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Conflict Watchlist 2024

Myanmar: Resistance to the Military Junta Gains Momentum

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Despite severe military repression, resistance groups in Myanmar opposing the February 2021 coup revitalized their armed struggle against the military junta in late 2023. Several armed resistance organizations coordinated attacks across the country in an ongoing campaign called *Operation 1027*. The allied forces successfully capitalized on sustained and widespread pressure on the Myanmar military by hundreds of resistance groups formed since the deadly military crackdown on peaceful protests against the coup.¹ They seized many towns, military bases, and outposts, generating follow-on initiatives and giving momentum to the resistance going into 2024. The National Unity Government (NUG), composed of lawmakers ousted by the coup, promised “wave after wave” of victories,² while the prolonged intensity of the conflict has pushed Myanmar to the top of the [ACLED Conflict Index](#).

These developments may mark a turning point in the conflict. After months of preparation, *Operation 1027* commenced on 27 October in northern Shan state led by the Brotherhood Alliance, composed of the Myanmar National Truth and Justice Party/Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNTJP/MNDAA), the Palaung State Liberation Front/Ta’ang National Liberation Army (PSLF/TNLA), and the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA). In contrast to other ethnic resistance groups – such as the Kachin Independence Organization/Kachin Independence Army, Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army, Chin National Front/Chin National Army, and Karenni National Progressive Party/Karenni Army – who have regularly collaborated with the NUG to resist the military junta, *Operation 1027* was the first time the Brotherhood Alliance openly coordinated militarily with the NUG.³

The operation also sparked renewed fighting to the west in Rakhine state where clashes between the military and the ULA/AA, a member of the Brotherhood Alliance, had largely subsided since November 2022. Meanwhile, other resistance forces seized on the momentum of *Operation 1027* to attempt similar campaigns in their respective areas of operation. Karenni resistance forces, for example, initiated *Operation 1111* with the goal of taking Loikaw town, the capital of Kayah state, and Pekon town in southern Shan state.

The increased tempo of the many campaigns being waged by resistance forces has reportedly yielded significant losses for the Myanmar military. Alongside the deaths of high-ranking officers,⁴ many of the rank and file in the military are losing the will to fight. Defections have prompted the military to issue a call for soldiers to return to their barracks.⁵ The military has sought to portray the situation in the country as one of ethnic armed groups seizing on disorder to promote their own agendas. Yet, while the military has tried to equivocate its collapse with the collapse of the state,⁶ many of the ethnic groups involved in the revolution have emphasized their commitment to upholding the union of Myanmar.⁷ The MNTJP/MNDAA of the Brotherhood Alliance, whose reputation has benefited from its decision to ally with revolutionary forces,⁸ has also signaled that its objectives in launching *Operation 1027* encompass more than just territorial concerns, stating that one of its goals is to “eradicate the military dictatorship.”⁹

What to watch for in 2024

Attacks against the civilian population by the military spiked notably after the start of *Operation 1027*, particularly in northern Shan and Rakhine states. Clashes between the army and resistance forces are typically accompanied by increased shelling of civilian populated areas. During a meeting between the military and the Brotherhood Alliance in December, the military allegedly threatened to continue their “aerial bombardment” of towns and villages seized during *Operation 1027*.¹⁰ The ongoing fighting also puts civilians in neighboring countries at risk, most recently with an artillery shell landing in China leading to civilian casualties at the start of the new year.¹¹

Despite multiple setbacks, fighting between the military and resistance forces is likely to continue in 2024. **The NUG's strategy of "all roads lead to Nay Pyi Taw" has led the military to take action to further fortify the capital**, increasingly under threat of infiltration from the resistance forces.¹² Momentum gained from the successes of *Operation 1027* may favor the resistance continuing an effort to seize control of towns, though analysts have noted the limitations of this approach.¹³ Resistance groups have had varying degrees of success maintaining their hold on and administering towns once seized.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the start of 2024 saw the seizure of Laukaing in northern Shan state by the MNTJP/MNDAA following the surrender of soldiers from the Regional Operation Command in the town.¹⁵

