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# Burma: Background and Issues for Congress

## Overview

Burma (also known as Myanmar) is a multi-ethnic Southeast Asian nation of 57.5 million that has been under some degree of military rule since 1962 and under an authoritarian military junta since a February 2021 coup d'état. The coup ended a decade-long period of partial democratization and ushered in a broad nationwide conflict that has killed tens of thousands of people and, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), displaced 2.6 million.

More than three years after the coup, the military (commonly known as the *Tatmadaw*) is fighting several ethnic armed groups on Burma's periphery as well as recently formed anti-junta militias across much of the country. Anti-junta activists overseas, including members of the ousted National League for Democracy (NLD), the political party of Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, have created a shadow government called the National Unity Government (NUG), and seek diplomatic recognition. In 2023, the NUG opened an office in Washington, DC.

Congress has taken considerable interest in Burma since a democratic movement rose there in the late 1980s. In the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress, the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 (NDAA 2023; P.L. 117-263) included provisions related to the 2021 coup that had been part of the Burma Unified through Rigorous Military Accountability Act (BURMA Act; H.R. 5497/S. 2937), passed by the House of Representatives on April 6, 2022. The FY2023 NDAA states that it is U.S. policy to “support the people of Burma in their struggle for democracy, freedom, human rights, and justice” and authorizes additional sanctions and non-lethal, technical assistance to resistance groups, among other provisions. Congress also has appropriated resources to provide humanitarian assistance and promote democracy and human rights in Burma.

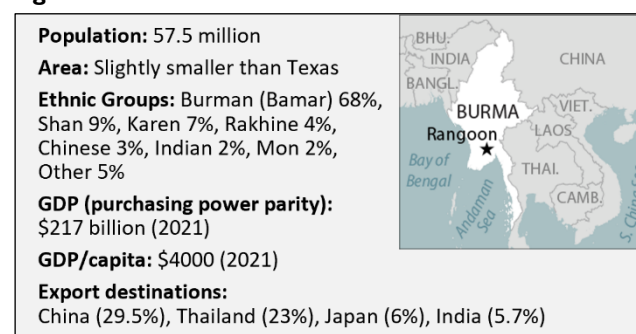
## Historical Background

Burma gained independence from the U.K. in 1948, and in its early years some political leaders, including Aung San Suu Kyi's father, Aung San, sought to develop some form of federalism in the multi-ethnic nation. A 1962 coup installed a military junta that rejected autonomy for ethnic areas, initiating a decades-long period of military rule and ethnic conflict. In 1990, the junta, then known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), ignored the results of a general election won by Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD, and detained her under home arrest.

Beginning in 2010, the junta allowed a partial transition toward a more democratic system, in which a hybrid civilian-military government led the country following

parliamentary elections in 2010 and 2015. The civilian side of the government undertook some political and economic reforms and released thousands of political prisoners, while the military retained control of the country's security ministries and key economic assets. During this period, the military committed grievous human rights abuses, particularly against Burma's Rohingya minority. (See “Plight of the Rohingya,” below.)

**Figure 1. Burma**



**Source:** CIA World Factbook, 2024.

Burma held another election in November 2020, in which the NLD won an overwhelming majority of parliamentary seats, vastly outperforming military parties. Claiming the results were fraudulent, the military launched a coup and installed another junta, known as the State Administrative Council (SAC), led by military commander Min Aung Hlaing. The junta arrested Aung San Suu Kyi and many other NLD leaders.

## Conflict Post-2021

Resistance to the coup gave rise to conflict that has spread across much of Burma. Resistance forces, many made up of ethnic minority groups that already effectively controlled significant territory, have gained control over additional territory particularly since 2023. The military has repeatedly used lethal force against peaceful protestors, waged offensives—including with airstrikes—against ethnic minority militias, and allegedly committed a wide range of human rights violations, including targeted killings, burning of villages, and sexual violence. OCHA reports that as of November 2024, 18.6 million people—33% of the country's population—are in humanitarian need. It cites active fighting, administrative restrictions imposed by all sides, and violence and harassment of humanitarian personnel as barriers to providing assistance.

The resistance to Burma's military junta is diverse, and it is unclear whether its numerous elements share a common vision for the country's future. In April 2021, a group of ousted parliamentarians, most of them in exile, named a “shadow” cabinet, the NUG, which included Aung San Suu

Kyi as “acting State Counsellor” and a full cabinet of ministers, including a shadow foreign minister. Most of the NUG’s membership is comprised of NLD members, but also has named representatives of two minority groups as president and prime minister. The NUG has held Burma’s seat at the United Nations since the coup took place. The European Union (EU) Parliament voted in 2021 to recognize the NUG as the “only legitimate representatives of the democratic wishes of the people of Myanmar.”

