

Specials

# In Myanmar, Pro-Junta Vigilante Groups Wage Campaign of Violence, Disinformation

Sunday 8 August 2021, by [The Irrawaddy](#) (Date first published: 11 June 2021).

**In response to the increasingly organized public resistance to the Myanmar military following its takeover on Feb. 1, Pyu Saw Htee groups have been formed across the country, reportedly with support from the military, to counter the anti-regime movement.**

The first Pyu Saw Htee groups were formed in mid-May after the parallel government, the National Unity Government (NUG), called for the formation of People's Defense Forces to resist the regime. The groups emerged at a time when attacks on military-appointed ward administrators and ward administration offices were erupting in the country.

In a leaked letter to Pyu Saw Htee groups across the country, leaders of the movement instructed the groups to bomb schools across the country and spread misinformation on social media and at teashops, markets, banks and so on claiming that the attacks were carried out by the NUG.

"They intend to smear the NUG and the CRPH," said NUG Deputy Defense Minister Daw Khin Ma Ma Myo. The NUG was formed by the CRPH, a committee representing lawmakers elected in the 2020 general election who were unable to take their seats due to the coup.

U Tin Soe, a former village administrator and National League for Democracy member in Kachin State's Hpakant, was assassinated on June 2. Locals said he was murdered by a Pyu Saw Htee. Pyu Saw Htee are also suspected of torching schools in Yangon and elsewhere.

There are reasons for such suspicions. Streetlights were turned off before the fires. Normally, streetlights are controlled by ward administrative bodies. School principals turned a deaf ear when they were informed about the fires at their schools. Nightwatchmen didn't seek help as the schools burned, and ward administrative bodies made no effort to put out the fires.

Widely viewed as military stooges, Pyu Saw Htee are reportedly formed by township-level offices of the General Administration Department. The groups consist of active and retired military personnel, civil servants, members of the military proxy Union Solidarity and Development Party, ultranationalists and people hired for a wage of 5,000 kyats (about US\$3) per day.

Posts have circulated on social media claiming to show letters in which Pyu Saw Htee headquarters instruct members to use fake accounts to spread misinformation, infiltrate anti-regime groups and provide information to security forces. The Irrawaddy has been unable to independently verify the letters.

In an interview with independent media outlet Mizzima, Ko Thura, who described himself as the information officer of a Pyu Saw Htee group, said: "We have formed combat teams, but only to protect the people on the front line in case of emergency. But we will not be acting alone. With the

approval of the state leaders, we intend to provide assistance to the Tatmadaw [Myanmar's military] as its auxiliary force if they need us."

The Pyu Saw Htee remind many people of the Swan Arr Shin—a vigilante group formed by police, soldiers, firefighters, lower-level administrators and the Union Solidarity and Development Association, the predecessor of the USDP. The Pyu Saw Htee have thus been referred to as new versions of the Swan Arr Shin.

This is not the first time the name "Pyu Saw Htee" has been associated with pro-military vigilante groups. Amid instability and insurgency during the rule of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) government, the idea of forming a vigilante group to help restore law and order was presented at a conference held by the Myanmar military on Sept. 14, 1955.

The idea led to the Pyu Saw Htee scheme, named after a semi-legendary king of the Bagan period, and launched with the approval of the National Defense Council chaired by then Prime Minister U Nu.

The group however earned a bad name as it bullied the people with guns instead of protecting them. Widely viewed as stooges of the AFPFL, the group committed every crime in the book, from kidnapping and robbery to rape and murder, not to mention assassinating politicians of opposition parties in broad daylight.

Some of the most notorious crimes committed by the Pyu Saw Htee of that era in order to get rid of the AFPFL's political rivals included a quadruple murder in Minhla town, Tharyawaddy District in Bago in 1956, and a mass murder in the village of Si Taung Eaing in Myeik District in 1957. In some cases, women had to hide in monasteries for fear of being raped.

Opposition parties including the National United Front as well as the people repeatedly called for disbanding the Pyu Saw Htee, but their demands went unheeded by the AFPFL government and military. Only after the AFPFL split into two in 1958 did Prime Minister U Nu hold talks with the military on reducing the size of the Pyu Saw Htee. It was agreed the group's numbers would be halved, and that it would eventually be disbanded.

The military and Home Affairs Ministry were not willing to disband the Pyu Saw Htee, however, as the group had been useful in maintaining public order despite its notorious name. Finally, high-ranking military and police officers agreed to transform it into an auxiliary police force, and it lingered on in that capacity for a time, but the curtain had already come down on the Pyu Saw Htee as far as being an actor on Myanmar's political stage. Though the groups of today bear the same name, there is no direct link between them and the group formed in the 1950s.

## **The Irrawaddy**

---

### **P.S.**

• The Irrawaddy 11 June 2021:  
<https://www.irrawaddy.com/specials/in-myanmar-pro-junta-vigilante-groups-wage-campaign-of-violence-disinformation.html>