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Resisting the Resistance: Myanmar's Pro-military Pyusawhti Militias

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What's new? As anti-coup forces grow stronger in central Myanmar, the military has increasingly relied upon pro-regime networks of armed civilians commonly known as Pyusawhti. This strategy has largely failed, with the Pyusawhti facing stiff resistance and getting limited protection from overstretched security forces.

Why does it matter? Although the Pyusawhti have gained little traction, they have received military training, making them more lethal. Their involvement in regime atrocities has put them in the crosshairs of resistance groups, leading to tit-for-tat killings that risk unleashing long-term cycles of communal violence.

What should be done? With no hope of quickly restoring law and order, informal justice mechanisms may, despite obvious limitations, be the best hope for constraining escalatory communal violence and providing non-violent means of redress for victims. Preserving the possibility of international accountability through the UN-established Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar will also help.

I. Overview

Following the Myanmar military's February 2021 coup d'état, various forms of armed resistance have emerged, alongside peaceful responses. Some of the most persistent and tactically innovative cells are battling soldiers in what is called the Dry Zone, to the west of Mandalay in the Burman Buddhist heartland. In an attempt to quash them, the security forces have turned to networks of pro-military civilians, widely referred to as Pyusawhti, for reinforcements, intelligence and knowledge of the terrain. But this strategy has failed to constrain the resistance movements, instead bringing a wave of attacks on those suspected of pro-regime sentiments or activities, leading to Pyusawhti reprisals. The danger is that this cycle of violence becomes self-sustaining. With no hope of reversing the coup in the near or medium term, informal community justice mechanisms might be the most promising means for preventing the increasingly gruesome tit-for-tat killings by giving victims non-violent means of redress. International justice mechanisms also help by threatening future accountability for atrocities.

The Myanmar military, or Defence Services, has a long history of raising militias as part of its counter-insurgency operations, particularly in Myanmar's uplands,

where it has been fighting ethnic armed groups for more than 70 years. Over the decades, it has also mobilised irregular forces – bands of thugs whom it has recruited ad hoc and paid daily wages – to crack down on protesters and political opponents.

Following the coup, the junta attempted to use this *modus operandi* to quell the nationwide resistance movements. But the generals learned early on that the coup's unpopularity made ad hoc recruiting difficult, and so the military changed its approach. In the Dry Zone and other parts of the Burman Buddhist heartland where they face stubborn and effective armed resistance, the security forces turned to pro-military Pyusawhti networks for back-up, intelligence and knowledge of local geography.

The original Pyusawhti groups arose out of a government militia-forming strategy in the 1950s, and were named after a semi-mythical warrior-king from the Burmese chronicles. The emergence of Pyusawhti militias today, however, appears to have a different backstory. Today's groups evolved out of pre-existing local networks consisting of individuals who are ideologically pro-regime, as well as others – such as members of the military-established Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) – who fear being targeted by the resistance, whether or not they actively support the junta. Security forces are providing these networks with basic training and rudimentary weapons. While the military is stretched too thin to protect them from retaliation, it regularly launches revenge attacks when anti-coup resistance cells hit Pyusawhti groups.

The military's attempt to use the Pyusawhti against anti-coup forces has foundered, however, due to the strength of anti-regime sentiment, the risk of reprisal against those who do sign up has increased. The pro-regime militias, if anything, may have deepened popular hatred of the regime with their involvement in reported atrocities and their campaign against the resistance. That victims of violence on both sides have neither effective state protection nor legal recourse augments their inclination to take matters into their own hands, leading to tit-for-tat reprisals and the potential for greater escalation. Myanmar's judicial system independence was badly compromised to begin with, and following the coup broke down completely, depriving individuals of what protection they had beforehand.

Responsibility for this sad state of affairs lies squarely with the regime, not only for mounting the coup and dispensing with what existed of the rule of law, but also for unleashing horrific violence on civilians thereafter. Nonetheless, resistance forces must also take responsibility for the actions of their members, some of whom have also committed what appear to be crimes. The National Unity Government, a parallel administration created by ousted lawmakers after the coup, has issued guidance and rules of engagement for resistance fighters, but it cannot hope to police the behaviour of the many different groups spread across the country.

The best remedy for the situation – to reverse the coup and restore a modicum of law and order across the country – is not on the cards for the foreseeable future. Against this backdrop, outside actors should continue to focus on denying political legitimacy to the junta, targeting sanctions at the military and its business interests, preventing the flow of arms to the regime, and engaging closely with the National Unity Government and other legitimate representatives of Myanmar's peoples, including the Rohingya.

As for Pyusawhti-related violence, the bodies within Myanmar that may be best positioned to make inroads are informal justice mechanisms. These structures, which

rely on the authority of community elders and religious figures, have an important role in dispute resolution and conflict mitigation in Myanmar, and could help provide victims with non-violent means of redress and thus help stop cycles of revenge from spinning out of control. The turbulent post-coup environment has tended to limit the ability of these figures to constrain violence, but over time they could regain their traditional influence. International bodies such as the UN-established Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar can also assist by looking into post-coup atrocities and collecting information that enables future efforts to hold perpetrators to account.

II. History of Irregular Forces in Myanmar

A. Dealing with Post-independence Chaos

The Myanmar army has made use of irregular forces throughout its decades-long fight with numerous insurgencies, as well as for the purposes of protecting individual political leaders.¹ The practice dates back to the Burma army's earliest years, during World War II, and continued after independence from Britain in 1948. Myanmar was in tumult at the time, with three quarters of towns having fallen to various rebel groups, half of the government's troops having mutinied and the 2,000 soldiers who remained barely able to control the capital, Yangon.² The large quantity of weapons left over from World War II added to the disorder, with politicians, parliamentarians, business owners and black marketeers all raising their own teams of gunmen, known as "pocket armies".³ Over the course of the 1950s, the beleaguered government authorised formation of militias across the country, known variously as "levies", "volunteer defence forces" and "special reserves", though these initiatives mostly just gave legal cover to the pocket armies.⁴

One of these initiatives was the formation in 1955 of the original Pyusawhti militias. The name refers to a semi-mythical early king of Bagan, from a dynasty that began in 849 C.E. and that, at its height (around 1200 C.E.), was the first to incorporate most of what is now Myanmar.⁵ The Burmese chronicles say that Pyusawhti was a fearsome warrior, who vanquished four dangerous beasts (a giant bird, boar, tiger and

¹ For Crisis Group reporting since the 1 February 2021 coup, see Asia Briefings N°s 166, *Responding to the Myanmar Coup*, 16 February 2021; 167, *The Cost of the Coup: Myanmar Edges Toward State Collapse*, 1 April 2021; 168, *Taking Aim at the Tatmadaw: The New Armed Resistance to Myanmar's Coup*, 28 June 2021; 170, *The Deadly Stalemate in Post-Coup Myanmar*, 20 October 2021; Asia Reports N°s 314, *Myanmar's Military Struggles to Control the Virtual Battlefield*, 18 May 2021 and 319, *Myanmar's Coup Shakes Up Its Ethnic Conflicts*, 12 January 2022; and Q&As, *A Close-up View of Myanmar's Leaderless Mass Protests*, 26 February 2021 and *One Year On from the Myanmar Coup*, 25 January 2022.

