

Myanmar faces ethnic unrest

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Stepped-up offensive against minorities stoking up tension ahead of polls.

BANGKOK - MYANMAR'S military junta may have taken Ms Aung San Suu Kyi out of the picture ahead of elections next year, but it could face an even greater challenge from rising ethnic unrest, analysts said.

The regime has recently stepped up its decades-long campaign against minority groups, with offensives against ethnic Chinese rebels in the north-east last month and Christian Karen insurgents near the Thai border in June.

Civil war has racked the country since independence in 1948, and while most rebel groups have reached ceasefire deals with the junta, analysts say the army is determined to crush the rest before the polls.

The offensives have mirrored the ruling generals' efforts to take Ms Suu Kyi off the political stage by sentencing her to another 18 months' house arrest recently.

Military ruler Than Shwe has long made the struggle for the stability of the state the main justification for the army's continued dominance in Myanmar.

In recent years, the regime has been able to reach peace pacts with key ethnic groups, co-opting some to become junta-backed border forces that have taken on their former rebel brothers-in-arms.

But last month's outbreak of fighting in Kokang, a mainly ethnic Chinese region of Myanmar's Shan state, showed the tensions near the surface and earned a rare rebuke from Beijing, Myanmar's closest ally.

The offensive was a warning to other minority groups thinking of causing disruption before the polls, said Mr Win Min, a Myanmar expert at Payap University in the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai.

Critics have denounced the upcoming elections as a shame aimed at legitimising the junta's grip on power.

The new Constitution - pushed through in a referendum last year just days after a cyclone ravaged southern Myanmar - does not provide the autonomy many groups had hoped for, he added.

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