

Patterns of Myanmar Military Conduct in Sagaing Region

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Citing farcical allegations of fraud in the November 2020 elections, Myanmar's military staged a coup on 1 February 2021, thereby ending a decade of transition towards quasi-democratic government. In the form of a junta, the 'State Administrative Council' ('SAC') seized power. The people of Myanmar immediately displayed an unwillingness to return to military rule. Millions of civilians protested peacefully for several months before widespread violence against protesters made that impossible. Armed resistance then emerged across Myanmar involving not just older ethnic armed organizations ('EAOs'), but also new resistance groups, including in Bamar majority-areas. These new groups, widely known as 'People's Defence Forces' ('PDFs'), were mandated by the newly formed opposition government, the National Unity Government ('NUG').¹ PDFs also received material support from and acted jointly with EAOs that have long fought against the military.

1. Excessive Use of Force Started Early and Accelerated in Sagaing Region

Largely rural and agrarian, in the country's northwest, Sagaing Region did not seem likely for resistance to emerge – at least not armed, widespread and sustained. It has a relatively limited history of modern armed conflict. Yet it has become central to the armed resistance against the SAC as evidenced by the extent of armed engagements in Sagaing. Since the coup, the author has catalogued nearly 40,000 'conflict incidents' up to July 2023.² Approximately 32 per cent of these incidents occurred in Sagaing Region, one of the country's 14

¹ The NUG was created through a national coalition of actors opposed to the junta in April 2021 to lead resistance to SAC rule. On 5 May 2021, the NUG mandated the formation of PDFs to act as local self-defence forces to operate within townships. Other 'local defence force' groups also emerged. While not using the label PDF, they also shared the same goal of overturning the military dictatorship and collaborated with local PDFs and EAOs.

² First, it should be noted that while using specific numbers, the author makes no claims that the data presented is a perfect representation of what has transpired. What is provided is a methodical approximation based on available information. 'Conflict incidents' are considered by the author to be incidents of significance to understanding Myanmar's ongoing violence, and can cover more conventional military action (such as air attacks on an enemy outpost, ambushes of vehicle convoys or improvised explosive device attacks) to a wide range of attacks on unarmed civilians (such as raids of villages and arson attacks, extrajudicial killings, and artillery shelling of civilian populations). Data has been collected and coded by the author from a wide variety of sources – commercial security reports, media and social media reports, plus other reporting from assorted aid actors – since April 2021 together with a small team of Myanmar colleagues.

states and regions.³ Some of the earliest acts of armed resistance occurred there, in March and April of 2021. Since then, the region has consistently seen high levels of armed violence.

Sagaing Region emerged as a hotspot of resistance because of the military's brutality – habituated and institutionalized over the decades since it first staged a coup in 1962. Use of force by SAC units against peaceful protests directly provoked armed resistance in the form of self-defence. Along with the rest of the country, the people of Sagaing Region were overwhelmingly outraged by the military's coup on 1 February 2021. They quickly expressed that sentiment through widespread peaceful protests, spanning both urban and rural areas and across its diverse population. By 14 February 2021, mass protests had emerged, with media reporting crowds of over 100,000 that day in and around Sagaing Region's capital, Monywa.⁴ Large crowds were seen in other major regional towns, such as Shwebo and Kalay. During these first few weeks, protests were largely free of violence as non-violence was the agreed norm among the protesters and SAC forces did not yet use armed violence.

During the last week of February 2021, both the scale of protests and tensions between security forces and protesters became more pronounced within Sagaing Region. For example, on 26 February, the police in Sagaing city started to place roadblocks around town to prevent protests from forming or moving in the city. These tensions led to steadily more violent standoffs, with regular arrests, beatings and imprisonment of protesters. Protests became consistent in regional towns such as Ye-U, Myinmu, Salingyi, Ayadaw, Depayin, Taze and Homalin. Regular posts on social media highlighted near ubiquitous protests in villages across the region, tending to take the form of winding processions marching between villages through farmland. As March began, the situation deteriorated further into routine and often fatal violence involving SAC forces.⁵

Peaceful protests continued, but there was a palpable increase in tensions as protesters resorted to defending themselves behind tire

³ States and regions in Myanmar are essentially provinces. Below them are 77 districts and 330 townships, which all together form the administrative structure for the country. There is also a capital territory for Nay Pyi Taw.

