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Conscription in Myanmar: Is the Military Junta Losing Control?

By Sandeep Singh

SYNOPSIS

The recent activation of an existing conscription law in Myanmar by the ruling military junta seeks to draft young people into serving in the military in a situation of worsening civil conflict in the country. This significant development was in response to increased gains by rebel forces and demonstrates the shaky position of the junta.

COMMENTARY

On 10 February 2024, the Myanmar junta made military service mandatory for all young men and women. Considering strong anti-military sentiments in Myanmar, the conscription law is likely to intensify the rebellion and work against the military's aim of winning the civil war.

The move comes in the wake of growing military repression in Myanmar as the junta's forces suffered battlefield defeats in various parts of the country. The lack of clarity over how the conscription law will be implemented led to widespread confusion. This was further compounded by the junta's decision to scrap recruitment of women on 21 February. This swift retraction showed a lack of coherence in the plan for the new law – the nuts and bolts of it continue to be up in the air.

The conscription law and its inconsistencies demonstrate a growing crisis of legitimacy for the junta, which has remained in power since the coup d'état in February 2021. It is also evidence of the military successes of the rebel forces whose advances have forced the junta to hastily introduce the law.

Conscription to Tighten Control

The military junta in Naypyidaw has introduced conscription as another measure to

tighten its dominance over the country. The conscription law had mandated, upon its introduction, that men between 18 and 35 and women between 18 and 27 [must serve for two years](#) in a national military service programme. Professionals such as doctors, engineers and technicians could serve up to [five years](#).

Although the law was promulgated 65 years ago, it has never been enforced by [previous Myanmar administrations](#). The junta's activation of the conscription law through the State Administration Council (SAC) was a significant heightening of the attempt to control the volatile situation on the ground. It came in the wake of the growing influence of the rebels.

This reliance on the force of the law is in stark contrast to the voluntary and enthusiastic participation of young recruits in the "[People's Defence Force](#)" of the opposition National Unity Government – the Myanmar government in exile – and its allies. According to the regime's spokesman, Zaw Min Tun, the conscription law looks set to conscript a first batch of 5,000 recruits in April.

The Junta's Precarious Position

The resistance forces, whose advances have been significant, come from diverse backgrounds and motivations. Recent events such as the junta's defeat in Myawaddy in April 2024 demonstrate the unity between various rebel groups such as the Karen National Union and forces of the National Unity Government's affiliated People's Defence Force. These resistance armies as well as pro-democracy, anti-coup forces have made significant gains.

An offensive dubbed [Operation 1027](#) brought together the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, the Arakan Army and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army which captured more than 100 regime positions in late October 2023. These victories inspired other armed ethnic organisations to launch "[synchronised attacks across the country](#)".

The latest advances took place against a backdrop of attacks by the military junta including airstrikes on civilian areas. These attacks, which killed at least 165 civilians in airstrikes in the Pazigy region in April 2023, have been justified by the Tatmadaw as actions to "strike at terrorists" and to crush [internal rebellions](#). This rhetoric flies in the face of evidence showing sustained casualties and massive losses of life among civilians.

Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin offered to [mediate](#) recently after the military regime's loss of Myawaddy. As Srettha put it, the military regime in Myanmar is "losing strength", which sums up the ineffectiveness of the junta's tactics and operations. Before the enforcement of the conscription law, and faced with dwindling manpower resources, the Tatmadaw had pushed non-combat personnel [to the frontline](#).

Effects on Myanmar Youths

The conscription law has significant historical roots as it reflects the military's central role in Myanmar's past notwithstanding the brief democratic experiment under Aung San Suu Kyi. Former Prime Minister Ne Win [enacted the law in 1959](#) when he was in

charge of the interim government. As this law was never enforced before 10 February 2024, there is understandable unease about its enforcement among Myanmar nationals.

The Straits Times in Singapore has reported that Myanmar youths are worried about what the law might mean. A [29-year-old entrepreneur in Yangon](#) expressed, “I don’t know what to do. Should I continue to live here or should I continue to study? Where should I run to? Should I join the revolution forces?”.

The conscription law has created concerns for the young people in Myanmar about becoming involved in a war not of their choosing. While it is not clear the degree to which the conscription law will be enforced, it has raised widespread suspicion of [further abuses](#) by the military on the civilian population under the pretext of involving them in national defence, not least on the Rohingya population who are reportedly being dragged in to fight for the very forces that participate in their [detention without end](#).

The military’s role as the guardian of the nation has been compromised, and this has worsened since the coup of 2021. This has a significant ramification on how conscription can become used as a justification to defend the nation while quite clearly resting on shaky grounds of legitimacy.

While the junta’s spokesman Zaw Min Tun [expresses](#) the need for “everybody to proudly follow this people’s service military law”, the consequences for not following it include imprisonment for five years, which leaves people with little to no choice. Imprisoning a significant number of young people is not a positive sign for the regime’s legitimacy.

Given the backdrop of daily battles between the Tatmadaw and resistance forces, the situation on the ground has brought about [forcible recruitment](#).

One of the possible effects of enacting the law, some analysts suggest, maybe to persuade young people to join the rebel movements. The National Unity Government estimates that some 14,000 troops from the military have defected since 2021. With their fate in the balance, it may well be the case that these young people either resort to this or flee the country if they have the means to, or, get an exemption if they have the [means to pay the bribes](#).

With shrinking manpower, the military regime’s power is hard to [sustain](#). The fact that it is drafting unwilling people for a [civil conflict](#), rather than a war against an external enemy, adds further doubts on the strength of the Tatmadaw. As of April 2024, basic military training has [commenced](#), but the rush to implement it might be an indicator that enlistment rates have been [limited](#).

The enforcement of the conscription law on unwilling conscripts amid the military successes of the resistance forces could be an indication that the military junta is losing control.

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