

Myanmar junta imposes martial law on resistance strongholds, reshuffles cabinet and military council members

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The moves come as the regime extends a national state of emergency two years after seizing power.



Resistance fighters travel between villages in Sagaing Region's Khin-U Township in November (Moe Oo/ Myanmar Now)

Myanmar's military junta has declared martial law in 37 townships in eight of the country's 14 states and regions, giving regional commanders absolute authority over areas where it is facing staunch resistance to its rule.

The move was announced on Thursday, a day after the regime extended a national state of emergency that has been in place since it seized power two years ago.

According to state-run broadcaster MRTV, the secretary of the military council, Lt-Gen Aung Lin Dwe, said the new measures would allow the army to "exercise more effective undertakings for ensuring security, the rule of law and local peace and tranquillity" in restive regions of the country.

Nearly a third of the affected townships are in Sagaing Region, where resistance forces allied with ethnic armed organisations continue to challenge the regime's hold on power.

A total of 11 townships in the region are now under martial law, MRTV reported.

Its neighbours in the country's northwest, Chin State and Magway Region, are also heavily affected, with seven and five townships now under direct military rule, respectively.

The other townships facing more draconian controls are located in Bago and Tanintharyi regions and Karenni (Kayah), Karen (Kayin), and Mon states—covering a broad swathe of the country from the centre to the east and the far south.

In March 2021, the regime imposed martial law on 11 townships in Myanmar's two largest cities, Yangon and Mandalay, as it escalated its deadly crackdowns on protesters opposed to the military takeover that took place less than two months earlier.

Two months later, the military was also handed greater control over Mindat Township in Chin State and Deik-U Township in Bago Region, as armed resistance to its rule spread across the country in response to its indiscriminate killing of civilians.

In areas under martial law, regional commanders can set up military tribunals to hear cases involving 23 different offences, for which sentences can include the death penalty and indefinite detention. The offences include high treason, sedition, incitement, unlawful association, terrorism, murder, and rape.

Violations of immigration and media laws are also subject to the tribunals' judgments, which cannot be appealed.

On Wednesday, the anniversary of the February 1, 2021 coup, its orchestrator, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, acknowledged in an address to the country's National Defence and Security Council that his regime was in control of only 60% of Myanmar's 330 townships, while 132 remain strongly contested.

The regime leader cited this situation as a pretext for extending the state of emergency and maintaining his hold on power. Since then, he has also carried out a major reshuffle of cabinet and military council members.

While Min Aung Hlaing remains as head of the military council and prime minister of the state's administrative body, five other regime leaders—junta vice-chair Soe Win and the ministers of defence, home affairs, transport and communications, and planning and finance—have been appointed to serve as deputy prime ministers.

The regime's foreign minister, Wunna Maung Lwin, has been removed from this position and transferred to the military council. Nearly half of the army-dominated council's 20 military members have been replaced, while civilian members have been appointed to a newly formed Central Advisory Body.

The chief ministers of Mandalay Region and Mon, Shan, and Rakhine states have also been replaced, although no specific reason was given.

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