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## **Myanmar's National Census: A Step Towards the Long-Promised Election in 2025?**

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It has been three years since the faithful political incident that shook the region, and Myanmar has been attempting to restore stability and create new normalcy in the country amidst the ongoing conflicts. The most recent national effort was the announcement of the population and household census enumeration for 2024, which is essential for both the country's development and election.

On September 02, the Chairman of the State Administration Council, Prime Minister Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, announced the population and household census enumeration for 2024.<sup>1</sup> The census will be held nationwide from October 1 to 15 by the SAC as a way for the military government to gather accurate information on the population and their lifestyle.<sup>2</sup> This announcement draws both support and criticism as neighboring countries seek any possible solution to stop the conflict since it has caused them border insecurity and a refugee burden. Critics and National Unity Government (NUG) officials believe that the populace needs to be very “cautious” with their personal information should the census be carried out.

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<sup>1</sup> “Everyone must respond thoroughly to the questions, as this contributes to a data collection process that benefits themselves, their families, future generations, and the State” *The Global New Light of Myanma*, September 02, 2024, <https://www.gnlm.com.mm/everyone-must-respond-thoroughly-to-the-questions-as-this-contributes-to-a-data-collection-process-that-benefits-themselves-their-families-future-generations-and-the-state/#article-title>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

During the census announcement, Senior General Ming Aung Hlaing called for support and cooperation from the citizens and ethnic organizations of Myanmar to participate in the census,<sup>3</sup> as it would mutually benefit the people of Myanmar in future development and elections. Myanmar is blessed with diverse natural resources and terrain, such as forests, mountainous ranges, and water bodies, resulting in complex, beautiful, and unique lifestyles and cultures across the country. However, this diversity also challenges the government regarding political, social, and economic development plans. To carry out any form of development in the country, the government and all relevant stakeholders, such as investors, development partners, NGOs, and the regional and central government, need to have accurate data on the area of interest. With accurate and up-to-date information, development policies can be implemented with inclusivity, efficiency, effectiveness, and minimal risk and damage. The population and household census would provide Myanmar with information about the total population, age, gender, socioeconomic measures, and household data.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, accurate data collected from an inclusive nationwide census is of the utmost importance for the prospects of Myanmar and its people. The significance of the population and household census transcends development policies. Not only does an inclusive and nationwide census provide a foundation for evidence-based decision-making for development plans,<sup>5</sup> but it would also generate accurate voter lists, an essential foundation for a free and fair election.<sup>6</sup> Hosting the election has been the SAC's "ultimate mission."<sup>7</sup>

The National Unity Government has been very vocal and critical on the matter, insinuating that the people should be cautious with the census questions and that the SAC cannot be trusted with the civilians' data.<sup>8</sup> The NUG carries on to suggest that the census is just a step towards the military

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<sup>3</sup> Grant Peck, "Military-run Myanmar to hold a census next month to prepare for election slated for 2025" *The Canadian Press*, September 2, 2024, <https://ca.news.yahoo.com/military-run-myanmar-hold-census-165123358.html?guccounter=1>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> "About the census" UNFPA Myanmar, accessed September 13, 2024, <https://myanmar.unfpa.org/en/about-census#:~:text=About%20the%20census&text=The%20data%20generated%20at%20all,programmes%20implemented%20in%20the%20country.>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Sebastian Strangio, "Myanmar Announces Census as Prelude to Long-Delayed Election" *The Diplomat*, September 03, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/09/myanmar-announces-census-as-prelude-to-long-delayed-election/>

to find methods to terrorize civilians and legitimize the regime.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, critics have mentioned how any form of election would not be “free and fair” at all as the majority of the National League for Democracy party leaders, noticeably Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, have been arrested.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, the Tatmadaw has already been facing accusations of violating data privacy with digital censorship and social media crackdowns. Since the 2021 political incident, the military has been intensely imposing digital censorship on various social media platforms such as Facebook, a main source of information consumption.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the Tatmadaw introduced a new Cybersecurity Bill into the drafting process in 2022.<sup>12</sup> Under a newly added provision, using Virtual Private Networks (VPN) without permission from the ministry in charge would be considered a criminal offense punishable by up to three years in prison.<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that a VPN is a gateway for people to avoid the surveillance of the military government that monitors their activities on the internet. The military’s digital censorship actions, social media crackdowns, and increased internet surveillance have sparked concerns about Myanmar’s freedom of speech and internet privacy and safety, resulting in skepticism about the State Administration Council’s handling of the civilians’ information should the population and household census be carried out. Therefore, critics of the military are not confident in the SAC in carrying out the census, fearing that the Tatmadaw would violate the data privacy of the people and use the gathered information for their interest in prolonging the regime and terrorizing the civilians. Moreover, the Tatmadaw has had a history of extending the state of emergency and postponing the national election on numerous occasions. Therefore, it could create a sense of uncertainty on whether this new statement and commitment by senior general Ming Aung Hlaing would come to reality.

However, there are some challenges that the government has to face to achieve its “ultimate mission.” Conflicts are still raging throughout the region across Myanmar. Noticeably, the armed

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> “Myanmar: UN experts condemn military’s “digital dictatorship”” *United Nations Human Rights Office of High Commissioner*, June 7, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/06/myanmar-un-experts-condemn-militarys-digital-dictatorship>

<sup>12</sup> Net Mission Asia, “Foreshadowing Myanmar’s Digital Security Governance and Rights”, January 18, 2024, <https://netmission.asia/2024/01/18/foreshadowing-myanmars-digital-security-governance-and-rights-kenneth-leung/>

<sup>13</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Myanmar: Scrap Draconian Cybersecurity Bill”, February 15, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/15/myanmar-scrap-draconian-cybersecurity-bill>

clashes between the Tatmadaw and Ethnic Armed Groups such as the Three Brotherhood Alliance are still raging on in the bordering regions such as the Rakhine, Chin, Shan, and Kachin. As a result of the clashes, there are instability and safety concerns. Therefore, conducting a census in those regions could be challenging for the State Administration Council. However, the government has foreseen and acknowledged this issue as well. During the September 2 announcement, Senior General Ming Aung Hlaing mentioned that the data-collecting process will be prioritized in areas under the control of the military first.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the skepticism and controversies regarding the State Administration Council's previous action, a national population census is still imperative for the country's future development and national elections. As addressed earlier, the national household and population census would provide an accurate database for government and development stakeholders. More importantly, it would be a key stepping stone towards peace and stability restoration in Myanmar, for the census would provide accurate voter lists. Even if it might be flawed or incomplete, a census must be carried out, and a national election must be conducted. As the government, according to the constitution, the State Administration Council and the Tatmadaw still have the obligation and authority to conduct the election.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.