² See Mary P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca, 2003), chapter 5.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. See also John Buchanan, "Militias in Myanmar", The Asia Foundation, July 2016.

⁵ The various Burmese chronicles and contemporary historical scholarship disagree about when the Pagan dynasty began and what role Pyusawhti played in founding it. See Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps* (London, 2006), chapter 3; and Michael Aung-Thwin, *The Mists of Ramanā: The Legend That Was Lower Burma* (Honolulu, 2005).

flying squirrel) that were terrorising the local people.⁶ In the 1950s, the War Office (a precursor to the defence ministry) pitched the Pyusawhti militias as local forces that would similarly protect the people from the predation of insurgents and armed robbers.⁷ Authorities raised these militias in places across the country, placing them under the oversight of army field commanders in their respective areas of responsibility, with the intention that they would free the army from tedious routine security functions.⁸ In practice, the Pyusawhti, like other irregulars, were often partisan – loyal to local ruling-party politicians – and the army attempted to disarm and disband them after its 1958 coup, with mixed success.⁹

B. *Subcontracting Conflict Management*

Despite the patchy record of militias in the post-independence years, the Myanmar military continued to make use of irregulars to perform local security functions and keep insurgencies in check.¹⁰ Separate from the Pyusawhti, from the 1960s onward, the Defence Services offered insurgents across the country the chance to convert into military-aligned Ka Kwe Ye [“defensive”] militias, later called Border Guard Forces, allowing them to keep their arms and giving them a free hand to engage in (often illicit) business in exchange for their loyalty.¹¹ The military also established hundreds of new village-level militias in insecure areas – mostly small, poorly trained and lightly armed *pyithusit*, or “people’s forces” – which the army used as patrolmen and in particular as informants.¹²

These militias created by the military government, which ruled the country from 1962 to 2011, were nearly all established in the uplands, where the regime confronted insurgencies fighting for self-rule for various ethnic minorities. Such counter-insurgency tactics were not needed in the Burman-majority lowlands, where the security forces established firm control, at least in recent decades.

C. *Organised Political Violence*

The military periodically mobilised irregulars in the Burman heartland as well, however, to intimidate its political opponents and crack down on protesters.¹³ These networks were known by various names, the most widely used of which was *swan ar shin*

⁶ See *The Glass Palace Chronicles of the Kings of Burma* (Yangon, 1960).

⁷ Callahan, op. cit., chapter 7.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (New York, 1999); and Mary Callahan, *Political Authority in Burma's Ethnic Minority States: Devolution, Occupation and Coexistence* (Washington, 2007). See also Crisis Group Asia Report N°299, *Fire and Ice: Conflict and Drugs in Myanmar's Shan State*, 8 January 2019.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² See Buchanan, “Militias in Myanmar”, op. cit.; and Andrew Selth, *Burma's Armed Forces: Power Without Glory* (Norwalk, 2002), p. 78.

¹³ By the colonial-era Code of Criminal Procedure, local authorities had the power to “require the assistance of any male person” to disperse an unlawful assembly, although the code appears to have been rarely if ever explicitly invoked in such mobilisations. The Code of Criminal Procedure [India Act V, 1898] (as amended), section 128.

[literally, “masters of force”]. Members were reportedly thugs recruited by local authorities in poor peri-urban areas and paid by the day; they wore civilian clothes so that they would not be easily identifiable.¹⁴ The previous military regime deployed them most notoriously for the attack on the convoy escorting Aung San Suu Kyi, the dissident who became leader of Myanmar’s democratically elected government (and whom the coup deposed), through Dipeyin (Tabayin) township in 2003, as well as during the Saffron Revolution of 2007.¹⁵ Occasionally, *swan ar shin* networks were referred to as Pyusawhti groups in the Myanmar media, likely a nod to the role played by the pro-military militias in the 1950s.¹⁶

In many places, it was common knowledge who had been recruited to these forces, to the extent that members were openly transported in police trucks and conducted morning drills in public areas.¹⁷ On occasion, they wore distinct items of clothing so that the security forces could tell them from protesters.¹⁸ In 2015, for example, poorly trained *swan ar shin* wearing red armbands were widely photographed breaking up student protests in downtown Yangon.¹⁹ Military authorities, however, did not publicly acknowledge that these forces existed or admit to supporting them, and the individuals involved did not usually identify themselves or disclose how they had been recruited.

The militias’ involvement in violence – and their connection to the Defence Services – is sometimes clear and sometimes not. The *swan ar shin* were blamed for several violent episodes, leaving the impression that they were a standing paramilitary force rather than an ad hoc mob. But many such reports were based on conjecture. For example, commentators suggested that *swan ar shin* instigated the wave of anti-Muslim violence that swept through Myanmar in 2012 and 2013.²⁰ Yet no evidence for this assertion came to light, and contemporaneous Crisis Group investigations cast doubt on their involvement in some of the most serious violent incidents.²¹ By contrast, there did appear to be military collusion with, if not outright support for, Rakhine vigilantes who attacked Rohingya villages in October 2012.²² The connivance was obvious during the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya in 2016–2017, when such

¹⁴ For detail on recruitment and use of *swan ar shin*, see “Crackdown: Repression of the 2007 Popular Protests in Burma”, Human Rights Watch, 6 December 2007.

¹⁵ Ibid. See also “Myanmar junta uses gangs not guns to crush dissent”, Reuters, 30 August 2007. The Saffron Revolution was a series of anti-regime demonstrations led by Buddhist monks, which the army brutally quashed.

