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CONFLICT WATCHLIST 2026 **REPORT**

Ahead of elections, Myanmar's military capitalizes on foreign support to divide the resistance

The military's reliance on repression, manipulation of ethnic divisions, and external partnerships will perpetuate cycles of violence and humanitarian suffering.

11 December 2025 • 6-minute read



People walk past destroyed buildings following Myanmar military airstrikes in Kyauktaw town in Myanmar's western Rakhine State on 15 May 2025. Photo by STR/AFP via Getty Images.

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By the numbers

From 1 January to 28 November 2025:

- There were **over 13,700** conflict-related deaths countrywide.
- Military air- and drone strikes increased by **around 30%** compared to 2024.
- Conscription-related abductions increased by **26%** compared to 2024.

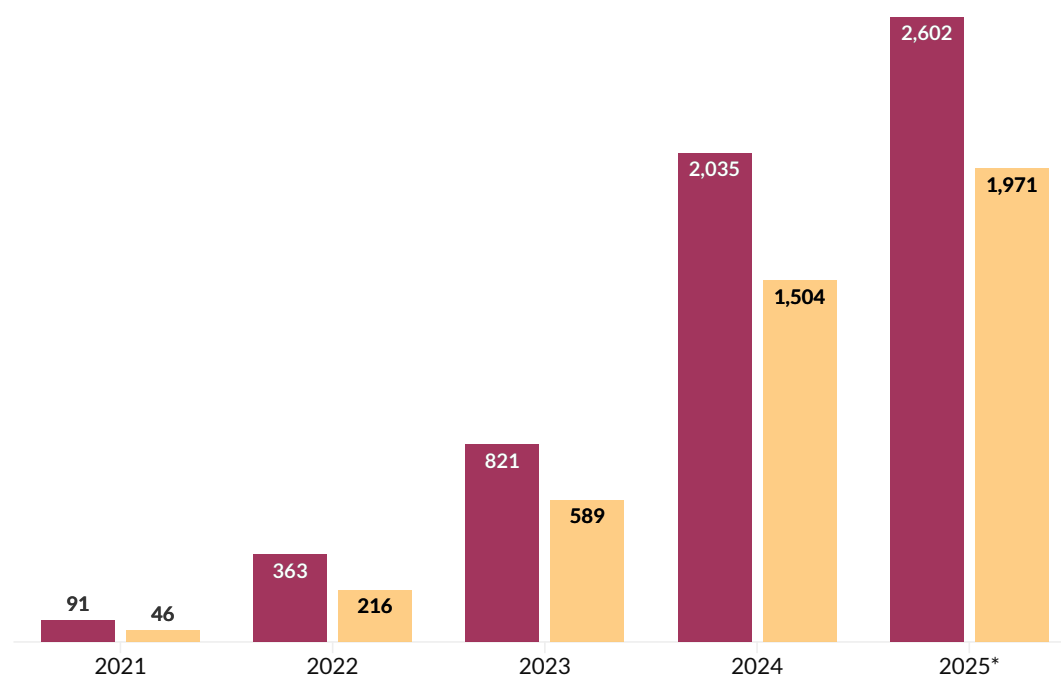
In 2025, Myanmar's military reversed some of the gains made by resistance groups since the 2021 coup. Despite several [unilateral ceasefire announcements](#) following the devastating Sagaing earthquake in March, the military escalated its air raids – reaching the highest ever monthly level in April 2025. The earthquake killed more than 4,000 people and displaced several thousand, yet it did not deter the military from escalating its air campaign in affected areas. In fact, [the military's upgraded drone capabilities](#) and command changes, which allow lower-ranking officers to authorize preemptive airstrikes, enabled a more flexible use of air power in an effort to weaken enemy defenses and morale prior to troop advances.¹ ACLED data illustrate these shifts: By the end of September 2025, ACLED already records the highest number of military airstrikes and resulting fatalities since 2021 (*see chart below*).

