

Scenarios for Security Sector Reform in Myanmar's Heartland

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Abstract

The 2021 coup shattered Myanmar's Bamar Buddhist heartland (Sagaing, Magway, and Mandalay regions) with emerging People's Defense Force(PDFs). This paper examines the different armed groups in the heartland: National Unity Government (NUG)-aligned PDF battalions, hundreds of local PDFs, and ideologically driven groups such as the communist People's Liberation Army. It also analyses the junta's counter-insurgency force called Pyu Saw Htee militias. This paper explores four possible outcomes of the struggles in Central Myanmar by 2026 and beyond 1)What happens to SSR when the conflict remains locked in a protracted stalemate, allowing only limited, localised "micro-SSR" in resistance-controlled zones? 2) What happens to SSR after a revolutionary victory if the anti-junta coalition collapses and armed groups refuse to integrate, leading to fragmented authority and warlord rule? 3) What happens to SSR when revolutionary victory is followed by successful political consolidation and the creation of a civilian-controlled Federal Union Army? 4) What happens to SSR if the junta crushes the heartland resistance and re-imposes harsh, centralized military rule? Security reform in central Myanmar cannot happen without fundamental political change because integrating hundreds of different armed groups into a systematic arrangement is only a political matter. Without justice for past crimes, which will create the space for chaos with unseized weapons in the future, genuine civilian control over armed forces, credible programs to reintegrate the PDF fighters into society, and an end to Bamar military dominance, the heartland could become either the place where permanent fragmented control after the conflict. Because these three regions are the demographic core of Myanmar, what happens here will have a big effect on democratizing of the country with accountable security forces, or fall back into cycles of armed group dominance and violence.