¹⁶ See, for example, “Mandalay officials arm themselves with homemade weapons”, *Mizzima News*, 1 March 2006, which concludes with the observation: “Before the infamous Dipeyin attack on NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi on 30 May 2003, authorities in Mandalay and Monywa are known to have armed themselves with bamboo sticks, formed the *swan ar shin* force and Pyusawhti forces and participated in combat training”.

¹⁷ Andrew Selth, “Burma: The return of the ‘vigilantes’”, *The Interpreter* (Lowy Institute), 22 April 2015.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ See for example, “Burma recruits vigilante ‘Duty’ mobs to quell student protests”, *Asian Correspondent*, 6 March 2015.

²¹ See Crisis Group Asia Reports N°238, *Myanmar: Storm Clouds on the Horizon*, 12 November 2012 and N°251, *The Dark Side of Transition: Violence Against Muslims in Myanmar*, 1 October 2013. See also Selth, “Burma: The return of the ‘vigilantes’”, op. cit.

²² Crisis Group Report, *Dark Side of Transition*, op. cit., Section III.B.

vigilantes carried out killings, rapes, looting and arson with impunity, including within sight of foreign journalists.²³ Unlike the *swan ar shin*, these vigilante groups formed organically but then received military support.

III. Evolution of the Pyusawhti

A. Tactical Challenges

In the coup's immediate aftermath, the regime returned to its old tactics, mobilising thugs to scatter demonstrators, but these efforts mostly failed. On 25 February 2021, three days after a national strike and with protests swelling across the country, a pro-military mob of hundreds attacked demonstrators and residents in downtown Yangon with clubs and slingshots.²⁴ Residents captured at least 22 of the attackers and detained them for most of the day, in a tense standoff with police that ended when residents eventually handed them over.²⁵ So strong was public opposition to the coup that security forces were not easily able to protect their hired thugs anywhere in the country. In many cases, members of these mobs faced stiff resistance even in their own poor neighbourhoods, where the vast majority of residents supported the anti-regime protests.²⁶

As the regime cracked down with increasing brutality, and demonstrations gave way to determined armed resistance, the security forces faced increasing difficulties recruiting non-uniformed assistance. While raising militias has been part and parcel of the military's standard strategy for decades in fighting insurgencies, doing so in a context where anti-military sentiment is so widely held has been much more difficult.²⁷ People who had pro-military leanings – or who thought others would suspect them of having such sympathies – were isolated to the degree that they feared being targeted by resistance forces.

Consequently, pro-military civilians began organising themselves into what were initially loose self-protection networks that the military subsequently used for its own purposes. Early reports of such mobilisation came from Mingin township in Sagaing Region, where the USDP enjoys significant support, and soon thereafter the phenomenon spread to other parts of the Dry Zone, as well as elsewhere in Myanmar.²⁸

²³ See Crisis Group Asia Report N°292, *Myanmar's Rohingya Crisis Enters a Dangerous New Phase*, 7 December 2017; and Jonathan Head, "Rohingya crisis: Seeing through the official story in Myanmar", BBC, 11 September 2017.

²⁴ See "Pro-military mob attacks local residents, anti-coup protesters in downtown Yangon", *Myanmar Now*, 25 February 2021.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, local journalist, Yangon, August 2021.

²⁷ The Defence Services faced a similar situation in Rakhine State during the intense conflict with the Arakan Army from 2019 to 2021, when it was equally unsuccessful in forming militias by co-opting rival armed groups or exploiting internal splits in enemy ranks given the widespread popular support for the insurgent group. See Crisis Group Asia Report N°312, *Identity Crisis: Ethnicity and Conflict in Myanmar*, 28 August 2020.

²⁸ Mingin was the only township in Sagaing Region the USDP won in the 2015 elections, although in 2020 it lost the seat to the NLD, which took the whole region in a clean sweep. On the emergence

Thus, unlike with the *swan ar shin* and the original Pyusawhti militias in the 1950s, the security forces do not appear to have rolled out a comprehensive militia-formation strategy after the coup. Rather, the first pro-regime militias seem to have evolved in the manner of the anti-Muslim vigilantes active in 2012-2013, or those who attacked the Rohingya in Rakhine State in 2016 and 2017, in the sense that they formed organically, often out of pre-existing local networks, but with the tacit acceptance – and later, active support – of the security forces.²⁹ These networks included Buddhist nationalists, USDP members and army veterans who had come together ahead of the November 2020 elections in the hope of defeating Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD).

B. Local Pyusawhti Mobilisation

Some pro-regime networks self-identify as Pyusawhti, but others do not, and the resistance movement and Myanmar independent media are using the term to refer to any group of civilians providing support to regime forces – or those with political affiliations that make them suspect, such as USDP members, nationalists or military veterans whether or not they belong to such a group. The term's prevalence can give the impression that the Pyusawhti is a larger, more coherent organisation or group of organisations than is actually the case. Rather than a national military-established body with local branches, the Pyusawhti is more accurately described as a loosely connected set of village-level networks across the country, having widely varying characteristics and capabilities.

As suggested above, members of these networks include people who are ideologically pro-regime, as well as those – such as some USDP members, for example – who fear that the resistance will target them, whether or not they are actively backing the junta.³⁰ But not all individuals assumed to be in Pyusawhti are in fact affiliated with such a network. Indeed, in some cases, USDP members have reportedly made contact with the resistance in an attempt to avoid assassination, by providing support or giving assurances that they will not oppose resistance forces or act as informants against them.³¹

Crisis Group research in Magway Region – a resistance stronghold in the Dry Zone – indicates that Pyusawhti militias in this area evolved out of pro-military demonstrations following the coup.³² Those demonstrations, in March 2021, were composed mostly of USDP members and militant Buddhist nationalists, who had already come together for electoral campaigns ahead of the November 2020 polls.³³ The USDP,

of Pyusawhti in Mingin, see “‘A threat to the revolution’: Pyusawhti returns to post-coup Myanmar”, *Frontier Myanmar*, 14 July 2021.

²⁹ See Crisis Group Reports, *Storm Clouds on the Horizon; Dark Side of Transition*; and *Myanmar's Rohingya Crisis Enters a Dangerous New Phase*, all op. cit.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, journalists and researchers, November 2021-February 2022.

³¹ See “Armed resistance replaces anti-coup protests in Pauk township”, *Frontier Myanmar*, 31 August 2021.

