

IPRC BRIEF 2 : 2026

Understanding Myanmar's current state after the sham election of 2025–2026



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief is based on the Myanmar Update 2026 presented by Dr Ma Thida at Murdoch University. The event was organised by the Indo-Pacific Research Centre in partnership with PEN International's Perth Centre and the Centre for Stories.

The military government in Myanmar imposed punishing conditions on the 2025–2026 electoral process that severely undermined its legitimacy. This followed government legal reforms that dissolved opposition parties, criminalized dissent, and restricted political participation. Voting occurred in only part of the country, while opposition groups were largely excluded or boycotted the process. These developments form part of the military junta's broader attempt to consolidate their power, including efforts to expand executive authority, systematise digital surveillance, and exploit illicit economies such as narcotics production and online scam networks. These mechanisms are accompanied by extensive human rights violations, including arbitrary detention, violence against civilians, and military conscription.

In response, a broad and diverse resistance movement—comprising civil society actors, political coalitions, and ethnic armed organizations—continues to call for a federal democracy. While recent coordination efforts signal increased institutional cohesion, the movement faces significant internal and structural challenges.

Support for democracy is, on the one hand, undermined by external support for the junta and limited regional effectiveness in resolving the crisis. On the other hand, there is growing advocacy for international engagement that prioritizes a Myanmar-led democratic transition driven by domestic resistance actors rather than legitimizing military rule.

THE HEADLINES

1

The Myanmar military junta uses a range of punishments and controls to undermine the country's democratic movement.

2

The recent fraudulent elections show the extent of the junta's coercive powers and their willingness to use the law to destroy any challenges to their rule.

3

A range of illegal businesses – including narcotics trafficking and scam centre operations – are vital to the junta's control of the economy and work to undermine social cohesion.

4

The diverse opposition movement that has emerged in the country faces not only severe government repression but also is internally divided as to the country's political direction and the form of its democracy.

INTRODUCTION

The 2025–2026 electoral process in Myanmar marks a critical juncture in the country's ongoing political crisis, reflecting a broader pattern of authoritarian consolidation under military rule. Following a series of legal reforms that effectively dismantled opposition parties, restricted political freedoms, and criminalized dissent, the elections were tightly controlled by the government. These developments occurred alongside the expansion of executive authority, the institutionalization of digital surveillance systems, and the increasing entrenchment of illicit economic networks linked to the state.

At the same time, Myanmar's political landscape is being reshaped by a diverse and evolving resistance movement composed of civil society actors, political bodies, and armed groups that have a shared vision of federal democracy. This report examines the interplay between the junta's strategies to maintain power—including legal, technological, and coercive mechanisms—and the efforts of democratic forces to build an alternative political future amid ongoing conflict, humanitarian crisis, and geopolitical pressures.

Since the 2021 Myanmar coup d'état, Russia and China have played significant roles in sustaining the Myanmar military regime through diplomatic, economic, and military support. Both states have acted to limit coordinated international responses, particularly within the United Nations, by opposing sanctions and formal condemnations. In addition, Russia has expanded defence cooperation, while China has maintained strategic engagement through continued investment and trade relations, alongside selective security cooperation. Collectively, such support has contributed to the resilience and international positioning of Myanmar's military authorities in the post-coup period.

UNDERSTANDING THE ELECTION 2025–26

Legal changes to election and party registration laws from late 2025 dissolved opposition parties and seized their assets, leaving opposition groups either barred from participating or choosing to boycott the process. The Protection of Multiparty Democratic General Elections law passed in July 2025 made criminal offences of most action and speech that questioned the fairness of the election process. As a result, 400 people were imprisoned for their criticism of the election, and for organizing and protesting the sham elections.

The Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) and the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar (SAC-M), on 10th April, launched a joint report "Old Generals, New Clothes: The Myanmar Junta's Illegitimate 2025–26 Elections and the Way Forward". According to this report, the elections were held in only 42 percent of Myanmar's territory and were the culmination of a years-long strategy to undermine democracy in Myanmar, driven in large part by the junta leader and alleged war criminal Min Aung Hlaing's personal ambition to secure Myanmar's "presidency" at any cost.^[1] Though the USDP benefited from the electoral process designed to ensure its dominance, it got only 44–45% of the votes cast across the country.

PUBLIC SURVEILLANCE UNDER NEW/PERSISTING MILITARY AUTHORITY

Recent legal and technological developments in Myanmar point to an increasingly systematized architecture of state control that extends beyond conventional constitutional frameworks. On 3 February 2026, the enactment of the Union Consultative Council Law established an extra-constitutional body endowed with expansive authority to intervene across the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, thereby consolidating centralized decision-making power. This was followed on 17 March 2026 by the Myanmar Passport Law, which has been widely interpreted as a strategic instrument for restricting mobility and suppressing political dissent, particularly among activists and opposition figures who are now living abroad but working against the military rule.



These legal measures operate together with a suite of digital surveillance and population management systems introduced since 2021. Platforms such as the Personal Scrutinization and Monitoring System (PSMS) and the Guest List Management System (GLMS) facilitate granular tracking of individuals' movements and associations, while the Myanmar Advanced Passenger Processing System (MAPPS) extends state oversight to cross-border travel, especially at the international airport. Similarly, the National Service Information Management System (NSIMS) enables the monitoring of citizens in relation to conscription and national service obligations, and the Central Equipment Identity Register (CEIR) system strengthens control over mobile communications by regulating device usage. Collectively, these initiatives illustrate a shift toward an integrated surveillance state, where legal instruments and digital infrastructures mutually reinforce mechanisms of political control and social regulation.



Source: BBC News. (n.d.). Myanmar profile. BBC News.
 BBC News. (n.d.). Myanmar profile. BBC News.