Military air and drone strikes in Myanmar

1 January 2021 - 28 November 2025



Number of events Reported fatalities



*ACLED data up to 28 Nov. 2025

Bolstered by Beijing's diplomatic, military, and economic backing, the junta successfully mitigated the growing existential threat posed by Operation 1027, a large-scale military campaign launched by resistance forces that captured 28 towns in northern Shan state and the Mandalay region — a move that had the potential to threaten the garrison town of Pyin Oo Lwin and Mandalay city.

The military's momentum in clawing back the resistance's gains began after Chinese-brokered ceasefires with the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA). In April, MNDAA withdrew from Lashio and escorted junta troops into the town. This opened the Mandalay-Lashio-Muse trade corridor for military operations to re-take towns held by resistance groups. In July, [the Ta'ang National Liberation Army \(TNLA\) retreated from Nawngkhio](#), a junction town and key logistical node between Mandalay and Shan state. This move constrained resistance supply lines and exposed more towns on the trade corridor to military offensives. The resistance groups lost control of lucrative mines and mining towns such as Thabeikkyin. By October, the TNLA also entered into a China-brokered ceasefire with the junta and [agreed to cede Mogoke and Mongmit](#). If the MNDAA and TNLA ceasefires hold, the junta could redeploy more forces from the Northern Shan state campaign to other conflict zones.

The military's successes in 2025 were significant but remain limited in the context of the overall conflict. It remains in a weakened position compared to before the 2021 coup and Operation 1027 and is unable to assert effective control over the areas it has recently re-taken. These areas remain in a state of limbo; most residents who were displaced amid mass destruction of property and returnees face limited services. Meanwhile, the military struggled to respond to new battlefronts in the western Bago, Magway, and Ayeyarwady regions, and it has yet to meaningfully respond to [the Arakan Army's \(AA\) control of nearly the whole of Rakhine state](#).

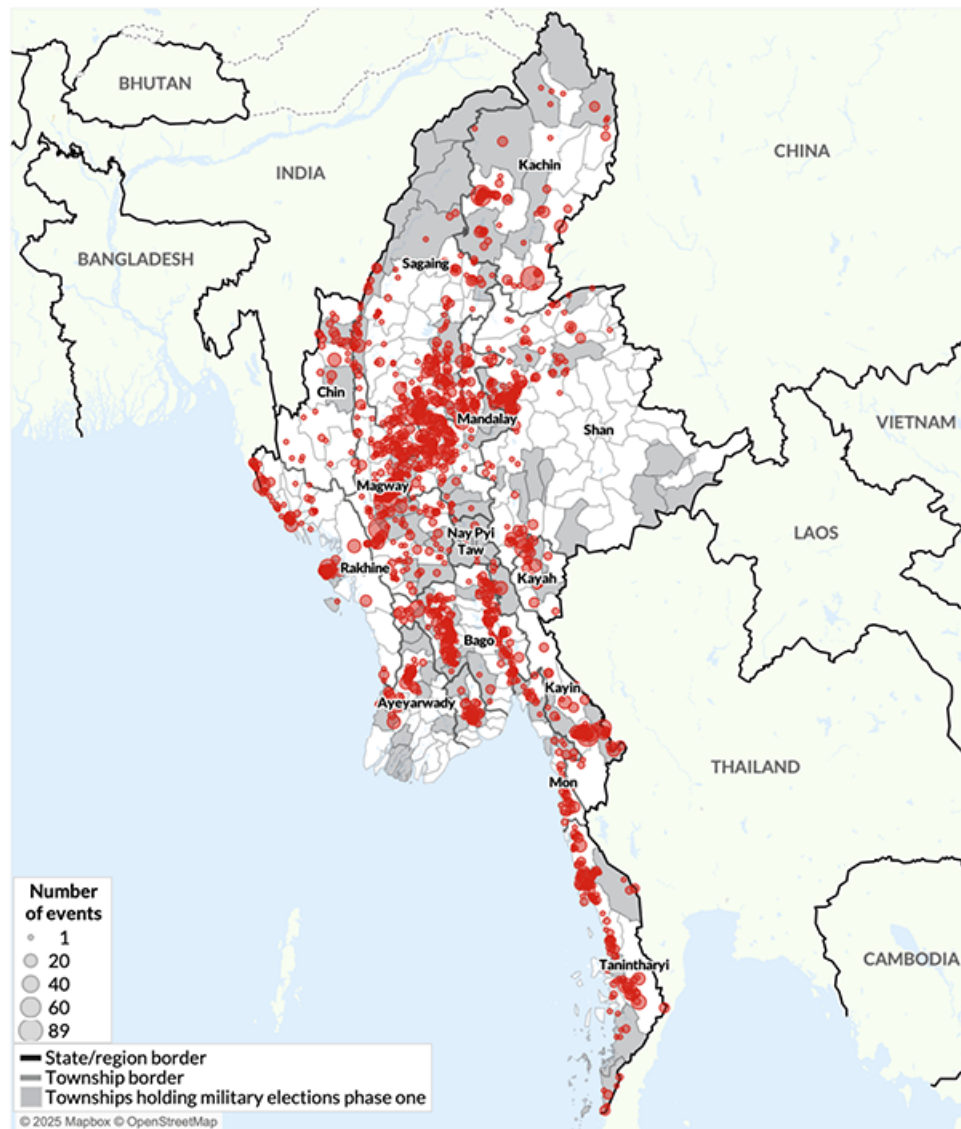
Military ceasefires and elections offer little prospect for de-escalation in 2026