³² The Dry Zone is an agro-ecological zone that encompasses parts of Magway, Sagaing and Mandalay Regions.

³³ Crisis Group interviews, prominent local defence force leader, pro-military militia leader, Pauk township, December 2021. For detailed discussion of Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°290, *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*, 5 September 2017.

which suffered an embarrassing defeat in those elections, supported the coup, echoing the military's justification by claiming that the balloting had been marred by fraud.³⁴ For their part, Buddhist nationalists have been increasingly active over the last decade, backing the USDP and strongly opposing the NLD out of fear that political reforms and modernisation threatened the traditional place of Buddhism in society.³⁵

By May 2021, some of those who had participated in the earlier pro-military demonstrations had organised themselves into village-based militias.³⁶ At this time, resistance groups were arming themselves more systematically, in response to the military's atrocities, and beginning to assassinate perceived regime sympathisers.³⁷

At first, pro-regime networks appeared confident that military backing would give them power and impunity. According to a resistance leader in Pauk township, in May 2021, members of a nascent militia circulated a pamphlet in the name of the Pyusawhti listing the names of 21 local anti-regime figures that they would capture "dead or alive", including herself.³⁸ But instead the pamphlet incurred the wrath of resistance forces, who began targeting Pyusawhti members as a priority.³⁹ One pro-regime militia leader in the area told Crisis Group that the resistance tried to assassinate him at home on 12 June 2021, failing because he managed to escape through a back door.⁴⁰

The regime thus faces two broad challenges in rolling out a militia strategy for combating the rise of anti-coup resistance forces. First, the strength of anti-regime sentiment across much of Myanmar is such that pro-regime militias often become targets for resistance forces rather than a tool for the security forces to project power. Resistance forces have assassinated more than 1,000 allegedly pro-regime individuals since mid-2021, including almost 200 known or rumoured to be involved with pro-regime militias.⁴¹ The majority of these killings were in the Dry Zone and adjacent townships; resistance forces have also killed groups of militia members in clashes.⁴²

³⁴ See "Claiming Electoral Fraud, Myanmar Military and Proxy Party Calls Special Parliament Session", *The Irrawaddy*, 11 January 2021; and "နိုင်ငံရေးပါတီ (၂၃) ပါတီ၏ ပူးတွဲသဘောထားထုတ်ပြန်ကြေညာချက်" ["Statement on the joint opinion of 23 political parties" [including USDP]], 3 February 2021, posted to the official USDP Facebook page.

³⁵ See Crisis Group Report, *Buddhism and State Power*, op. cit.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, pro-military militia leader, prominent local defence force leader, Pauk township, December 2021.

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, analyst with detailed knowledge of local defence force mobilisation in the Dry Zone, February 2022. See also Crisis Group Briefings, *The Cost of the Coup*, op. cit., Section III.B; and *Taking Aim at the Tatmadaw*, op. cit., Section II. See also "Armed resistance replaces anti-coup protests in Pauk township", *Frontier Myanmar*, 31 August 2021.

³⁸ Crisis Group interview, prominent local defence force leader, Pauk township, December 2021.

³⁹ Ibid. See also "ပျူစောထီးဆိုတာ ဘယ်သူတွေလဲ၊ သူတို့ ဘာတွေလုပ်နေလဲ" ["Who are the Pyusawhti? What are they doing?"], *Radio Free Asia*, 12 May 2021.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, pro-military militia leader, Pauk township, December 2021.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, researcher tracking violent incidents, January 2022.

⁴² Ibid. See also, for example, "ကြုံရကောက် တိုက်ပွဲတွင် ပျူစောထီး ၅ ဦးသေဆုံး" ("Five Pyusawhti members killed in clashes in Gyobingauk"), *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 9 February 2022; and "ပုလဲတွင် ပျူစောထီးများ၏ စစ်သင်တန်းတိုက်ခိုက်ခံရသောကြောင့် စစ်ကောင်စီတပ်သား နှစ်ဦးနှင့် ပျူစောထီး သုံးဦးသေဆုံး" ("Two regime soldiers and three Pyusawhti members killed in attack on Pyusawhti military training course in Pale"), 74 Media, 23 January 2022.

In several cases, they have captured and disarmed such militias, who complain of a lack of support from the police and military.⁴³

Secondly, the military and police are overstretched in the Dry Zone theatre and face constant attacks by the resistance when on the move, particularly in rural areas. Resistance forces also hit smaller fixed bases, especially poorly-defended police stations. The security forces are thus constrained in their ability to protect or provide backup to pro-regime militias, leaving them very exposed. According to militia members and other well-informed sources, the Pyusawhti are poorly equipped, often by police who give them confiscated *tumi* flintlock guns and other old or unreliable weapons.⁴⁴ *Tumi* guns seized from pro-regime militias by the resistance bear police markings.⁴⁵ While police stations have limited supplies, the military has the capacity to provide more effective weaponry. Tellingly, it does not: lacking a clear understanding of who is who on the ground, it fears inadvertently arming its opponents. Weapons given to weak militias are also easily captured by resistance forces.

The parallel emergence of pro- and anti-regime armed groups of civilians has led to deep divisions in many communities. In rural Myanmar, the village is the fundamental unit of social organisation.⁴⁶ Villages are typically mono-religious and mono-ethnic, bound together by religious institutions, practices and ceremonies as well as cultural traditions. Where villages are diverse, residents will typically self-segregate along ethno-religious lines (with “upper”, “lower”, “east”, “west” or some other designator appended to the village name to distinguish the areas).⁴⁷ But this tendency to homogeneity did not, until recently, extend to politics. Before the coup, it was not uncommon for residents of the same village to support different political parties – for example, the NLD and USDP.⁴⁸

That is changing. In places where the armed resistance is strongest, particularly in the northern and central parts of the Dry Zone to the west of Mandalay (see map in Appendix B), the post-coup level of distrust and violence is such that political diversity within villages is no longer viable. Most villages support the resistance. Only a small number of pro-regime villages have emerged. These are either places where most residents supported the NLD’s political opponents – for example, USDP supporters or militant nationalists – or places where the army houses veterans and their

⁴³ See, for example, “ထီးလင်း၊ မီးတောက်ကျေးရွာရှိ ပျူစောထီးအဖွဲ့ဝင်များက တုမီးသေနတ်များ YDF-ထီးလင်း ထံအပ်နှံကာ တော်လှန်ရေးတပ်ဖွဲ့များနှင့် ပူးပေါင်း” (“Pyusawhti members from Zee Taw village surrendered “tumi” flintlock guns to Yaw Defence Force-Tilin and joined the revolutionary forces”), Khit Thit Media, 14 October 2021; and “ဘူးလက်လှဆွေရဲ့ ပျူစောထီးတပ်ဖွဲ့တွေ YDF ထံ လက်နက်ချ ခိုလှုံ” (“Pyusawhti group of Bullet Hla Swe surrenders to the YDF”), video, *The Irrawaddy*, 15 October 2021 (Burmese).

