

Myanmar junta pardons and releases more than 23,000 prisoners

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It is not known if those freed to mark new year holiday include activists seized since military coup

Myanmar's junta has pardoned and released more than 23,000 prisoners to mark the traditional Thingyan new year holiday, but it is not known if they include pro-democracy activists detained after the military seized power in February.

The releases were announced on the state broadcaster, MRTV, which said the junta chief, Min Aung Hlaing, had pardoned 23,047 prisoners, including 137 foreigners who will be deported. He also reduced sentences for others.

It comes as daily protests against the 1 February ousting of the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi continue, as does the use of deadly force against them.

According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, which monitors casualties and arrests, government forces have killed at least 728 protesters and bystanders since the takeover. The group says 3,141 people, including Aung San Suu Kyi, are in detention.

Unconfirmed but credible accounts with photos on social media claimed three people were killed on Saturday by security forces in a violent crackdown in the central city of Mogoke, in Myanmar's gem-mining region.

Detainees released on Saturday from Insein prison in Yangon included at least three political prisoners jailed in 2019, said witnesses and local reports.

The three are members of the Peacock Generation performance troupe who [were arrested during that year's new year celebrations](#) for skits that poked fun at military representatives in parliament and military involvement in business.

Their traditional style of acting is called Thangyat, a mashup of poetry, comedy and music with a sharp undertone of satire. Several members of the troupe were convicted under a law banning circulation of information that could endanger or demoralise members of the military. The actors may have particularly angered the military because they performed in army uniforms.

Several members were also found guilty of online defamation for livestreaming their performances. It could not be ascertained if all imprisoned members of the troupe were released.

Another freed prisoner was Ross Dunkley, an Australian newspaper entrepreneur sentenced in 2019 to 13 years in prison for drug possession. His release was confirmed by his ex-wife, Cynda Johnston, reported the [Sydney Morning Herald](#) newspaper.

Dunkley co-founded the Myanmar Times, an English-language daily, but was forced to give up his share in it. He became well-known for co-founding or acquiring English-language publications in formerly socialist states that were seeking foreign investment as they liberalised their economies, but was sometimes criticised for doing business with authoritarian regimes.

Early prisoner releases are customary during major holidays in Myanmar and this is the second batch the ruling junta has announced since taking power.

After the release of more than 23,000 convicts to mark Union Day on 12 February, there were reports on social media that some were recruited by the authorities to carry out violence at night in residential areas to spread panic, especially by setting fires. Some areas responded by setting up their own neighbourhood watch groups.

In March, more than 600 people who were imprisoned for protesting against the February coup [were released](#) from Insein prison, a rare conciliatory gesture by the military that appeared aimed at placating the protest movement.

Those freed were mostly young people caught up in sweeps of street demonstrations, while those considered protest leaders were kept locked up.

Neither the military government nor those opposed to it show any signs of backing off from their struggle for power. Western nations have tried to pressure the military through diplomatic and economic sanctions with little effect.

Myanmar's south-east Asian neighbours, concerned about regional instability, are trying to get the junta on the path to restoring democracy, or at least end its violent repression.

A spokesperson for Thailand's foreign ministry said Min Aung Hlaing had confirmed he would attend a summit meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations on 24 April.

Tanee Sangrat said in a text message to journalists that Brunei, the current chair of the 10-nation body, confirmed it had proposed the date for a meeting at the group's secretariat in the Indonesian capital, Jakarta. Indonesia has taken the lead in calling for the special meeting to discuss the Myanmar crisis.

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