Leading into 2026, the Myanmar military aims to recapture as much territory as possible ahead of its proposed three-phase elections scheduled from 18 December 2025 through January 2026.

Regaining more towns through military means is achievable if the military deploys enough resources, but controlling rural areas will be a significant challenge as resistance to military rule remains widespread throughout the country (*see map below*). While ASEAN member states may not officially endorse the results of the upcoming elections, a lack of atrocities during the election period may hasten the end of the regime's isolation abroad and a gradual normalization of relations with its neighbors.

Violence involving resistance forces in Myanmar

1 January - 28 November 2025



China's support for the elections in Myanmar likely relates to its hope that they will decentralize power within the military regime away from coup leader Min Aung Hlaing and result in a civilian-fronted government that the international community will be more willing to recognize. This shift would quicken the resumption of its own trade with and investment in the country, as well as better ensure the security of its ongoing projects under the Belt and Road Initiative. However, the military remains deeply unpopular across Myanmar, and its coercive elections are unlikely to usher in peace or bring about political stability.

Military repression of civilians is increasing in the lead-up to the vote. According to human rights groups, over 100 civilians have been arrested under its new election protection law.² The law imposes long prison terms and the death penalty for broadly defined acts deemed to obstruct or disrupt the elections.³ Following the elections and throughout 2026, the military is likely to increase surveilling, detaining, and attacking civilians for potential resistance or dissent. Armed resistance groups opposing the military's elections will not allow polls to take place in areas they control,⁴ heightening the risk of violence before and after the elections.

The military's reliance on a tried-and-true divide-and-rule strategy will increasingly define its approach to ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and resistance groups. Its blunting of the anti-coup

resistance movement's momentum in 2025 will enable it to more effectively exploit divisions among EAOs, groups that have or have not agreed to ceasefires, and factions within the resistance movement. The military regime is already pressuring its allied militias and border guard forces to provide security for the elections, potentially causing confrontations with nearby EAOs.⁵

