



Credit : WOLVERHAMPTON University

# Free but not FREE

Human rights violations and international crimes continue unabated in various parts of Burma, creating a never-ending vicious cycle of violence. Since the military coup in 2021, the crisis has only worsened. It is without a doubt that the people of Burma are collectively suffering from trauma; a consequence of the long-standing violence that has ravaged the country.

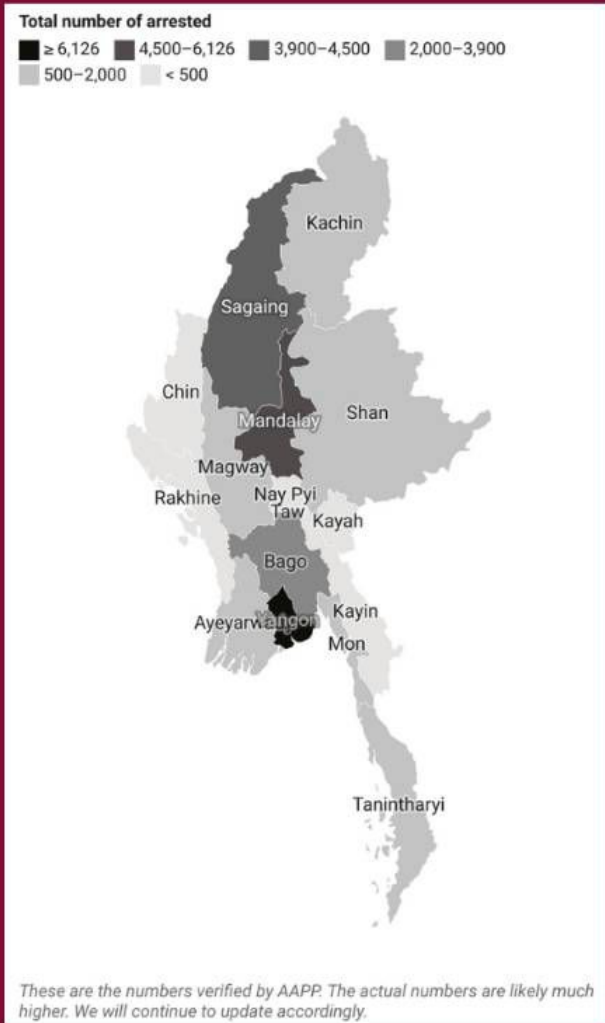
At a time when the entire nation is enduring immense hardship, living in a country that is subjected to scorched earth policy by the junta—political prisoners—who have been arbitrarily arrested and imprisoned—sustain further oppression at the hands of the junta. Even those who are released from prison, are forced to endure ongoing inhumane violations that show no sign of ending. At the same time, the torment of their experiences inside the prison walls continues to haunt them.

From the beginning of the Spring Revolution until October 31, 2024, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners has documented (27612) people who have been arbitrarily arrested for political reasons. This figure is the number verified by AAPP, though the actual number may be higher on the ground. According to AAPP, the total number of political prisoners arrested before the 2021 coup d'état, due to the country's previous political conditions, is estimated to be around 10,000. The documented statistics show that the number of arrests during the almost four years of the Spring Revolution has nearly tripled compared to previous periods.





## Map showing the arrests by State/Region



State_Region	Arrested number
Yangon	6126
Mandalay	4944
Sagaing	3995
Tanintharyi	1738
Bago	2316
Magway	1878
Ayeyarwady	1474
Mon	1033
Shan	1243
Kachin	796
Kayin	437
Nay Pyi Taw	387
Chin	358
Unknown	162
Kayah	316
Rakhine	409
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>27612</b>

Even after their release, former political prisoners remain under targeted surveillance and harassment by the junta and its affiliates. This has greatly hindered their ability to reintegrate harmoniously into society and has a deep-rooted effect on their economic, social, and educational lives. Additionally, due to the horrific experiences they endured in police stations, interrogations, and inside prisons, many former political prisoners continue to suffer the psychological after-effects of violence.

Former political prisoners, interviewed by AAPP, have reported that during their arrest and interrogation by the junta, their personal property was confiscated, and their family members were subjected to pressure. Even after their release, they continue to live in fear and anxiety due to the violence and oppression they endured during their arbitrary detention. The constant stress of being re-arrested continues to haunt them. One former political prisoner, whose ID card was confiscated during his arrest, said that after his release, he realized the possibility of being re-arrested if he returned home. As a result, he relocated to another area but was unable to register for a new ID card due to ongoing conflicts in the region. He shared the difficulties of securing employment because of this situation, stating:

After I was released on November 17, I decided not to go back home. My friends also told me not to, as people were getting re-arrested at home. So, I stayed at a brother's house in Hpa-An. While I was there, an administrator frequently went to my home and asked whether I was back, what I was doing, and my whereabouts, just as I expected. I faced challenges because my ID card was not returned to me after they seized it during interrogation, and it was not easy for me to make a new ID card. As I have no ID card, I cannot get any job.



There are instances where the junta re-arrests political prisoners immediately after their release, right outside the prison entrance. As a result, many former political prisoners live in constant worry that they will be re-arrested at any moment.

### A former political prisoner said...

Mentally speaking, although we have been released from prison, the anxiety remains. Every day, I live in fear that they will come and arrest me again. I have trouble sleeping at night. This feeling never goes away. There is no way to get rid of this feeling of insecurity. I constantly feel as if they could arrest me at any moment and for any reason. This isn't just my experience—everyone who escaped with me expressed the same fear.

Not only do former political prisoners suffer from trauma, but their family members, especially children who witnessed the arrest of their parents, also experience psychological distress, despite their young age.

### A former political prisoner shared the trauma her son experienced:

“ My son saw his parents getting arrested, so he was deeply traumatized. I learned that he became afraid whenever people came to check the overnight guest registration while he was living with his grandmother. He was constantly frightened, remembering the events. He told me that he was so scared that his heart stopped whenever he saw soldiers passing by when he looked down from the apartment, worrying whether he was seen or if he would be taken away. ”

Even before the military coup in 2021, efforts to address mental health issues and raise awareness in Burma were limited and ineffective. According to a report submitted by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to the 57th session of the Human Rights Council, the need to address these mental health issues has only increased. Having faced civil war for over 70 years and enduring the junta's oppressive rule for decades, the Burmese public have suffered psychological damage in various ways. Therefore, urgent action must be taken to address this growing problem.

Similarly, regarding the mental and physical rehabilitation of former political prisoners who were arbitrarily arrested and imprisoned for political reasons, the National Unity Government (NUG), civil society organizations, and the international community must prioritize the development and implementation of rehabilitation plans, post-release, to support their reintegration into society and as soon as possible, help them, to overcome the violence that they survived in the past.

### Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP)