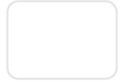


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Amendment grants Myanmar junta sweeping new powers under Anti-Terrorism Law

By RFA Burmese

Myanmar's junta has expanded its ability to target those who seek its removal from power by sharpening the teeth of law that it's already used to jail hundreds of people since seizing power in a coup d'etat two years ago.

The addendum to the Anti-Terrorism Law issued on March 1 allows authorities to eavesdrop on suspects, confiscate their assets and take other steps to crush the opposition, experts say.

The junta will use the amended law to enable its forces to commit atrocities and brand any actions by rebels with the People's Defense Force or other groups as terrorism, said Than Soe Naing, a political analyst.

"The junta is trying to make its crimes – such as burning down villages, confiscating civilian properties and killing their cattle for food – acceptable under their laws," he said.

The provisions were added to the Anti-Terrorism Law that was enacted in 2014 under then-President Thein Sein's quasi-civilian government. The changes – 20 chapters and 120 articles – were published in the junta's Myanmar Alinn newspaper in a series of segments beginning on March 10, and signed by junta Interior Minister Lt. Gen. Soe Htut.

One chapter details the confiscation and control of assets belonging to terrorist groups or individuals and organizations associated with them. Another chapter spells out how authorities can take control of a suspect's assets as part of an investigation, including their bank accounts.

Another provision adds protections for witnesses of the prosecution, including the ability to testify via video conferencing to avoid facing the accused in the courtroom.

Surveillance powers

Six articles in Chapter 14 provide authorities with sweeping new powers over digital information, including the ability to intercept, monitor, cut off and restrict communications, as well as to pinpoint

the location of a suspect. Such information can now be used in investigations into terrorism or the financing of terrorism, and may be submitted as evidence in a court of law.

An IT technician with an opposition group who declined to be named told RFA that while government agencies around the world monitor telecommunications as part of criminal investigations, in Myanmar they are only monitored to investigate the junta's opposition.

"You might be under surveillance unknowingly. If someone transfers some money to us for some reason, it could be confiscated without us even knowing," he said.

"One must bear in mind that even if you are not involved in anti-junta activities, you may be among those under surveillance by the military regime."

According to the new provisions of the Anti-Terrorism Law, authorities can monitor and restrict digital information for up to 60 days on a single approval and can extend such activities "if required."

Cutting off support

Lawyers and political analysts told RFA the new law is aimed at cutting off public support for the country's shadow National Unity Government and the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, or shadow parliament, as well as the People's Defense Force – three organizations that the military regime has declared terrorist groups.

But Thein Tun Oo, the executive director of the Thayninga Institute for Strategic Studies, which is made up of former military officers, said that if the provisional law is followed to the letter, it will help to facilitate peace in the country.

"The law has been enacted already – we just have to wait and see how much can be done according to this law," he said. "If this law can be applied accordingly, I am sure that the violence and conflicts in Myanmar can be controlled to a certain extent."

But a lawyer who spoke to RFA on the condition that his name not be used noted that, immediately following the coup, the junta suspended laws prohibiting law enforcement agencies from monitoring and restricting digital communications.

"We already have laws that protect the basic human rights of citizens, but the junta announced a temporary suspension of those laws," the lawyer said.

"Now, they have enacted a new law to eavesdrop on and intercept people's telecommunications. This means that they no longer need to consider the rights of the people while conducting an investigation."

Lawyers and political analysts also noted that the junta has tried to use the Anti-Terrorism Law as a tool to manipulate the country by appointing new judges to the Supreme Court, suspend existing laws, finalize a controversial cybersecurity bill, and issue various decrees and restrictions.

According to a March 3 report by the United Nations Human Rights Commission, authorities have killed nearly 3,000 people and arrested some 18,000 others in the two years since the coup. Armed conflict is actively affecting at least 255 of Myanmar's 330 townships, the report found.

ecoi.net description:

Junta issued addendum to Anti-Terrorism Law that allows authorities to eavesdrop on suspects, confiscate their assets and take other steps to crush the opposition

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