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Pro-Democracy Violence: Myanmar's Anti-Regime Movement

By Benjamin Mok

SYNOPSIS

The anti-regime movement formed following the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar has conducted regular bombings and assassinations against regime-affiliated civilian targets, causing collateral casualties. It is a trend that is likely to continue.

COMMENTARY

THE ANTI-REGIME movement formed following the military takeover in Myanmar in February 2021 was initially largely non-violent, limiting its actions to mass protests and the [civil disobedience movement \(CDM\)](#). However, the government's [violent crackdown](#) on protesters and activists rapidly escalated the situation such that by mid-2021, the movement began adopting hard-line tactics like urban bombing campaigns and targeted killings.

These tactics are mainly deployed by localised militias known as People Defence Forces (PDFs). While the government-in-exile – the [‘National Unity Government’ \(NUG\)](#) – claims ownership of these militias, the reality is that there is little centralised coordination between the groups, resulting in a wide variation of modus operandi.

Trends, Targets and Strategies

However, certain trends can be discerned in the attacks that have emerged over time: While the PDFs had initially largely focused their [attacks on military targets](#) such as checkpoints and convoys, they have developed an increasing willingness to carry out [attacks against regime-affiliated civilian targets](#).

Based on ICPVTR's internal database as of December 2021, anti-regime groups have

carried out at least 64 acts of arson, 362 bombings and 584 assassinations against such civilian targets. At least 261 of these incidents resulted in collateral casualties.

Targets of attacks primarily consist of what the movement terms as '[dalans](#)' – pro-regime administrators and informants accused of cooperating with the military in its repression campaign. There is no standard procedure in the identification of 'dalans'.

The process relies heavily on local hearsay and information gathered by PDFs; for example, some targets were reportedly [seen by locals guiding regime forces](#) during raids, while others were [highlighted in social media](#) by commentators pleading for local PDFs to 'take action'.

Dalans as 'Clearance Operations'

The PDFs generally term attacks neutralising such 'dalans' as 'clearance operations'. Another, less-publicised, category of targets are workers who chose not to participate in the CDM, thus impeding the movement's goal of bringing Myanmar's daily operations to a standstill.

Most common examples include those working in the government sector, as well as regime-affiliated essential sectors such as education, oil, electricity and banking. Workplaces falling into this category, particularly local administration offices, are also targeted.

Most attacks involve bombings and assassinations. Bombings tend to vary in terms of lethality. Some bombings are symbolic and carried out using equivalents of firecrackers or flash grenades. Other bombings use improvised explosives that require some level of bombmaking skill and include hallmarks of lethality such as [ball bearings](#).

Bombing tactics similarly vary in lethality, with some bombings carried out at night to avoid casualties, while others are carried out during public events (such as [weddings](#)) or working hours to catch intended targets.

Some groups also employ sophisticated tactics such as [double-tap bombings](#), intended to harm military-affiliated first responders arriving at the scene. Assassinations are more homogenous; targets are generally killed via shootings or stabbings in residences or during their daily commute.

Bystanders and 'Grey-area' Collateral

It is important to highlight that the PDFs are not carrying out indiscriminate attacks against the civilian population. Many PDFs have issued [statements](#) warning civilians to not associate with 'dalans', to stay away from government buildings or targeted roads, and avoid unnecessary travel.

Nevertheless, collateral casualties occur. Some might simply be bystanders. For example, [customers of a tea house](#) owned by someone affiliated with the military, [pedestrians](#) who happened to be standing close to a workplace bombing, or [garbage collectors](#) accidentally setting off planted explosives.

Incidents involving such casualties are not publicised and PDFs rarely claim responsibility for them; one [member of a Yangon-based PDF reportedly stated](#) that he was “sorry” for such incidents, but also that they were the result of “bad luck”.

Some other casualties fall into a ‘grey area’ of justification within the anti-regime movement’s ideology. Families are usually included in [threats issued to informants](#); at least 55 attacks have caused casualties amongst family members of the targets. For example, on 29 October 2021, the [wife and father of a township administrator](#) were shot by the Pakokku PDF – what the PDF termed as a ‘clearing’ operation against military supporters.

Similarly, many [non-participants in the CDM are targeted](#), particularly those with sensitive jobs such as [collecting electricity bills](#) or working for [military-affiliated companies](#).

While some in the anti-regime movement might justify such ‘grey-area’ collateral due to the victims’ continued association with regime-affiliated family members or workplaces, it does raise questions over the extent to which these spouses, children and workers are able to disassociate from the targets.

False Flag Incidents and their Nuances

Not all the recorded attacks against regime-affiliated civilian targets may have been carried out by the anti-regime movement. Of the 1010 recorded incidents, 831 remain unclaimed by anti-regime groups. Members of the latter claim that many – particularly those involving unintended casualties – are false flag incidents planted by the regime.

Some [evidence](#) have been circulated online indicating a degree of truth in this claim. However, given that PDFs have admitted to causing collateral casualties in at least 35 of the remaining 179 incidents, and that the attacks do result in significant disruption to the regime’s daily operations, it is likely that a substantial portion of the 831 unclaimed incidents are indeed carried out by the anti-regime groups.

The NUG, likely realising the dangers that such incidents pose towards the anti-regime movement’s public image, have [urged the PDFs](#) to follow its established guidelines. Many PDFs, particularly in major urban centres, have released [statements](#) indicating their intent to do so by avoiding bombings of public areas, hospitals and schools, and to limit any unintended casualties.

Yet, these guidelines are nebulous – the [NUG’s official statement](#) calls for compliance with ‘international military laws’, including the ‘Law of Armed Conflicts’ and ‘Code of Conduct for Civilians’, but fails to define how exactly these expansive concepts function in reality.

Growing Complexity of Anti-Regime Movement

While the [NUG’s foreign minister has stated](#) that committing ‘indiscriminate attacks’ is not the policy of the NUG or PDFs, both unintended and ‘grey-area’ collateral continue to occur on a regular basis. Furthermore, the NUG’s control over the PDFs is tenuous – [many PDFs do not follow](#) the NUG’s established guidelines, and some have even

[declared their independence](#) from the NUG. Also, some PDFs have been [influenced](#) by the Ethnic Armed Organisations operating in Myanmar.

The variation in tactics by PDFs, the nuances of how collateral casualties are defined, and the murky justifications of attacks highlight the growing complexity of the anti-regime movement in Myanmar.

Black-and-white portrayals of the movement as either [terrorists conducting indiscriminate attacks](#) or [freedom fighters eschewing terror tactics](#) fail to capture the divisions and contradictions within the movement itself. To gain a more accurate understanding of the movement, further analysis of the different actors, drivers and ground situation is required.

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