

**The Australian National University, Myanmar Research Centre submission to:
members of the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, in
response to the inquiry on Democracy and Human Rights in Myanmar**

Canberra, 29 January 2026

I. Summary

Since the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, Australia has reconfigured its engagement and its aid program to minimise contact with the junta while maintaining essential development and humanitarian assistance under challenging circumstances.

Australia's post-coup policy settings should not be reconsidered subsequent to the 2025-26 phased elections, which have been designed and conducted to inaugurate a new phase of military rule and prevent establishment of civilian government.

It is in Australia's national interest and in accord with our values to (1) refrain from acknowledging the election results; (2) support governance initiatives independent of the junta; (3) sustain and enlarge humanitarian assistance; (4) enhance educational opportunities for Myanmar nationals; (5) pursue a regional engagement strategy centred on democracy and human rights; (6) call out the Myanmar military as a transnational organised crime actor; and, (7) expand targeted sanctions and accountability mechanisms.

II. Context

Myanmar's military junta has been conducting general elections over three phases (December 28, 2025; January 11 and 25, 2026) in parts of the country where it is able to exert sufficient control to hold the ballot.

The elections lack any credibility. Having carried out the February 2021 coup to prevent the National League for Democracy — which won 88% of seats in the 2020 election — from taking government, the junta banned all but a handful of acquiescent proxy opposition parties, and detained genuine political opponents, including the State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and President U Win Myint. It rewrote electoral rules to ensure that the army-established Union Solidarity and Development Party will through votes from a small proportion of citizens secure the bulk of electorates. The result will be a military legislature, with soldiers constitutionally occupying part and cronies or lackeys, the remainder.

The elections have been conducted amid civil warfare and economic collapse. An estimated three quarters of people in Myanmar now live hand-to-mouth as the military diverts resources toward its own coffers, and to fighting a multi-front conflict that has killed tens of thousands and displaced millions of people internally. The junta has introduced conscription to make up depleted ranks of troops caused by casualties and absconders, contributing to the exodus from the country since the coup, on top of the millions who had previously fled for security or economic reasons. Power outages, hyperinflation, and infrastructure decay have reduced middle-class families to poverty. Credible reports have it that the military has either blocked or manipulated humanitarian aid so that it goes to regime loyalists, including in the aftermath of the massive March 2025 earthquake.

Human rights abuses and state violence are endemic. Indiscriminate air strikes and drone attacks on predominantly civilian targets, many in earthquake-affected zones, occur daily, targeting hospitals, schools, homes, religious sites, and shelters for internally displaced people. Mass arbitrary detention, including of around 23,000 political prisoners; torture, extrajudicial killings, sexual violence as a weapon of war, and forced displacement are pervasive, including in Rakhine State, where in 2017 the military carried out a genocidal campaign against Rohingya civilians. The regime consistently violates rights to free

speech, assembly, privacy, movement, information, free press, effective legal counsel, and fair trials. It has massively increased surveillance online.

For decades, the Myanmar military has been the primary driver of instability and violence in Myanmar. It has either refused to negotiate peaceful settlement of armed conflict, or has negotiated in bad faith. It has a history of conflict-containment and management through ceasefires that enable and fund counterinsurgency strategy, and the persistence, rather than annulment, of civil war. While the 2010s marked the beginnings of a new design, for “winning by process”, the military itself ended this experiment with the 2021 coup.

There is no evidence that the junta now intends to return to a path of political reform. For its office-holders, who are unable to achieve a decisive military victory but unwilling to negotiate a political end to dictatorship and transition to power-sharing, elections are mere tactics in a war of attrition in which the military elite and its collaborators will, with backing of China, Russia and Iran, for the foreseeable future take what spoils it can get at the immiseration of millions.

Those spoils include profits from transnational criminal enterprises. The Global Organised Crime Index now lists Myanmar as the biggest nexus of organised crime in the world. Since the coup, the junta is reported to have expanded ties to transnational organised crime networks that encompass production and trafficking of narcotics, weapons, gemstones, rare earths minerals, humans, and endangered species of flora and fauna. Either directly or through its allied militias it has hosted cyber-scam centres and enabled money-laundering operations for organised crime syndicates.

III. Alternatives

A conflict-sensitive approach to engagement in Myanmar requires avoiding complicity in the war-making and political strategies of the military, and a conscious effort to work toward alternatives. It requires rejecting the false narrative that Myanmar is at risk of ‘balkanisation’ and descent into anarchy. That narrative is structured to deny any policy alternatives other than those that work toward short-term stabilisation by, directly or indirectly, strengthening the military regime.

The non-violent uprising against the 2021 coup, which morphed into new forms of armed and unarmed resistance, is evidence of the strong commitment of people in Myanmar to work for the common goal of ending dictatorship and establishing federal democracy. That will is reflected in the lack of engagement with the phased elections. While the outcome of the elections will come soon, the outcome of the struggle for democracy and human rights in Myanmar will not. It is achievable only through long-term approaches, and partnerships with actors who will work in good faith toward objectives that align with Australia’s values.

The military’s hold on government and deteriorating state institutions continues to be actively contested by diverse political actors in the country. Opponents of the junta, among them the National Unity Government (NUG), acting in lieu of the government elected in 2020; People’s (and Local) Defence Forces established after the coup, and armed para-state groups operating around the country, old and new, now control more of the territory and govern more people than at any time since independence. They are variously and collectively working in challenging circumstances to meet basic education, health and security needs. Many of those involved in the groups and activities are graduates or affiliates of Australian universities.