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, prominent local defence force leader, pro-military militia leader, Pauk township, December 2021.

⁴⁵ See, for example, “ဘူးလက်လှဆွေရဲ့ ပျူစောထီးတပ်ဖွဲ့တွေ YDF ထံ လက်နက်ချ ခိုလှုံ” (“Bullet Hla Swe’s Pyusawhti group surrenders to the YDF”), video, *The Irrawaddy*, 15 October 2021 (Burmese).

⁴⁶ See, for example, Takahashi Akio, “Comparative Study of Myanmar Village Society: Japan, Thailand, and Myanmar”, *Southeast Asia History and Culture*, no. 44 (2015).

⁴⁷ Ibid. Crisis Group interview, analyst, February 2022.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, analyst, February 2022.

families.⁴⁹ Everywhere, people with minority loyalties have had to go along with the majority, flee or face assassination.⁵⁰

It is this reality, rather than any strategy, that accounts for the emergence of most Pyusawhti-type militias. These groups, and often the villages where they operate, look to the security forces for back-up, training and equipment, and the security forces have in turn come to rely on them for intelligence, local knowledge and additional manpower. Thus, while there are reports of Pyusawhti groups forming in many parts of Myanmar, it is in the Dry Zone, where the resistance poses the greatest threat to the individuals concerned, that they have mostly taken root. This region is also the place where the military has had the biggest problems trying to consolidate control, and therefore has the greatest need for the support the Pyusawhti can provide, and the greatest incentive to back them in return. There are also multiple reports of people being pressured by the junta and its allies into joining Pyusawhti groups.⁵¹

C. *The Military's Use of Pyusawhti*

In the Dry Zone, the Myanmar military has found itself fighting a very different kind of conflict than it is used to, and one that it is not well equipped for. Unlike in the ethnic areas, where the army has been battling insurgents continuously since independence, there has been no rebellion in the Burman-majority central lowlands for decades, which means that the military does not have the bases, territorial familiarity, operational intelligence or supply networks in place to support offensive operations in these areas.⁵² The Dry Zone has also long been a key recruiting ground for the military, meaning that many rank-and-file soldiers and non-commissioned officers are fighting in their native regions. As a result, morale is reportedly low, producing a steady trickle of desertions and defections.⁵³

The military is also more overstretched than it has been in decades, fighting on numerous fronts against adversaries, new and old, in Chin State, the Dry Zone and adjacent areas, parts of Shan State and Kayah State, as well as engaging in sporadic but heavy clashes elsewhere.⁵⁴ Unlike in the past, it must also maintain sizeable forces

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, journalist, December 2021. Crisis Group interview, expert on Myanmar military, November 2021. See also "A woman's murder deals a heavy blow to Pauk's resistance", *Myanmar Now*, 5 December 2021.

⁵⁰ Ibid. The risk is demonstrated by data indicating that resistance forces have killed more than more than 220 people suspected of being informants since the coup, the largest number in the Dry Zone. Crisis Group interview, Myanmar researcher tracking violent incidents, January 2022.

⁵¹ See, for example, "Leaked document confirms Myanmar junta is arming anti-resistance militias", *Myanmar Now*, 2 March 2022; and "Myanmar army to 'accelerate' operations in Sagaing with support of Pyu Saw Htee militias", *Myanmar Now*, 27 March 2022.

⁵² Crisis Group interviews, local analysts and international conflict experts, November 2021-February 2022.

⁵³ See Ye Myo Hein, "Finding fault lines within the Tatmadaw", *Frontier Myanmar*, 16 September 2021.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, expert on the Myanmar military, January 2022. The old adversaries in these areas include the ethnic Kokang Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, which the military has fought sporadically for more than a decade, as well as the Chin National Front and Karenni Nationalities Progressive Party, which resumed attacks on security forces following the coup, after a hiatus of many years.

in the main cities, where resistance groups regularly assassinate regime figures and attack patrols.

The Dry Zone Pyusawhti are thus a useful ally for the regime, as their members can provide valuable intelligence, act as local guides or take the point position in operations, as well as serve as reinforcements.⁵⁵ Many reports of military operations in central Myanmar indicate that armed men in civilian clothes, assumed to be Pyusawhti members, accompanied the troops.⁵⁶ Pyusawhti members are also reported to ride along with police on missions to arrest or kill dissidents.⁵⁷ The regime has at various points denied having any role in forming Pyusawhti groups, but it also distributes leaflets in the Dry Zone declaring that it has organised an overwhelming force of pro-regime fighters, and the Sagaing Region chief minister has reportedly claimed that the authorities have raised 77 such militias and provided them with some 2,000 weapons.⁵⁸

The military has sometimes given temporary shelter on its bases to people who fear being targeted by resistance forces, such as regime-appointed administrators and members of Pyusawhti networks.⁵⁹ It has also been providing two-week military training courses to such people on an ad hoc basis, as well as to spouses of soldiers.⁶⁰ But while these initiatives may have made Pyusawhti members better fighters, they have not altered the strategic equation on the ground, especially since the military is not arming these groups in any significant way. Rather, by bringing these civilians more clearly under its wing, the military is putting them at greater risk of resistance attack, especially since as noted above it cannot provide them reliable protection. For example, resistance forces have repeatedly attacked a village in Sagaing Region's Pale township that has been hosting Pyusawhti training courses.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, pro-military militia leader, Pauk township, December 2021. The point position is the leading member of a unit advancing through hostile or unsecured territory, usually someone who knows the terrain and can more easily spot dangers.

