



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on February 16, 2023

Myanmar Junta Reboots 1977 Law Permitting “Loyal” Citizens to Be Armed, Sparking Fears of Civil War

SINGAPORE — Myanmar’s junta has rebooted a 1977 law that permits civilians it considers “loyal to the state” to own firearms, a move analysts fear will increase violence by arming pro-junta groups combating armed resistance groups fending off military rule.

The junta’s Ministry of the Interior announced the order to revive the law on January 31, a day prior to the second anniversary of the February 1, 2021 coup, based on a leaked junta document and media reports.



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The law allows the ownership of five types of firearms without permits: 9mm pistols and revolvers, 12-gauge or smaller shotguns, hunting rifles, and air guns. Handguns larger than 9mm, semiautomatic rifles, and submachine guns can also be possessed with a permit.

“This new amendment is designed for a wider range of weapons,” a Yangon-based lawyer told Radio Free Asia (RFA). “People who want to carry weapons now know what kinds of weapons they are allowed to carry.”

The lawyer, who requested not to be named in order to speak freely, said that permitting civilians to carry weapons could undermine the country’s security.

“Now, defense groups such as pro-junta militias ... can legally take up arms issued to them by the military,” he said. “This could lead to many other problems related to the misuse of these weapons ... and we can’t say it’s enough to simply register the weapons you carry.”

The law says those applying for the right to bear arms must show “loyalty to the state, a good character, and a need to carry weapons,” with no criminal record or history of mental instability.

Once their application is authorized, the law mandates that licensed arms bearers be involved in the “suppression of crime and vice” if so directed, and are responsible for “protecting the life and properties of the people” within the bounds of the established rules.

The military hopes that its supporters can be armed to ramp up its fighting forces, said Kaung Thu Win, a leader of the Civil Disobedience Movement, which staged widespread protests and strikes against the junta.

“They think that they will get help once they allow their supporters to take up arms. For example, armed pro-junta militias may report the presence of the [resistance] members to the military or fight them on their own,” he said. “By this new policy, the junta has given the pro-junta groups more rights to carry out more forceful attacks on the resistance forces under the law.”

As the army has already been arming pro-junta militia groups, said political analyst Than Soe Naing, this new law simply legalizes the army’s actions.



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“This new attempt is to arm people ... such as members of the [pro-military] Union Solidarity Development Party, low-level civilian administration officials like ward and township administrators and their staff,” he said. “This is because the military junta can no longer guarantee their security and they now have to protect themselves.”

This law implies that if summoned, newly armed people must work with the junta against the resistance.

Major General Zaw Min Tun, the junta spokesman, did not answer RFA’s requests for comment on the revived law.

However, Zaw confirmed in the local *Popular News* media outlet on Monday that the regime will permit those who “adhere to discipline” to own guns.

“There are calls from the people demanding their security,” he said. “We are going to allow the ones who really need to defend themselves, those who are under threat and those who can handle them in a disciplined manner [to bear arms].”

Padoh Man Man, the spokesman of the Karen National Union armed ethnic group’s fifth brigade, remarked that the policy is worrying, as it may lead to unnecessary shootings and killings.

“About 3 years ago, the military adopted a policy for a mandatory military service for citizens 18 years and older, but they could not implement it successfully,” he said. “This new policy is their second attempt to do that. This is really a seriously worrisome situation for our country.”

Organizations on both sides of the political spectrum said that resistance forces are shooting and killing people suspected of being junta informants, while the military is arresting and killing those it suspects of being resistance members.

The military reported that 5,443 government officials, chief administrators, monks, and children were killed across the country between February 1, 2021 and January 25, 2023, and another 4,577 injured.

Thailand’s Assistance Association for Political Prisoners said that, as of Monday, authorities in Myanmar had killed 2,988 civilians throughout the country since the military coup in 2021.

Myanmar’s increasing domestic violence implies that the country is spiraling into a wider civil war, based on a statement by the Peace Process Steering Team, set up by representatives of armed ethnic organizations and in charge of negotiating with the junta for peace.

Junta leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing said that the country is “a long way from peace” owing to meddling by various local and foreign groups, without elaborating further.

In turn, Saw Mya Raza Lin, the deputy chairman of the Arakan Liberation Party, one of the country’s ethnic armed groups, stated that it is time for stakeholders to have an open discussion.

“It’s still necessary to negotiate. We need to have a serious discussion about the constitution, as well as for other sectors,” he said. “The revolution is a protracted feud that will take many years, and those in power may be concerned that the country will be separated into many smaller parts.”

Saw said that as ethnic groups want their right to self-determination, both parties have to be transparent in negotiations.

Last year was supposed to have been the “Year of Peace” after the junta announced a nationwide ceasefire and invited many of the ethnic armed groups for talks. Nonetheless, the junta widened an



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offensive against armed resistance groups throughout the country, such as by ordering airstrikes and artillery strikes.

A meeting of the junta on January 31 revealed that only 198 of Myanmar's 330 townships are currently "stable," and that 19,444 battles have been fought since the coup.

Based on figures from the United Nations (UN) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 1.5 million people across the country have had to escape from their homes owing to violence and insecurity.

Since its independence from the British, Myanmar has been grappling with a farrago of military rule, civil war, weak governance, and massive poverty. In February 2021, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and other military leaders staged a coup after the military's proxy party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), [weathered a huge defeat in the 2020 elections](#). The junta — officially called the State Administration Council — detained and charged de facto civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi with corruption and other crimes. It ordered lawmakers from her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), and other parties, as well as many activists, to be placed under house arrest.

Widespread protests broke out nationwide in the weeks following the coup. Tens of thousands of people, including health workers, bankers, and teachers, joined what was supposed to be a peaceful civil disobedience movement, refusing to go to work until the elected government returned to power.

As time went on, deposed NLD lawmakers, protest leaders, and activists from several minority groups set up a parallel government known as the [National Unity Government](#) (NUG) that aimed to rally the disparate groups opposed to the junta together as well as establish an agenda for a post-junta Myanmar. Subsequently, the NUG declared war on the junta and formed an armed division known as the People's Defense Force.



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