⁴ This is significant considering Monywa's population is a bit over 350,000 residents.

⁵ One of the early drivers of violence were efforts by the military to replace ward and village tract administrators, who had been roughly elected by their communities, with new administrators directly appointed by the military. Tensions between these new administrators and their outraged communities escalated in places into violent confrontations. In Kawlin Township, protesting locals detained a junta-appointed local administrator on 16 March 2021. Local police forces then intervened and killed a protester.

barricades placed across streets as junta forces started regularly using live ammunition and eventually heavier weapons to disperse protest crowds. The resultant deaths of protesters started to become routine occurrences, with one of the earliest known fatalities occurring in Sagaing city on 10 March 2021 when a protester was shot dead. The pace of violence against peaceful protesters culminated in the bloodiest day of the Spring Revolution, 27 March. This day is a national holiday known as ‘Armed Forces Day’, long projected by the military as a celebration of itself. Sagaing Region saw 11 protester fatalities that day, including five in Shwebo alone. All were peaceful civilians. Hence, the defining dynamic over March of 2021 was the increasing pace of confrontations between protesting communities and security forces. There was a clear frustration amongst the protesting public that they could not protect themselves nor do much to stop the brazen actions of security forces, which were by then methodically and violently clamping down on peaceful protests, from the largest cities and towns and out to the multitude of villages.

Such confrontations would escalate across the region throughout April 2021, with towns and villages erupting into violence. Pinlebu Township exploded on 5 and 6 April when two protesters were killed by security forces, which then led to the local administration office and township court being destroyed in arson attacks. Subsequent clashes left four police officers and four protesters dead. Taze Township erupted into clashes on 7 April following the deployment of over 100 soldiers to the town. These lasted for several days, leaving 11 protesters and three soldiers dead. Tensions lingered and multiple arson attacks against state buildings occurred on 9 April, including a checkpoint for the main highway to India. Tigyaing Township turned violent on 24 April when police tried to transport local prisoners (peaceful protesters, newly arrested), but were stopped by a crowd resulting in a police fatality and multiple casualties amongst residents.

While the pace of confrontations was increasing, so was the potency of weaponry used by the military. On 21 April 2021 in Yinmarbin Township, security forces used high-powered weapons, including rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), to disperse crowds in Win Kone, Ka Paing and Thee Kone villages, leaving at least eight locals dead. Compounding tensions was the torture of detainees and the increasing frequency of their deaths while in junta custody. For instance, in Chaungma Village in Kani Township, the body of a resident arrested on 27 April was given back to his family several days later bearing unmistakable signs of torture. Similarly, in Myaung Township on 25 April, a 63-year-old woman charged under Article 505(a)⁶ died a few minutes after her arrest, officially due to ‘underlying health conditions’. Covid-19 was regularly cited as a cause of death even though bodies displayed signs of torture. A key source of tension were local administrators newly appointed by the military who acted as informants, leading to the arrests, and subsequent deaths, of many protesters and community leaders. The role of such administrators in regime violence inflamed local tensions. While targeted assassinations of such administrators would become common in the months ahead across the country, one of the earliest assassinations of a ward administrator occurred on 14 April in Sagaing’s Homalin Township.⁷

By the end of April 2021, it is estimated that 759 civilians across the Myanmar had been killed by SAC forces.⁸ The unfolding situation was no longer defined by peaceful protests. Sagaing Region, like the rest of the country save for a few areas, was beginning to openly rebel against military rule. On 5 May 2021, the NUG decreed the formation of PDFs, tasking local communities with forming armed groups

⁶ Article 505a (intent to incite violence) of the Myanmar Penal Code, 1 May 1861 (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/41swdf/>), was the ubiquitous regulation used by SAC forces to arrest anyone deemed a threat.

⁷ In Homalin Township (Kandee District, Sagaing Region), Tha Phan Kone village administrator appointed by the SAC was reportedly killed by live rounds on 14 April 2021 at 9:00 in the morning.