⁵⁶ See, for example, "Over 1,000 flee as junta attacks village in Magway following killing of local official", *Myanmar Now*, 2 August 2021; "Military burns down 10 houses of people affiliated with NLD in Kanbalu, Sagaing", *Myanmar Now*, 29 October 2021; and "မင်းကင်းမြို့နယ် ရွာ သုံးရွာအား စစ်တပ်က မီးရှို့၊ ဒေသခံ ၃၀ ကျော်ကို လူသားခိုင်းအဖြစ် ဖမ်းဆီး" ("Three villages in Mingin Township set on fire by army, more than 30 locals arrested as human shields"), *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 3 February 2022.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, local defence force leader, Pauk township, December 2021. See also "A woman's murder deals a heavy blow to Pauk's resistance", *op. cit.*

⁵⁸ See "Pyu Saw Htee members surrender to resistance fighters in Yaw and hand over weapons", *Myanmar Now*, 15 October 2021; "စစ်ကိုင်းတိုင်း မြို့နယ် ခုနစ်ခုမှာ ဝါဒဖြန့်စာရွက်တွေ စစ်လဟာတ်ယာဉ်နဲ့ ကြွချ" ("Propaganda leaflets distributed in seven townships in Sagaing Division by military helicopter"), *Radio Free Asia*, 16 December 2021; and "Leaked document confirms Myanmar junta is arming anti-resistance militias", *op. cit.*

⁵⁹ See tweet by DVB English, @DVB_English, 12:50 am, 8 November 2021.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, local defence force leader, Pauk township, December 2021. See also "Myanmar regime orders mid-ranking officers' wives to undergo military training", *The Irrawaddy*, 11 January 2022; and "Myanmar junta arming, training civilians as losses, defections mount", *The Irrawaddy*, 18 January 2022.

⁶¹ See "Resistance forces rescue dozens of civilians under junta-occupied village in Sagaing", *Myanmar Now*, 23 February 2022.

D. *Risks of Escalation*

The vast majority of violence is being committed by junta troops, including the most notorious incident to be reported in the Dry Zone, when soldiers allegedly killed and incinerated eleven people, including six teenagers, in Sagaing Region's Salingyi township on 7 December 2021, with indications that some were burned alive.⁶² At the same time, however, pro-regime militias' proactive targeting of resistance forces has increasingly led the latter to take an eye for an eye. Militias are also embroiled in some of the regime forces' reported atrocities, deepening the public's hatred and ratcheting up retaliatory violence. Regime, militia and resistance forces alike engage in reprisals. Examples include the following:

- ❑ In May 2021, resistance forces reportedly assassinated two perceived regime sympathisers in Pauk township: a USDP organiser, killed on 25 May, and a local government clerk, five days later.⁶³ Allegedly, the military and local police, accompanied by suspected Pyusawhti members and seeking revenge for these killings, torched most of the 250 homes in a nearby village that they suspected of supporting the local resistance group, killing two elderly residents who were unable to flee and were burned alive in their homes.⁶⁴
- ❑ A group of Pyusawhti members accompanied by three police officers allegedly abducted, tortured and killed a resistance leader in Pauk township on 14 September 2021.⁶⁵ In response, resistance forces allegedly snatched, blindfolded and tortured a 23-year-old man accused of participating in the killing. His brutal interrogation, in which he confessed to his involvement in that murder and other violent incidents, was filmed by his captors and posted on social media.⁶⁶
- ❑ Resistance forces reportedly killed a family in Sagaing Region's Taze township on 22 September 2021, including an alleged Pyusawhti leader, his wife, son, one of his daughters and her five-year-old child.⁶⁷ In apparent revenge for the killings, the man's other daughter and her husband, both police officers, reportedly led a raid by security forces on the village the following day, burning down fifteen houses belonging to NLD members.⁶⁸

⁶² See "Myanmar soldiers accused of killing 11 people after charred remains found", Reuters, 8 December 2021; and "Junta soldiers massacre and burn 11, including teenagers, during raid on village in Sagaing", *Myanmar Now*, 7 December 2021.

⁶³ "Disputing junta narrative, Magway villagers blame security forces for massive fire", *Frontier Myanmar*, 23 August 2021.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, local defence force leader, Pauk township, December 2021. Crisis Group interview, local journalist, January 2022. See also "Disputing junta narrative, Magway villagers blame security forces for massive fire", *op. cit.* The leader of a local pro-regime militia told Crisis Group that claims his militia accompanied the security forces on this operation were untrue. Crisis Group interview, pro-military militia leader, Pauk township, December 2021.

⁶⁵ See "A woman's murder deals a heavy blow to Pauk's resistance", *op. cit.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ See "တပ်ဆည်မြို့ကျိတ်နွဲ့ရွာကို စစ်ကောင်စီတပ်ဝင်စီး အိမ် ၁၁ လုံးမီးရှို့" ("Military Council raids Kyaikone village in Taze township, sets eleven houses on fire"), *Myanmar Now*, 23 September 2021. Another family accused of being pro-military, including a 12-year-old boy, were killed in a same area a few days earlier. See "Gunmen in Sagaing kill entire family, including 12-year-old boy, accused of helping junta", *Myanmar Now*, 21 September 2021.

⁶⁸ See Facebook post by *The Irrawaddy*, 24 September 2021 (Burmese).

As these incidents demonstrate, and with emotions running high given the trauma triggered by the coup and subsequent violence, tit-for-tat killings could unleash an even more dangerous cycle of vendettas in some areas. The risk that local violence will escalate has increased because the military has trained the Pyusawhti and other pro-regime militias in the use of weapons. The Pyusawhti networks' violent and partisan actions could lead to a situation where resistance forces step up the killing of USDP members and military veterans who are not members of such networks or engaged in anti-resistance activities.

There have also been reports of cases of mistaken identity or settling of personal grudges as part of the tit-for-tat killings. For example, on 3 February 2022, a resistance group in Sagaing Region's Ayadaw township killed a poet and prominent pro-democracy activist in front of his children, in what appears to have been an error or a crime unrelated to politics.⁶⁹ The local group that claimed responsibility for the killing, insisted despite all evidence to the contrary that the individual was helping the regime. That group has faced sharp criticism for its actions, with sixteen local organisations, including the NLD's township chapter, calling for the perpetrators to stand trial "when the country is back in the hands of the people".⁷⁰

IV. Conclusion: Possible Responses

The Myanmar military has unleashed brutal violence across large parts of the country as it attempts to impose its rule on a population in revolt. Determined armed resistance has emerged in many areas, including the central Dry Zone and other parts of Burman-majority heartland that have not seen conflict in decades. The military has turned to the Pyusawhti as a check on resistance forces in these areas, but its reliance on these groups has instead helped perpetuate a vicious cycle of revenge killings. The post-coup breakdown in law and order in much of Myanmar, and the lack of trust in justice systems even where they still exist, are further aggravating factors as they deprive individuals of protection and victims of formal recourse. Victims frustrated by this state of affairs may opt to take matters into their own hands as vigilantes.