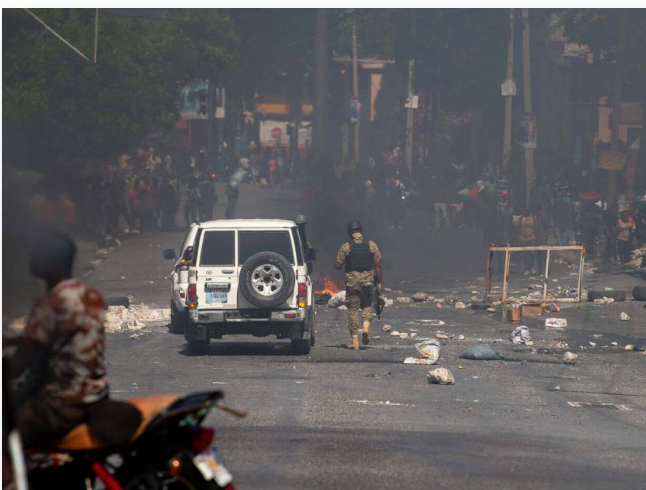
The regime is also successfully supporting an insurgency in the Bangladesh refugee camps on the border with Rakhine state to pressure the AA's rule there and inflame communal tensions between the Rakhine and Rohingya.⁶ Over a million Rohingya refugees — made stateless by the regime — continue to languish in desperate conditions in the Bangladesh camps.

The junta will likely maintain and leverage its ties with regional powers — particularly India, China, Bangladesh, and Thailand — to constrain resistance groups operating along border areas. Regime leader Min Aung Hlaing, although formally excluded from ASEAN, had meetings with several regional heads of state in 2025, including at a China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting, which bolstered the military's hopes of formal international recognition of its government. Enhanced cooperation with neighboring nations, in particular, could further restrict informal border trade options for resistance groups, which rely on these to survive. This could lead to increased friction between border-based resistance groups and foreign security forces. Tensions already exist, as exemplified by the Bangladesh Border Guard firing small arms at AA posts for the first time on 5 November.⁷

For their part, the setbacks suffered by resistance groups in 2025 partly reflect the lack of a unified political vision beyond the goal of ending military rule and poor coordination among armed groups. Many anti-junta groups remain focused on localized territorial control rather than building cohesive national strategies. Efforts toward greater collaboration — such as the August meeting between the Kachin Independence Army, Chin Brotherhood, and Sagaing-based groups — signal potential for renewed momentum, but tangible outcomes are limited.

Likewise, the AA has sought to enhance coordination with smaller post-coup resistance forces in the Bago, Magway, and Mandalay regions. The extent and outcome of such dialogue initiatives are not yet clear. Without significant progress toward unified command or shared political frameworks,

Myanmar ranks among the top five countries with the most intense political violence in the world.



Conflict Index

The ACLED Conflict Index is a global assessment of how and where conflicts in every country and territory in the world vary according to four indicators — deadliness, danger to civilians, geographic diffusion, and the number of armed groups.

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Footnotes

- 1 [Myanmar Defense & Security Institute, “Changes and Adaptations in Command, Control, and Strategic Aerial Operations of the Junta’s Air Force,” April 2025](#)
- 2 [Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, “Daily Briefing in Relation to the Military Coup,” 3 December 2025; Eleven Media Group, “In Chaung Sone Township, a man charged under the Election Security Law, including for obstruction of duties, has been sentenced to 17 years in prison”, 20 November 2025 \(Burmese\)](#)
- 3 [Myo Pyae, “Myanmar Junta Silences Election Criticism With Mass Arrests,” The Irrawaddy, 3 November 2025](#)
- 4 [Zaw Myat Khant, “Ethnic Armies Vow to Thwart Myanmar Junta’s Election,” The Irrawaddy, 15 August 2025](#)
- 5 [Phoe Tar, “Three Karen Armed Groups Agree to Provide Security for Myanmar Junta’s Election,” The Irrawaddy, 30 September 2025](#)
- 6 [International Crisis Group, “Bangladesh/Myanmar: The Dangers of a Rohingya Insurgency,” 18 June 2025](#)
- 7 [Thinzar Nwe, “Bangladesh Border Guards fire small arms at Arakan Army \(AA\) security post on Rakhine-Bangladesh border,” Narinjara, 6 November 2025](#)

COUNTRY

Myanmar

REGION

Asia-Pacific