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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. After more than four years of conflict and a devastating March 2025 earthquake, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), estimates that 3.5 million people—6% of the country's population—have been displaced since the coup.

The military currently is fighting numerous ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) as well as recently-formed anti-junta militias across much of the country. Some anti-junta groups have gained control over large regions in Burma. 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. Against this backdrop, criminal activity in Burma has flourished. Large cyber-scam operations, many reportedly run by international criminal enterprises, have grown in regions bordering the People's Republic of China (PRC, or China) and Thailand. Human trafficking and illegal trafficking in narcotics, wildlife, and sanctioned materials such as gemstones, continues.

Congress has taken considerable interest in Burma since the emergence of the pro-democracy movement in the late 1980s. In the 117th Congress, the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 (FY2023 NDAA; P.L. 117-263) included provisions related to the 2021 coup that had been part of the proposed Burma Unified through Rigorous Military Accountability Act (BURMA Act; H.R. 5497/S. 2937). 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. In the 119th Congress, the Brave BURMA Act (H.R. 3190) was introduced, calling for a special coordinator for Burma policy. Congress also has appropriated funds for humanitarian assistance and democracy and human rights promotion in Burma, although many of these programs have been impacted by the Trump Administration's cuts to foreign assistance in 2025.

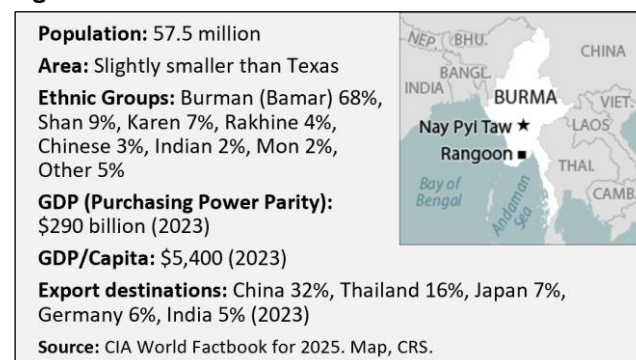
Historical Background

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 minority 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



The NLD won an overwhelming majority of parliamentary seats in November 2020 elections. Claiming the results were fraudulent, the military launched a coup the day before new members were set to be sworn in, and installed a 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 areas, 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

May 2025, 19.9 million people—more than a third 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 March 2025 earthquake, measured at 7.7 on the Richter scale and centered in northern Burma, greatly exacerbated humanitarian need and reportedly killed over 3,800 people. Assistance workers report difficulty in accessing some affected areas, and in delivering aid without restriction from the military.

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. The NUG, most of whose members are NLD members, has held Burma’s seat at the United Nations since the coup took place. Numerous EAOs exert varying levels of administrative control in minority-dominated regions of the country and have stepped up their decades-long fight for autonomy. 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.

U.S. Policy

Following the coup, the Biden Administration responded 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” according to a press statement from then-Secretary of State Antony Blinken. The Administration continued to fund projects to support pro-democracy actors and provide humanitarian assistance. It made citizens of Burma who could demonstrate continuous residence in the United States as of March 11, 2021, eligible for Temporary Protected Status.

For FY2024 and FY2025, Congress appropriated \$121 million annually for democracy, human rights, and governance-related programs as well as humanitarian assistance related to Burma. However, the Trump Administration’s cuts to foreign assistance and its policies toward refugees leaves much U.S. assistance toward Burma and immigrants from Burma in flux. U.S. programs to support refugees from Burma in Thailand reportedly were eliminated in March, as were human rights and democracy programs aimed at groups in exile. The United States sent a humanitarian assessment team to Burma following the March 2025 earthquake. The initial three-person team reportedly arrived a week after the disaster, later than those of other humanitarian donors, and was issued termination notices while on the ground. In June 2025, Burma was listed as one of 12 countries for which the United States would not issue entry visas.

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. In April 2021, leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), of which Burma is a member, agreed on a “Five-Point Consensus” calling for: an immediate end to violence, 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, although he did attend an April 2025 multilateral meeting in Thailand following the earthquake.

China, which shares a 1,350-mile border with Burma, has maintained links with successive national governments and with ethnic groups close to the PRC 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. In 2023, China tacitly supported an offensive by ethnic militias, reportedly due to concerns about the proliferation of cyber-scam operators in Burma that target PRC citizens. In a later sign of support, the PRC government hosted Min Aung Hlaing in Beijing in November 2024. China has substantial infrastructure investments in Burma, including an oil pipeline that connects China with the Bay of Bengal.

Plight of the Rohingya

The Rohingya, a predominantly Sunni Muslim ethnic minority in western 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 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 Rohingya, killed over 9,000 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. In March 2022, then-Secretary Blinken announced a determination that members of Burma’s military had committed genocide and crimes against humanity against the Rohingya.

In both the 118th and 119th Congresses, the Rohingya GAP Act (H.R. 8936; H.R. 4140) was introduced, calling for continued U.S. support for Rohingya humanitarian relief and the naming of a Special Coordinator for policy toward the Rohingya.

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