Unfortunately, there is little to suggest that the situation will change dramatically in the near term. Most importantly, the military shows no sign of reversing the coup, which would be the only reliable way to put an end to the violence and restore law and order. But even if these efforts are likely to be frustrated for the foreseeable future, outside actors should continue to work toward that objective, including by denying political legitimacy to the junta, targeting sanctions at the military and its businesses, taking steps to prevent the flow of arms to the junta, and engaging closely with the National Unity Government and other legitimate representatives of Myanmar's peoples.

As for the violence involving Pyusawhti militias and local resistance groups, the greatest hope for restraining it may – at least over the medium term – lie with informal community justice mechanisms. While obviously limited, informal justice mechanisms can help prevent escalation of violence and provide non-violent means

⁶⁹ "Anti-junta guerrillas draw outrage for killing respected democracy activist", *Myanmar Now*, 15 February 2022.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

of redress. These mechanisms, which rely on the authority of community elders and religious leaders, have always been important in local dispute resolution and conflict mitigation in Myanmar. They have, however, not yet fully adapted to post-coup conditions, and Crisis Group's enquiries over the last six months suggest that many armed actors are operating beyond the constraints that elders and religious figures might normally impose. That is likely to change over time however, as society adjusts to the new realities and traditional community structures start to reassert themselves.

While responsibility for the breakdown of law and order lies squarely with the regime, resistance movements must also work harder to police their members' actions. The National Unity Government has issued guidance and rules of engagement for resistance forces, and recently established a mechanism to investigate violations, but its influence is meagre, as even if many groups have pledged political allegiance to the parallel authorities, most remain independent.⁷¹ The response by local organisations to the killing of the pro-democracy activist in Ayadaw township (see above) is encouraging, but this case is extreme and the reaction unusual; other mistaken or unwarranted killings have received little pushback or attention. The National Unity Government should more decisively distance itself from such acts by resistance forces, which some local civil society groups have been quietly pushing it to do, and which international partners can also urge.

International mechanisms also play an important role in reminding local actors that there may be accountability for the various alleged crimes of international concern being committed across Myanmar, which a recent UN report says may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.⁷² While the International Criminal Court has no jurisdiction over crimes in Myanmar at present, other than those arising out of the anti-Rohingya rampages with a sufficient nexus to Bangladesh (an ICC party), that could change in the future and international accountability under some countries' universal jurisdiction provisions is possible.⁷³ Outside actors should therefore continue to support the UN-established Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, a body set up to collect and collate evidence of international crimes in Myanmar that is also now looking into atrocities committed since the military seized power.⁷⁴

The February 2021 coup has been a disaster for Myanmar, terminating its halting transition to democracy, depressing its economy, awakening dormant insurgencies, reinvigorating active ones and causing ever larger parts of the population to suffer.

⁷¹ See Crisis Group Briefing, *Taking Aim at the Tatmadaw*, op. cit. See also "Resistance leader and former monk admits committing war crimes in upper Myanmar", *The Irrawaddy*, 22 March 2022.

⁷² "Situation of human rights in Myanmar since 1 February 2021", Human Rights Council, Forty-ninth Session, UN Doc. A/HRC/49/72, 15 March 2022.

⁷³ ICC jurisdiction could be granted by the UN Security Council (although any effort to so would almost certainly be blocked by China and Russia); the Court could accept the National Unity Government's July 2021 declaration of voluntary jurisdiction (although this would require the court to recognise the NUG as the sovereign authority, which currently appears unlikely); or a future Myanmar government could decide to accept the Court's jurisdiction or become a member by ratifying the Rome Statute. Foreign states that assert universal jurisdiction over atrocity crimes are also potential fora for trying crimes committed in Myanmar.

⁷⁴ The mechanism is mandated to collect, consolidate, preserve and analyse evidence of international crimes committed in Myanmar since 2011, and to prepare case files to facilitate criminal prosecutions in any future national or international proceedings.

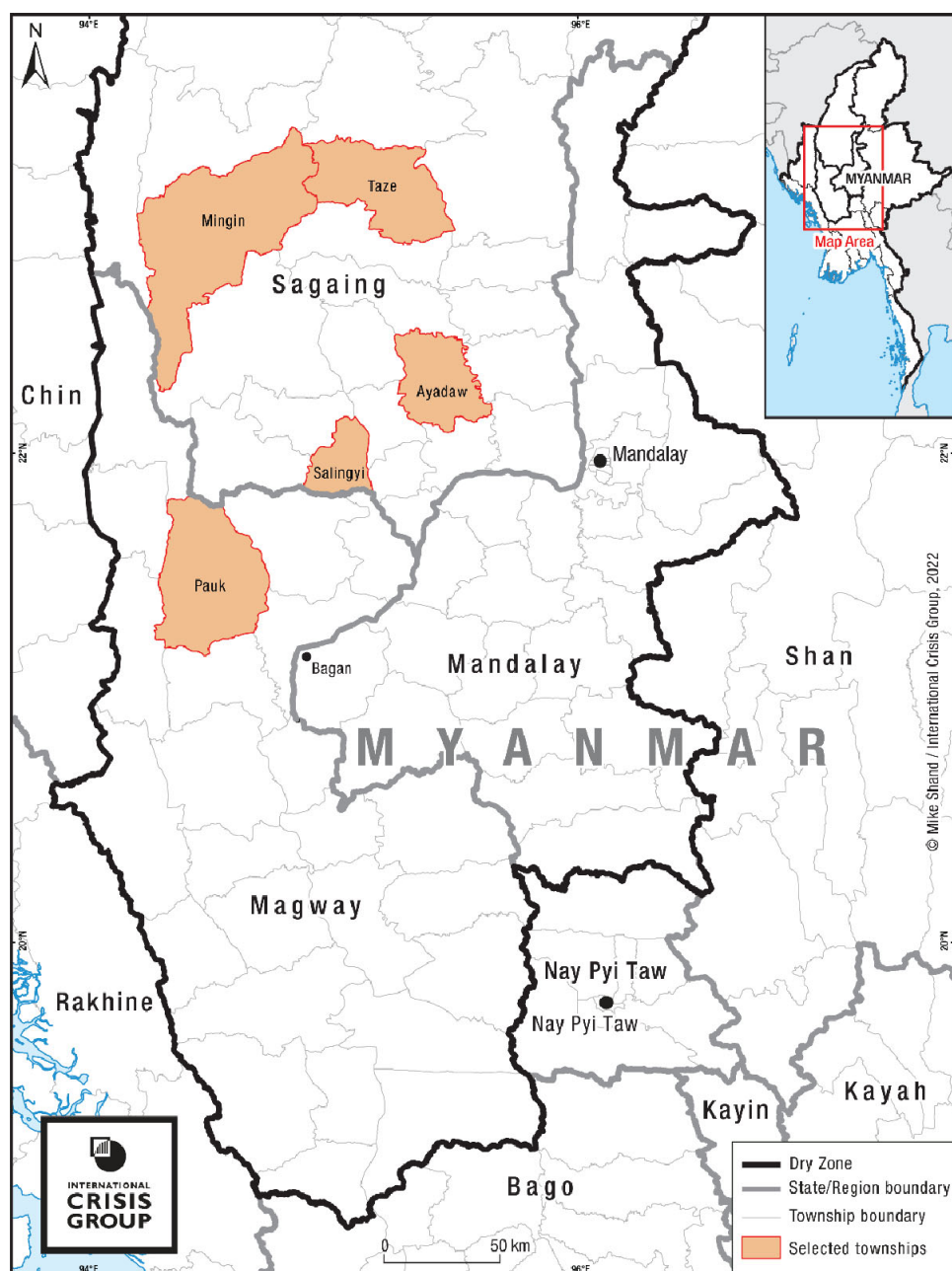
Even as popular resistance spreads, both peaceful and armed, the junta seems determined to stick to its hard line, of which the Pyusawhti militias are the latest manifestation. International justice may one day be of help, but in the meantime the customary dispute resolution methods of Myanmar society may well emerge as the best way to prevent Pyusawhti actions from triggering persistent cycles of communal violence.