STATE-SPONSORED CRIMES

The available evidence indicates that the junta's survival strategy is deeply intertwined with illicit economies and systematic repression. Online scam operations have emerged as a significant revenue stream, reportedly financing militia groups aligned with the regime and creating economic incentives for authorities to tolerate—and in some cases coordinate with—organized criminal networks. At the same time, the country remains the world's leading producer of opium and a major source of synthetic drugs, with the narcotics economy providing a crucial financial lifeline to military units, state-linked enterprises, and pro-junta militias. These economic practices are coupled with widespread human rights violations, including the deliberate obstruction of humanitarian aid as a form of collective punishment, as well as airstrikes, arson attacks, arbitrary detention, torture, and ill-treatment of civilians. Additionally, the enforcement of conscription laws has facilitated arbitrary recruitment, further entrenching coercive state control. Arbitrary forced recruitment in Myanmar is a grievous human rights violation that targets especially vulnerable populations, including displaced people and children. Evasion of conscription for the vulnerable brings harsh punishments on both those expected to serve and their families. The practice, moreover, shows how widespread corruption has spread, since people of privilege can buy their way out of service. Conscription also reveals the military's weakness, since it is driven by the army's manpower shortages amid ongoing conflicts around the country the junta faces. Together, these dynamics illustrate a governance model that relies on both illicit revenue generation and systematic violence to shore up its power.

MYANMAR-OWNED MYANMAR-LED APPROACH BY THE DEMOCRATIC FORCES

Resistance to dictatorship in Myanmar today is a complex movement involving civil and armed groups. Civil society actors, including the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), operate alongside political representative bodies such as the CRPH, NUCC, NUG, while armed resistance is conducted by the People's Defense Forces (PDF), Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs), and various local militias. Together, these actors articulate a shared core vision of establishing a federal democratic system, as codified in the Federal Democracy Charter of March 2021,

which emphasizes ethnic federalism, democratic governance, inclusion, equality, and the abolition of military constitutional authority.

The Spring Revolution thus represents a hybrid movement, combining peaceful protest with armed struggle. However, the diverse actors lack a unified command, dispute federal design—particularly regarding autonomy, territorial arrangements, and resource sharing—and face a broader difficulty of transitioning from revolutionary resistance to sustainable state-building amid ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis.

Recent institutional developments, such as the formation of the SCEF Steering Council in March 2026, signal ongoing efforts to address these challenges through greater political coordination and institutional consolidation. This body appears to function as a central coordinating mechanism of Military Coordination, Foreign Affairs, Security and Defence, Federal Affairs, and Finance. Its structure is notably inclusive, incorporating advisory groups that represent federal units and Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs), as well as designated representatives for the public and for women. This composition reflects an attempt to balance military coordination with civilian oversight and inclusive political representation. On 1 April 2026, the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar (SAC-M), an advisory body composed of international experts and former officials, publicly stated that the international community should support what it described as Myanmar's "historic revolutionary steering council," referring to the SCEF. This endorsement is noteworthy for several reasons.

However, the extent to which the SCEF can effectively operate as a unified steering mechanism depends on several factors. These include its ability to maintain cohesion among diverse stakeholders, establish clear lines of authority, and gain both domestic legitimacy and international recognition. Furthermore, the geopolitical environment—particularly the responses of regional actors and major powers—will significantly influence whether calls like those from SAC-M translate into tangible support.

On the same day that the SCEF announced its formation, a separate Political Coalition Body PCB issued a statement outlining its vision for federal democracy.

It has emphasized the need for a process of transitional justice and expanding political space for civilians. This coalition, composed primarily of former political prisoners inside the country, represents a community-driven initiative that differs in certain respects from SCEF's broader framework. This divergence, however, reflects a political orientation that provides important support for the project of community-based political re-foundation, as it seeks to establish a democratic federal model through local action and reliance on civilian actors.

Overall, the contemporary resistance movement is characterized by an unprecedented level of unity, forming what can be considered the broadest anti-military alliance in modern Burmese history. This coalition reflects a significant convergence of democratic aspirations and ethnic equality agendas, bridging historically fragmented political and social groups. On the ground, the resistance has achieved notable territorial and military momentum, reportedly controlling more than half of the country, while the ruling junta's authority appears increasingly fragmented and uneven. Central to the movement's strength is its legitimacy narrative: it positions itself as a representative of "the people" in direct contrast to the coercive power of the military regime. This claim is further reinforced by a discourse of federalism, which resonate strongly with diverse ethnic constituencies and underscore demands for a more inclusive and decentralized political order.



Dr Ma Thida in conversation with Prof Simon Adams (MU)

CONCLUSION

While democratic forces in Myanmar are making every possible effort to end military rule, the backing of the junta by China and Russia has created difficult realities on the ground. Smaller ethnic armed groups have been persuaded or pressured into negotiating with the military under a so-called peace process that lacks any foundation in transitional justice and instead offers limited regional development incentives. Meanwhile, much of the international community has deferred to ASEAN to lead a resolution, which has proven insufficient in countering the influence of China and Russia. In this context, there is a growing call for global actors to support a Myanmar-owned, Myanmar-led approach driven by democratic alliances SCEF, rather than endorsing the junta's attempts to legitimize its power through an unjust peace process.

[1] Many activists and observers in Myanmar and around the world have found this odd and megalomaniacal move hard to fathom. Min staged a coup in 2021 out of personal ambition for power. But, not content with running the junta that came to power, he then became president of the state without even standing as a candidate in an election.

Acknowledgement: IPRC is grateful to PEN International's Perth Centre and the Centre for Stories for supporting Dr Ma Thida's presentation of the Myanmar Update 2026. Thanks also to Sonali Fernando for editorial assistance

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