⁸ This figure is reported by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, “What’s happening in Myanmar” (available on its web site).

to co-ordinate and lead defensive measures against junta troops in every township. PDFs quickly multiplied in number and many started collaborating with four major ethnic armed organizations: the KNU, KIA, CNF and KNPP.⁹ These EAOs subsequently became known as ‘ethnic resistance organizations’ (‘EROs’), due to their participation in resistance to the coup in contrast to other EAOs that chose to remain on the sidelines. These EROs provided the nascent PDFs with training and other support. From May 2021 onwards, Myanmar was in a state of ‘revolution’ rather than ‘civil war’. It was driven by resistance from the population at large, starting in local communities. The vast majority of the population – evidenced by the peaceful protests, nationwide ‘silent strikes’, the Civil Disobedience Movement of over 400,000 striking civil servants, and rapid expansion of PDFs – was in revolt against the SAC. Myanmar’s was a society looking fundamentally for rupture from its history of military rule towards a different future, one built on federalism and democracy.

2. Preponderance of Targeting of Civilians

Sagaing has seen a high proportion of targeting of civilians compared to other parts of the country, for instance the regions further south.¹⁰ This is highlighted by a detailed analysis of incidents in Sagaing from February to July 2023, when approximately 3,742 conflict incidents occurred there. Of these, 39 per cent were attacks on SAC forces by resistance forces (PDFs or EROs, often working together). Some 51 per cent were SAC-instigated attacks, either targeting of civilian communities or attacks on EROs or PDFs.

Of those SAC-instigated attacks, 80 per cent were attacks against the civilian population – most often mass arson attacks on villages or violent raids meant to displace local populations. Only 20 per cent of SAC actions could be considered ‘military operations’ against resistance armed groups, mostly airborne raids on PDF bases and fire-fights along highways or outside security force outposts. Of the total conflict incidents, the remaining 10 per cent are what I deem miscellaneous ‘other incidents’, including use of force against individuals (such as the shooting of motorcyclists and extrajudicial killings of detainees) as well as the relatively limited number of war crimes by resistance forces, to be discussed below.

From February to July 2023, the SAC also conducted at least 155 air attacks in Sagaing, of which 49 per cent were attacks on villages, mostly by helicopter gunships strafing or rocketing villages.¹¹ This included some high-casualty incidents, most notably the attack on Pazigyi village in Kanbalu Township that saw at least 165 civilians killed in a single incident.¹² Whether by ground or air, the notion that SAC attacks on villages are narrowly targeting resistance actors is not true. A systematic review of incidents shows that less than 5 per cent of SAC attacks on villages resulted in engagement of resistance fighters (in the form of shooting or detention). SAC forces overwhelmingly burn villages and kill civilians to cause mass displacement and terrorize the Sagaing public into submission.

By the end of July 2023, approximately 57,500 civilian houses in Sagaing Region had been burnt by SAC forces, some 73 percent of

⁹ These EAOs include the Karen National Union (‘KNU’), Kachin Independence Army (‘KIA’), Chin National Front (‘CNF’), and the Karenni National Progressive Party (‘KNPP’). For more details on the long history of EAOs in Myanmar and multiple juntas’ systematic campaigns against civilians, see The Asia Foundation, “The Contested Areas of Myanmar: Subnational Conflict, Aid, and Development”, 16 October 2017.

¹⁰ Areas of ethnic minorities have long experienced extensive military violence against civilians, but Bamar-majority regions have limited histories of the military targeting civilian communities.

¹¹ For an illustrative example, see Thura Maung, “At least 10 dead in Myanmar junta airstrikes on Sagaing village”, *Myanmar Now*, 29 June 2023.

¹² “Kanbalu: up to 165 people killed in military airstrike, 11 April”, *Action on Armed Violence*, 13 April 2013.

the total of civilian houses destroyed nationwide since the coup.¹³ By mid-July 2023, UNOCHA stated that there were 778,900 internally displaced persons in Sagaing.¹⁴ It disingenuously cited internal displacement as generically resulting from “clashes and insecurity since February 2021”. While it acknowledged that over 70,000 civilian structures were destroyed, it neither provided attribution nor noted the significance of junta attacks on civilian populations. Regardless, there is a simple reality on the ground in Myanmar: SAC forces have been systematically targeting civilian populations since the coup and this is particularly evident in Sagaing Region. The pattern seems clear: a mass campaign of deprivation, brutalizing into submission a population that is in revolt against military rule.¹⁵ While there is significant armed resistance in Sagaing, the numbers of homes burnt down through arson and internally displaced leave little doubt that this is not just the residue of armed conflict, but the result of systematic actions of one actor, the SAC.