Yangon/Bangkok/Brussels, 6 April 2022

Appendix A: Map of Myanmar



Appendix B: Map of Dry Zone



Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Asia since 2019

Special Reports and Briefings

Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.

Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020, Special Briefing N°2, 12 September 2019.

Seven Priorities for the New EU High Representative, Special Briefing N°3, 12 December 2019.

COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

A Course Correction for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, Special Briefing N°5, 9 December 2020.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2021-2022, Special Briefing N°6, 13 September 2021.

North East Asia

The Case for Kaesong: Fostering Korean Peace through Economic Ties, Asia Report N°300, 24 June 2019.

South Asia

After Sri Lanka's Easter Bombings: Reducing Risks of Future Violence, Asia Report N°302, 27 September 2019.

Getting the Afghanistan Peace Process Back on Track, Asia Briefing N°159, 2 October 2019.

Twelve Ideas to Make Intra-Afghan Negotiations Work, Asia Briefing N°160, 2 March 2020.

Raising the Stakes in Jammu and Kashmir, Asia Report N°310, 5 August 2020.

Pakistan's COVID-19 Crisis, Asia Briefing N°162, 7 August 2020.

Taking Stock of the Taliban's Perspectives on Peace, Asia Report N°311, 11 August 2020.

What Future for Afghan Peace Talks under a Biden Administration?, Asia Briefing N°165, 13 January 2021.

Pakistan: Shoring Up Afghanistan's Peace Process, Asia Briefing N°169, 30 June 2021.

Beyond Emergency Relief: Averting Afghanistan's Humanitarian Catastrophe, Asia Report N°317, 6 December 2021.

Pakistan's Hard Policy Choices in Afghanistan, Asia Report N°320, 4 February 2022.

Women and Peacebuilding in Pakistan's North West, Asia Report N°321, 14 February 2022.

South East Asia

Fire and Ice: Conflict and Drugs in Myanmar's Shan State, Asia Report N°299, 8 January 2019 (also available in Burmese).

A New Dimension of Violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State, Asia Briefing N°154, 24 January 2019 (also available in Burmese).

Building a Better Future for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh, Asia Briefing N°155, 25 April 2019.

An Opening for Internally Displaced Person Returns in Northern Myanmar, Asia Briefing N°156, 28 May 2019 (also available in Burmese).

The Philippines: Militancy and the New Bangsamoro, Asia Report N°301, 27 June 2019.

Peace and Electoral Democracy in Myanmar, Asia Briefing N°157, 6 August 2019.

Myanmar: A Violent Push to Shake Up Cease-fire Negotiations, Asia Briefing N°158, 24 September 2019.

A Sustainable Policy for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh, Asia Report N°303, 27 December 2019.

Southern Thailand's Peace Dialogue: Giving Substance to Form, Asia Report N°304, 21 January 2020 (also available in Malay and Thai).

Commerce and Conflict: Navigating Myanmar's China Relationship, Asia Report N°305, 30 March 2020.

Southern Philippines: Tackling Clan Politics in the Bangsamoro, Asia Report N°306, 14 April 2020.

Conflict, Health Cooperation and COVID-19 in Myanmar, Asia Briefing N°161, 19 May 2020.

An Avoidable War: Politics and Armed Conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State, Asia Report N°307, 9 June 2020.

Rebooting Myanmar's Stalled Peace Process, Asia Report N°308, 19 June 2020.

COVID-19 and a Possible Political Reckoning in Thailand, Asia Report N°309, 4 August 2020.

Identity Crisis: Ethnicity and Conflict in Myanmar, Asia Report N°312, 28 August 2020.

Majority Rules in Myanmar's Second Democratic Election, Asia Briefing N°163, 22 October 2020 (also available in Burmese).

From Elections to Ceasefire in Myanmar's Rakhine State, Asia Briefing N°164, 23 December 2020.

Responding to the Myanmar Coup, Asia Briefing N°166, 16 February 2021.

The Cost of the Coup: Myanmar Edges Toward State Collapse, Asia Briefing N°167, 1 April 2021.

Southern Philippines: Keeping Normalisation on Track in the Bangsamoro, Asia Report N°313, 15 April 2021.

Myanmar's Military Struggles to Control the Virtual Battlefield, Asia Report N°314, 18 May 2021.

Taking Aim at the Tatmadaw: The New Armed Resistance to Myanmar's Coup, Asia Briefing N°168, 28 June 2021.

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