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Myanmar's junta views opposition party as existential threat that must be eliminated

Two years into Myanmar's coup, members of the country's deposed National League for Democracy are being hunted down and killed or imprisoned in what observers say is a bid by the junta to retain power.

The party of imprisoned leader Aung San Suu Kyi overwhelmingly won Myanmar's November 2020 general election before it was sidelined by the military three months later and sources told RFA Burmese that the junta views the still popular group as an existential threat ahead of new polls it has planned for later this year.

"The military is using vulgar methods to destroy the lives of NLD party members and to prevent the people from supporting it because they are afraid that they will not be free to manipulate and rule the country as long as the NLD exists," Kyaw Htwe, a member of the party's Central Executive Committee said in an interview.

According to the National League for Democracy's human rights research department, junta troops have killed at least 84 party members and officials and arrested at least 1,232 others since the February 2021 coup. Of those killed, 16 died in interrogation, eight in prison, one by execution, and 59 others "for no reason."

Nyunt Shwe, a member of parliament from Bago region, died in prison from Covid-19, while Tin Yee, who represented Kyun Su township in Tanintharyi region at the legislature, died while fleeing arrest.

Nyan Win, a veteran leader of the National League for Democracy who served as the party's secretary, was among the eight members who died in prison.

The 59 party members who died outside of junta custody were murdered by supporters of the military that include veteran groups and pro-military Pyu Saw Htee militias, according to the party's rights research department.

Living in fear

Myanmar democracy icon Suu Kyi, 77, was sentenced to another seven years in prison at the end of 2022 on five counts of alleged corruption, bringing the total number of years she must serve in detention to 33 on 24 counts, prison sources said.

A member of the National League for Democracy in Sagaing region, who declined to be named for security reasons, told RFA that those who belong to the party in areas of the country controlled by the junta live in constant fear for their lives.

"In places where the armed resistance is strong, especially in rural areas, people are free to join up and fight the junta or simply go on with their daily lives," he said.

"But we hear about the situation in the military-controlled urban areas, where members of our party are being killed – shot by groups of pro-military people or dying in horrible attacks."

In one incident on Jan. 14, pro-junta forces killed eight people – including three children – from a family whose home had served as an NLD party office in Sagaing's Kanbalu township prior to the coup.

A person close to the family told RFA that they had been regularly harassed for being party members leading up to the killing.

"All party members in this area have fled for their safety," the source said.

"The military is watching everyone who actively participated in the NLD. They are blackmailed, arrested, and have their homes raided. Honest, upright people are killed by the junta."

In addition to the killings and arrests, the military regime has also confiscated the homes and other assets of up to 605 party members, including at least 206 former members of parliament, the party's rights research department found.

Junta troops have raided party offices, seizing and destroying property in the process, at least 120 times since the coup, it said.

NLD executive committee member Kyaw Htwe told RFA that the party is "carefully documenting" the military's crimes and rights violations and sending evidence to international organizations to build a case for prosecution.

Attempts by RFA to contact the junta for this report about the claims made by the National League for Democracy went unanswered. However, during comments he made on Oct. 6, 2021, junta Deputy Information Minister Major Gen. Zaw Min Tun dismissed claims that the military regime was targeting the party, adding that members had been arrested and prosecuted "because of links to terrorism."

'Eliminating' the NLD and its supporters

Political analyst Than Soe Naing told RFA that the junta is "trying to eliminate" those who support the NLD to maintain its control of the country.

"The military is doing everything it can to get rid of the people and forces defending the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi," he said.

“They are doing this because the military believes that only by removing them will they be able to continue to hold onto power.”

The National League for Democracy said in a statement on Sunday that it continues to oppose efforts by the junta to hold elections and considers those who cooperate with the regime “traitors.”

It called on the international community to help ensure Myanmar’s return to a federal democratic union and to take “effective action” against the junta in accordance with international law.

According to Thailand’s Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma), since Myanmar’s coup, military troops have killed 2,901 civilians and arrested 17,525 others, mostly during peaceful anti-junta protests.

Translated by Myo Min Aung. Edited by Joshua Lipes and Malcolm Foster.

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