That the SAC is undertaking a mass campaign of deprivation against Sagaing’s civilian population is also clear if we further disaggregate its conduct. From February to July 2023, SAC forces conducted over 1,500 actions in Sagaing that were targeted violence aimed at civilians. Of these, the preponderance was attacks on villages across Sagaing’s vast rural spaces. Approximately 71 per cent were assorted types of raids by SAC ground forces on rural villages. These raids included a wide range of activities against communities, including mass arson attacks, rampant looting, and the systematic destruction of agriculture equipment and inputs (like seed stocks). Terrorizing violence against individuals or groups during such raids was routine, including regular executions, torture and the use of human shields. In general, attacks on civilian populations have been widespread amongst SAC forces, including military, police and proxy militias. At times special columns have been deployed to commit campaigns of destruction through individual or clusters of townships.¹⁶ For example, in March 2023 in Pale Township, SAC forces captured and executed three PDF fighters, including one who was decapitated, but also killed 14 civilians initially taken hostage as human shields.¹⁷

An increasing dynamic has been the use of incendiary artillery shells by SAC forces against villages, accounting for nearly 12 per cent of junta attacks on civilian populations.¹⁸ Moreover, as part of the general campaign of deprivation, blockades of market access to food and medicine have become pervasive, along with Internet and telephone access. There are also reports of SAC forces bulldozing roads and destroying bridges to block villages from accessing markets. This resembles the conduct of the Myanmar military in, for instance, Rakhine State where Rohingya communities were massively

¹³ “As of 31 July 2023, Myanmar’s military and its affiliated groups burned down approximately 74,874 civilian houses”, Data for Myanmar (data4myanmar), Facebook, 8 August 2023.

¹⁴ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), “Myanmar Humanitarian Update No. 31”, 15 July 2023.

¹⁵ This is not an outlandish point given the Myanmar military’s well-documented modern history. There are decades worth of academic literature as well as human rights documentation detailing the same tactics used elsewhere by Myanmar’s military against civilian populations.

¹⁶ A particular notorious example was a special grouping of SAC forces called the ‘Ogre Column’ that rampaged across much of southern Sagaing in March 2023 killing civilians. See “‘Ogre’ battalion uses brutality to instill terror in Myanmar”, *Radio Free Asia*, 22 April 2023; “Myanmar Regime Task Force Leaves Trail of Beheaded and Mutilated Victims”, *The Irrawaddy*, 10 March 2023.

¹⁷ This atrocity was documented extensively by the NUG, see: “NUG reports shocking massacre of over a dozen civilians in Sagaing’s Tataing village”, *Mizzima*, 5 March 2023; also, see Grant Peck, “Myanmar army killed 17 people in 2 villages, residents say”, *AP News*, 7 March 2023.

¹⁸ The use of artillery shelling of villages has consistently increased, rising to 16 per cent for July 2023. Incendiary shelling of villages is used by SAC forces as they do not need to cross wide spaces using roads which exposes them to attacks by armed resistance actors.

targeted. Other attacks by SAC forces on civilians occur in urban areas as well, including extrajudicial killing of detainees.

3. Conduct of the Resistance

We have seen sensationalism and over-generalization in narratives describing violence in Myanmar. At worst this has attempted to frame conflict in Sagaing as ‘inter-communal’, when it is clearly in response to a military coup. At other times, it takes the form of ‘both sides’ commit violence or ‘whataboutism’ implying that the armed resistance also undertakes significant atrocity attacks against civilians. Within the context of a wide-ranging uprising against SAC forces following months of violence against peaceful protesters, undoubtedly, the armed resistance has also used excessive force at times. Such violence requires the same scrutiny as that by SAC forces, but overall, it must be qualified to give a sense of the type and scale.