Numerous ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) exert varying levels of administrative control in minority-dominated regions of the country and have stepped up their decades-long fight for greater autonomy. In late 2023, three EAOs overran dozens of military posts near the Chinese border. Other opponents of the military government have formed informal militias known as People’s Defense Forces (PDFs) and waged sabotage campaigns against the regime. Analysts say there is some level of coordination among the various forces, but broad agreement on political goals remains elusive. The NUG issued a Federal Democracy Charter in 2021, outlining a roadmap to a post-conflict Burma, but elements of the national resistance—both within and between the NUG and the EAOs—do not agree on the degree of federalism and regional autonomy they seek.

## U.S. Policy

The Biden Administration has responded to the crisis with sanctions and other restrictive actions against the military government. Under Executive Order 14014, the Administration imposed a range of sanctions on the regime, its backers, and numerous military-linked companies including the state oil and gas monopoly, “to disrupt the regime’s access to the U.S. financial system and curtail its ability to perpetrate atrocities.” Following the coup, the Administration has withheld U.S. foreign assistance from Burma’s government, as required by law, while continuing to fund projects to support pro-democracy actors and provide humanitarian assistance. For FY2024, Congress appropriated \$121 million for democracy, human rights, and governance-related programs as well as humanitarian assistance related to Burma. The Administration imposed U.S. entry restrictions on coup leaders and their family members, and strengthened export controls against military-linked companies. It made Burmese citizens who can demonstrate continuous residence in the United States as of March 11, 2021, eligible for Temporary Protected Status.

The United States has sought to support multilateral responses, including through the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the G7, and other fora. It has encouraged efforts by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), of which Burma is a member, to pressure the junta to lessen violence and take part in dialogue with opposition actors. Several U.S. sanctions announcements have been coordinated with sanctions imposed by other nations, including the U.K. and Canada.

## International Actions

The UN Security Council has passed a series of resolutions condemning the coup and calling for a cessation of violence and dialogue among all stakeholders in Burma. In December 2022, UNSC Resolution 2668 called for an

immediate cessation of violence, unhindered access for the provision of humanitarian assistance, and the protection of all civilians. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar issued a report in March 2024 stating that the country’s humanitarian crisis “has continued to worsen.”

In April 2021, ASEAN’s leaders agreed on a “Five-Point Consensus” calling for: an immediate end to violence in the country, dialogue among all parties, the appointment of an ASEAN special envoy, humanitarian assistance from ASEAN to Burma, and the junta to allow the special envoy to visit and meet with all parties. In an expression of disappointment at the junta’s actions, ASEAN has not invited Min Aung Hlaing to its summits since the coup.

The People’s Republic of China (PRC or China) shares a 1,350-mile border with Burma and has maintained links both with successive governments of Burma and with ethnic groups close to its border. There is mistrust between the Burma’s military and Beijing, reflecting Burma’s desire not to be dominated by its larger neighbor and PRC concerns about instability. China tacitly supported an October 2023 offensive by ethnic militia, reportedly due to concerns about the proliferation of cyber-scam operators in Burma that target PRC citizens. However, in a sign of support, the PRC government hosted Min Aung Hlaing in Beijing in November 2024.

## Plight of the Rohingya

The Rohingya, a predominantly Sunni Muslim ethnic minority in Burma, have been subjected to systematic and pervasive discrimination and abuse by Burma’s military since the 1962 coup. Unlike most ethnic groups in Burma, the Rohingya are not recognized by the government or most ethnic-Burman citizens as an “official” ethnic minority. In 1982, the ruling military junta promulgated a citizenship law that stripped the Rohingya of citizenship.

In 2017-2018, violence by the military and others in Rakhine state, home to most of Burma’s Rohingya, killed over 9,000 Rohingya and resulted in the exodus of over 900,000 people into neighboring Bangladesh. The vast majority still reside in refugee camps in Bangladesh. Human Rights Watch estimates that another 130,000 Muslims, overwhelmingly Rohingya, live in internal displacement camps in western Burma, where they settled during earlier periods of violence. Fighting between the junta and EAOs reportedly has resulted in more violence against the roughly 630,000 Rohingya still in Burma.

The United States has designated several military leaders, including Min Aung Hlaing, for sanctions and visa bans related to the violence in Rakhine. In 2019, the Gambia filed an application at the International Court of Justice, arguing that Burma had violated the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced in March 2022 that the United States had determined that members of Burma’s military had committed genocide and crimes against humanity against the Rohingya.

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