The prevalence of many armed groups involved in the resistance may also cause friction as the resistance gains ground against the military. The emergence of multiple armed groups in opposition to the coup has been a point of strength for the revolution as local communities took up the mantle of resisting military occupation rather than being compelled to fight by a single group. This has meant that resistance groups have stronger connections to their communities, better knowledge of the landscape, and a dedication to seeing that the ideals for which they fight are upheld. While there have been clashes between some resistance groups formed after the coup, ACLED records only 16 such events over the nearly three years since the coup. More often, multiple armed groups work together to coordinate attacks on military positions, with an increasing number of battles fought between the military and resistance forces involving more than one anti-coup armed group operating jointly. Thus, while the sheer number of anti-coup armed groups creates challenges for successful intergroup coordination and future demobilization, the shared commitment to defeating the military junta is a strong basis on which to build a future absent of military rule.

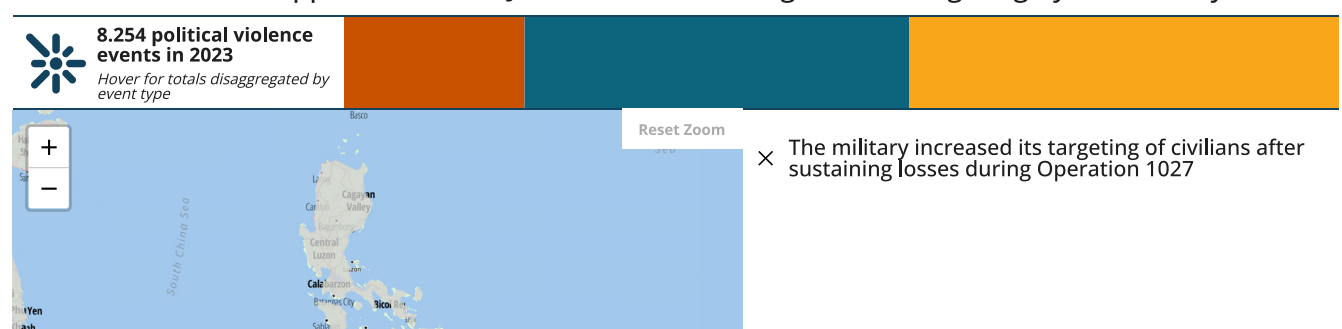
Resistance forces continue to engage in discussions to develop a vision for the country without the military junta.¹⁶ The NUG is likely to continue to establish People's Administration Teams (Pa Ah Pha) in areas under its control. Meanwhile, resistance groups in the borderlands have formed governing bodies such as the Chinland Council in Chin state and the Interim Executive Council in Kayah state in an effort to consolidate the gains of resistance forces in these areas.¹⁷ Debates persist over what form of governance might best serve the many polities that comprise Myanmar.¹⁸ The ability of the many revolutionary groups to negotiate among themselves and the public to build an inclusive system of governance will be key to stability.

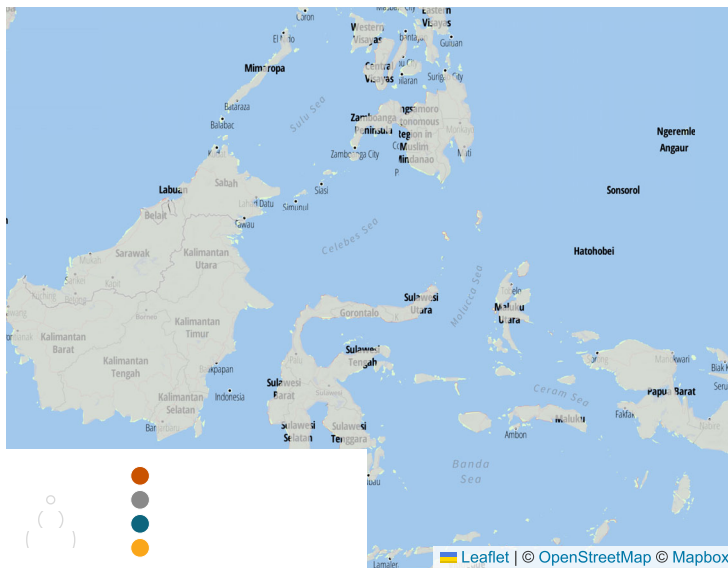
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+ In battles between the military and resistance groups, joint actions involving more than one resistance group progressively increased in 2023

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