First, any suggestion that armed resistance has committed violence against civilians on a scale approaching that of the SAC is not serious. There is no known massacre of civilians of any comparable size by resistance forces. Indeed, the only known massacre of unarmed SAC forces occurred on 1 June 2021 by a unit of the Karen National Union in Karen State.¹⁹ Resistance forces have taken in thousands of defectors as well as arrested a good number of deserters, but reports of extrajudicial killings by resistance forces are very limited.²⁰ Second, armed resistance has become saturated across the vast Sagaing Region, yet it consistently targets SAC forces rather than the population at large. This reflects the nature of a conflict that originated in response to a coup and emerged as self-defence by local communities. Not less than 32 of Sagaing’s 37 townships have seen regular armed resistance, and, as mentioned, armed resistance attacks on SAC forces comprise 39 per cent of conflict incidents as per the author’s data. These attacks range from small arms and drone attacks, make-shift artillery, roadside bombs against military convoys, and assaults on military, police and proxy militia bases.

From February to July 2023, the author noted 81 conflict incidents in Sagaing Region that might be considered excessive force. Pro-SAC media outlets reported on many of these, but included a wide range of incident types, such as drone attacks on civilian buildings, artillery attacks in residential areas, shootings at public buses and leaving mines to target civilians, for instance. Most controversial has been the armed resistance’s use of targeted assassination as a tactic, especially of local administrators. In Sagaing Region, from February to July 2023, there were 88 such targeted assassinations, approximately 15 per month. Taken together, this means that of the 3,742 conflict incidents recorded for the six-month period, roughly 4.5 per cent or less might be considered, with greater scrutiny, as excessive violence by resistance actors, as compared to over 40 per cent by SAC forces.

The alleged atrocities by armed resistance actors are certainly possible. In the chaos of a national uprising, violence by local armed groups will inevitably sprawl. Sagaing Region alone has seen hundreds of local resistance groups emerge, many of them ephemeral, but over time more and more of them consolidated as battalions under the NUG’s chain-of-command. However, considering targeted assassinations as core international crimes will require careful analysis by legal experts. A significant number are of lone police and military personnel or proxy militia members (armed combatants), while the group ‘local administrators’ is not as simple as the term implies. The military replaced thousands of local administrators with its own people after the coup (mostly ex-security force members or from SAC’s proxy political party) and has a policy of arming them.²¹ Their place-

¹⁹ “Ethnic Karen commanders in Myanmar admit killing 25 men”, *Al Jazeera*, 17 August 2021.

²⁰ There have been claims by resistance forces that prisoners were shot ‘while trying to escape’, but these would number in the tens rather than hundreds as compared to SAC.

²¹ These administrators, part of the Ministry of Home Affairs, are institutionally part of the SAC apparatus. State Administrative Councils, led by military officers but supported primarily by administrators of

ment by the SAC was a priority and subsequently a key target of the resistance. They are critical to SAC's surveillance and coercion of the public.²² Resistance crimes are clearer when spouses or other family members of local administrators have been killed, but this is not the norm (being in the single digits for the same time period). Local SAC actors central to military rule claiming to be 'civilian' deserve future scrutiny by international legal experts.

At the macro-level, SAC continues to escalate mass violence as detailed repeatedly by the United Nations.²³ In contrast, armed resistance to it remains remarkably disciplined, as is reflected in social media and also SAC outlets. There are no accounts of resistance forces systematically burning down villages to displace high numbers of the population, no practice of using human shields, no routine extrajudicial killings or mass arrests. Myanmar is experiencing a war where one side is overwhelmingly attacking civilians while the other is not.

4. Concluding Remarks on Attacks Against Civilians and Armed Resistance

To understand the situation on the ground in Myanmar, it is necessary to appreciate the extensive, systematic use of violence by SAC forces in their attempt to suppress widespread armed resistance. SAC forces are conducting a systematic campaign to displace large parts of the population where resistance is strongest. This covers much of the country but is especially intense in Sagaing Region, which we have considered in this brief. The facts that there are nearly 800,000 internally-displaced persons in this one region alone and that nearly 60,000 civilian houses have been burned down by SAC forces speak for themselves. This is not a binary civil war. It is a national uprising against a return to military dictatorship. The SAC is reverting to what it has done for decades, namely using excessive force. But SAC forces have not been able to suppress armed resistance – on the contrary, it