Actors such as the NUG, the Multi-Ethnic Councils (MEC), Spring Revolution Alliance (SRA), and others with plans for effective administration at regional and local levels, such as the Sagaing and Magway Federal Units, offer viable alternatives to military rule. The

NUG, MEC, and SRA reflect efforts for national unification. The NUG holds a National Unity Consultative Council inclusive of Myanmar's diverse pro-democracy actors for purposes of crafting a new national constitution prescribing a civilian-led democracy. The MEC is composed of several groups that are coordinating the running of local governance and delivering public services. The SRA assembles 19 armed resistance groups under a unified command structure to oppose the Myanmar military. At the same time, local communities are experimenting with their own administration systems for bottom-up or "emergent" federalism through grassroots initiatives.

These efforts are occurring in trying circumstances. Not all will succeed, but nor are they uncoordinated or happening in isolation from one another. They are supported by international humanitarian and technical assistance from the diaspora and established local civil society organisations on Myanmar's frontiers. Collectively, the diversity of pro-democracy actors demonstrates the capacity and willingness of Myanmar nationals to innovate and work collaboratively for democracy and human rights. It is in Australia's national interest and in accord with our values to support them.

IV. Recommendations

1. Refrain from acknowledging the election and its outcomes, or resetting policy.

Australia should maintain its position that the 2025-26 elections are undemocratic and do not represent the will of Myanmar people. It should assiduously avoid trade relations, defence engagement, or strengthening diplomatic ties with the military regime. It should join with the European Union, United Kingdom, and United States to build a global coalition impairing the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, Myanmar Economic Bank, Myanmar military international bank accounts, and aviation fuel suppliers that are critical for military finance and field operations; and, collaborate with international partners to investigate and preserve evidence of the transnational financial mechanisms that are sustaining the military regime.

2. Prioritize support for democracy and local governance independent of the junta.

Australia should direct more development assistance toward civil society organisations, including those organised by Civil Disobedience Movement participants; local governance structures unaligned with the military, and community-based initiatives. This includes pursuing new locally led, consultative approaches to aid and service delivery.

3. Sustain and enlarge humanitarian assistance across Myanmar and for refugees.

Australia should continue and increase assistance to conflict-affected communities throughout Myanmar, prioritising internally displaced persons. More of Australia's foreign aid budget should be directed to delivery of medical, educational and other humanitarian assistance, including supplies and training, via civil society groups and international organisations capable of bypassing the military state. Special regard should be given to Rohingya populations in Rakhine State and Bangladesh. With over one million Rohingya refugees currently in Bangladesh, there is an enormous need to sustain support while engaging diplomatically to prevent forced repatriation.

4. Enhance educational opportunities for talented Myanmar nationals abroad.

Australia should continue and expand the Australia Awards—Myanmar programme in order that talented Myanmar nationals working for democracy and human rights get opportunities to contribute over the long-term, consistent with Australia's Development Partnership Plans. It should support other initiatives, through research training at

universities in Thailand and elsewhere in the region, and through institutions and programs set up by Myanmar nationals, such as the Spring University-Myanmar.

5. Pursue a regional engagement strategy centred on democracy and human rights.

Australia should resist strategies that prioritise short-term stabilisation and premature normalisation of relations over longer-term democratic political transition. Those strategies risk serving the junta's political and military objectives. Instead, Australia should leverage its convening power to deepen strategic coordination on Myanmar with like-minded democracies—including European partners, the United Kingdom, and Japan—while maintaining constructive engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Australia should pursue parallel diplomatic tracks to support democratic transition and accountable local governance structures, even as regional countries may adjust policies.

6. Officially identify the Myanmar military as a transnational organised crime actor.

Australia should align with international law enforcement efforts to investigate and prosecute the regime and its partners as organised crime actors; direct Australian law enforcement to investigate and prosecute the potential harms to Australia arising from organised crime activities linked to the Myanmar military regime; and, direct more of Australia's foreign aid budget and foreign policy efforts to support investigations, evidence preservation, and prosecutions of the Myanmar military regime's actions in transnational organised crime.

7. Increase targeted sanctions and strengthen accountability mechanisms.

Australia should strengthen targeted sanctions against junta leadership and military-controlled economic entities while supporting international accountability efforts, including the documentation of war crimes and crimes against humanity for eventual prosecution. Support for international law should include assertive backing for the genocide hearing against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice. Australia should cooperate in full with, and support the mandate of the UN Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar; the International Criminal Court, and align with national cases for universal jurisdiction in national courts of countries such as Argentina.

About the ANU Myanmar Research Centre

The Australian National University has played a key role in regional debate on political, social, and economic change and reform in Myanmar/Burma since the 1990s. The ANU Myanmar Research Centre was established in 2015 with the mission of connecting and fostering Myanmar-related expertise, drawing upon faculty and students from across the ANU campus, in conjunction with other universities in Australia and around the world. The Centre hosts the biennial Myanmar Update conference—whose proceedings are published by ISEAS—among a range of other public and closed-doors events. Since the 2021 military coup, the Centre has played a critical role in informing the Australian Government about conditions in Myanmar. In partnership with the Myanmar Research Network, University of Melbourne; and, colleagues at the University of New South Wales, it currently receives funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Submission prepared by Associate Professor Jonathan Liljeblad, Dr Nicola Williams and Associate Professor Nick Cheesman in consultation with the MRC Board and staff

For correspondence, email [REDACTED]