinated diplomatic approach such as national reconciliation, transition to a legitimate civilian government, and consistent law enforcement against human rights violations, in order to achieve sustainable peace and political stability in the region.

CONCLUSION

The political crisis in Myanmar that began with a military coup on February 1, 2021 has caused deep instability in various aspects of the country's life. The coup derailed the democratic transition process that had been underway since 2011 and cemented the military's dominance in government. The junta's repressive response to peaceful demonstrations and civil resistance triggered an escalation of the conflict, which later developed into an increasingly organized armed resistance movement. The formation of the People's Defense Forces (PDF) as well as the support of various Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) demonstrated the growing discontent with military rule and worsened the security situation in the country. ASEAN as a regional organization has attempted to mediate the conflict through a five-point consensus, but its

implementation has been hampered by the junta's unpreparedness to abide by the commitments. In addition, the international community also faces challenges in exerting effective pressure on the Myanmar junta, mainly due to the complexity of diplomatic relations and geopolitical interests of various countries.

Resistance against the junta has intensified since 2023, with various resistance groups successfully seizing strategic areas. The resistance movement against the military junta in Myanmar opens up the possibility of several scenarios that will determine the future direction of the country, namely: First, the junta is able to extend the period of authoritarian rule in Myanmar. Second, the resistance movement succeeds in overthrowing the junta and restoring democracy. Third, political negotiations result in a compromise between the military junta and the opposition for power sharing.

However, if the conflict continues without a clear political solution, Myanmar risks a prolonged conflict that could worsen the humanitarian crisis and destabilize the Southeast Asian region. The escalation of conflict in Myanmar demonstrates that the military's dominance in the governance system can undermine democracy and create prolonged instability. This calls for regional and international actors to address the political crisis through a more assertive and coordinated diplomatic approach. This can be done through a strategy of national reconciliation, transition to a legitimate civilian government, and enforcement of human rights violations.

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