the General Administration Department ('GAD'), are present in every state/region, district and township. The GAD officers in turn supervise those considered local administrators in the country's 17,000-plus village tracts and urban wards. This model existed in previous military dictatorships and was reimposed by the SAC junta because it is tried and tested and the apparatus for it was never reformed during the 'transition' years (2010–20), see Kyi Pyar Chit Saw and Matthew B. Arnold, "Administering the State in Myanmar", "Subnational Governance in Myanmar", Discussion Paper Series No. 6, Myanmar Development Resource Institute's Centre for Economic and Social Development and The Asia Foundation, October 2014. On the SAC's policy of arming supporters in civilian clothes, see "Myanmar Junta's New Policy of Arming its Supporters Will Lead to More Bloodshed", *The Irrawaddy*, 20 February 2023. Note that many local administrators were unofficially armed long before this official promulgation. See also "ခေကာင်စီက ရုပ်ကွက်အုပ်ချုပ်ရေးဗဟိုဌာနများကို လျှောက်လွှာ တင်ရန် မလိုအပ်ဘဲ လက်နက်များ ထုတ်ပေး၊ ကျောက်ပန်းတောင်းတွင် ရဲမှူးက လဝက ဦးစီးမှူးကို သေနတ်ပစ်နည်း သင်ပြစဉ် လဝက ဦးစီးမှူး ပေါင် ကျည်ထိမှန်" ["The Military council issues weapons to ward administrators without the need to submit an application"], *Yangon Khit Thit News Agency*, 18 February 2023.

²² Often directly participating in road checkpoints and household sweeps and maintaining networks of neighbourhood informants.

²³ Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, "Press Release: War crimes by Myanmar military are more frequent and brazen – Myanmar Mechanism Annual Report", 8 August 2023.

has steadily intensified.²⁴

It is not realistic to expect a 'stable' Myanmar under military rule. The SAC continues to lose control over territory and is unable to maintain so many battlefronts because of the constant bleeding of numerous small, dispersed units that are increasingly isolated and declining through attrition. Aside from their criminal nature, the single biggest strategic blunder of the SAC has been the attacks committed against civilians across the country shortly after the coup, especially in rural areas. This ensured that armed resistance quickly emerged in countless communities, in none more than the vast Sagaing Region.²⁵ The SAC's excessive use of force first started the conflagration of armed resistance across Sagaing – committing more attacks against civilians is not putting it out.

Even if the SAC's approach has been militarily ineffective since the coup, the world should not lose sight of the incredible suffering of tens of millions in Myanmar at the hands of actors who claim to be their guardians. No international aid of scale reaches Sagaing. I wonder whether the SAC's goal is to reach a tipping point – pass the 'pain threshold' of the civilian population – to extract ceasefire agreements from armed resistance actors. Should the pattern of attacks against civilians be seen in this sinister light?

The world should not accept the false sense of security offered by a military trying to quiet a national uprising through excessive use of force. The military continues a long-standing practice of systematic violence against civilians. Its leaders must be held to account for earlier conduct, most notably against Rohingyas and in other ethnic-minority areas of the country, but also for violations committed since the coup. This brief illustrates that Myanmar's military cannot be considered a conventional force as long as it continues to commit violence against civilians.

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²⁴ For instance, townships such as Kale, Mingin, Kani and Pale have suffered extensive attacks against civilians since mid-2021, but have become townships of resistance control where SAC forces are largely confined to the garrison in the town that gives the name to each township. Similarly, the junta has committed serious attacks against civilians in townships along the border with Kachin State (such as in Katha, Tigyaing and especially Kantbalu) without the SAC pacifying the resistance. Very problematic for the SAC is its loss of control of south-central Sagaing, Bamar heartland if there is one. From Salingyi and Monywa to Chaung-U, Ayadaw and Budalin, the armed resistance against the SAC has only escalated. Attacks against civilians have been particularly bad in townships on either side of the Mu River, such as Taze and Depayin. Despite extensive burning of entire swathes of villages, the resistance has persisted and grown.

²⁵ Bamar-majority regions were recruiting grounds for the Myanmar military, but since the coup the military has lost its core base of support and struggles to recruit.



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