

The Securitization of Domestic Opposition by the Myanmar Junta Post-2021 Coup

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ABSTRACT

Article Info :

Article history :

Received : 22-03-2026

Revised : 31-07-2026

Accepted : 30-10-2026

Keywords :

Junta;
Coup;
Military;
Myanmar;
Securitization.

This study analyzes the securitization of domestic opposition by the Myanmar military junta after the February 1, 2021 coup. Using the Copenhagen School's securitization framework, this article examines how the State Administration Council (SAC), led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, constructed domestic opposition as an existential threat to national stability, sovereignty, and state unity. This research applies a descriptive qualitative method with a single case study design. The data were collected from official junta documents, public speeches, legal instruments, state media reports, international organization reports, and relevant academic literature. The findings show that the junta transformed political opposition into a security threat through speech acts, especially by labeling the National Unity Government (NUG), the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), and the People's Defense Force (PDF) as terrorist organizations under Notification No. 2/2021. This securitizing move legitimized extraordinary measures, including mass arrests, media restrictions, internet shutdowns, military operations, and the criminalization of pro-democracy actors. However, the process remained only partially successful because it gained acceptance mainly within military-controlled institutions, while facing resistance from wider society and the international community. This article contributes to critical security studies by showing that authoritarian securitization can reproduce regime security and justify authoritarian consolidation.



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How to cite this article:

Nauti, K., & Zarkasyi, F. (2026). The Securitization of Domestic Opposition by the Myanmar Junta Post-2021 Coup. *Journal of Government Science Studies*, 5(2), 204-214. <https://doi.org/10.66254/jgssvol5issue2page204-214>

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Journal homepage: <https://ojs3.unpatti.ac.id/index.php/jgss/>

Journal e-mail: jurnaljgssunpatti@gmail.com

Research Article · **Open Access**

INTRODUCTION

Domestic repression increasingly operates through the language of security. Globally, internal armed conflict, emergency laws, restrictions on civil liberties, and the criminalization of opposition have become central features of contemporary political crises. Reports from UCDP, Freedom House, and Amnesty International show that many domestic conflicts now move beyond ordinary political contestation and are framed as threats to national stability and public order (UCDP, 2025; Freedom House, 2022; Amnesty International, 2022).

This pattern is also visible in Southeast Asia. Although the region is often described as relatively stable in interstate relations, several countries continue to face internal conflict, political violence, protests, restrictions on civic space, and pressure on opposition actors. These dynamics show that threats to stability increasingly emerge from domestic political contestation, while governments often respond by using national security narratives to justify coercive measures.

Myanmar represents one of the clearest cases of this pattern after the military coup on February 1, 2021. The coup triggered a national crisis marked by civilian casualties, mass arrests, internal displacement, media restrictions, and the shrinking of public space. Reports by OHCHR, UNHCR, and press freedom organizations indicate that repression after the coup affected civilians, activists, journalists, and pro-democracy groups across the country (OHCHR, 2024; UNHCR, 2026; Free Press Unlimited, 2026).

The junta did not rely only on physical coercion. It also used legal and discursive instruments to redefine opposition as a security threat. Notification No. 2/2021 designated the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), the National Unity Government (NUG), and the People's Defence Force (PDF) as terrorist organizations under the Anti-Terrorism Law. This move changed the status of pro-democracy actors from political opponents into alleged threats to state security and public order.

This transformation is central to the securitization process. Political resistance against the coup was moved from the sphere of normal politics into the sphere of emergency security. By invoking national stability, sovereignty, and public order, the junta constructed domestic opposition as an existential threat and used this construction to justify extraordinary measures such as arrests, media suppression, internet shutdowns, and military operations.

Existing studies on post-2021 Myanmar mainly examine three themes. The first group focuses on democratic breakdown and the consolidation of military rule. The second group examines human rights violations, civilian repression, and humanitarian crisis. The third group applies securitization theory to ethnic identity, minority politics, or regional security spillovers, such as the Rohingya issue and cross-border insecurity. These studies provide important insights, but they do not sufficiently explain how the junta transformed domestic political opposition into an existential security threat after the 2021 coup.

This article addresses that gap by analyzing the securitization of domestic opposition as an internal political process. It focuses on how the junta used official discourse, counter-terrorism law, and state-controlled institutions to move pro-democracy resistance from the sphere of normal politics into the sphere of national security. The novelty of this study lies in its argument that the junta's securitization was not merely a response to insecurity, but a strategy of regime survival. By distinguishing state security from regime security, this article shows how security narratives were used to justify repression, delegitimize opposition, and consolidate authoritarian power.

Based on the above discussion, the central problem of this study is that the Myanmar junta's repression of domestic opposition has often been analyzed as a democratic crisis, human rights violation, or authoritarian consolidation, while its discursive transformation into a security threat has received less systematic attention. This study therefore asks: How did the Myanmar military junta securitize domestic opposition after the 2021 coup, and how did this securitization legitimize extraordinary measures against pro-democracy actors? This question is important because it shifts the analysis from repression as coercive practice alone to repression as a security discourse that produces legal, political, and institutional justification for authoritarian rule.

METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with a single case study design. Myanmar was selected as the case because the 2021 military coup created a clear empirical context in which domestic political opposition was redefined as a national security threat. This design allows the study to examine how security discourse, legal instruments, and coercive practices interacted in the junta's response to pro-democracy resistance.

The data used in this study are secondary data. They consist of official documents issued by the State Administration Council (SAC), speeches and public statements by military leaders, legal instruments such as the Anti-Terrorism Law and Notification No. 2/2021, state media publications, reports from international organizations, human rights reports, and relevant academic literature. The documents were selected based on three criteria: relevance to post-coup political opposition, direct connection to security narratives, and credibility of the source.

Data were analyzed through qualitative document analysis. The analysis followed four stages. First, the documents were collected and classified based on source type, including official state documents, public speeches, legal documents, media reports, and international reports. Second, the data were coded using the main indicators of the Copenhagen School's securitization framework: securitizing actor, referent object, speech act, audience acceptance, and extraordinary measures. Third, the coded data were interpreted to identify how the junta constructed domestic opposition as an existential threat. Fourth, the findings were compared across sources through triangulation to assess consistency between official narratives and external reports.

The operationalization of the securitization framework is presented in Table 1. The securitizing actor refers to the SAC and military leadership that produced security claims. The referent objects refer to national stability, sovereignty, state unity, and public order as objects claimed to be under threat. Speech acts refer to official statements, legal labels, and state media narratives that framed opposition groups as terrorists or destabilizing actors. Audience acceptance refers to the degree to which these claims were accepted by military-controlled institutions, society, and the international community. Extraordinary measures refer to repressive policies and coercive actions that went beyond normal political procedures.

Table 1. Operationalization of the Securitization Framework

Securitization Element	Operational Definition	Empirical Indicator in This Study
Securitizing actor	Actor that presents an issue as a security threat	SAC, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, and military-controlled institutions
Referent object	Object claimed to be threatened	National stability, sovereignty, state unity, and public order
Speech act	Official language that constructs threat	Terms such as terrorist, instability, threat to state administration, and national security
Audience acceptance	Degree of acceptance of the security narrative	Acceptance by military institutions, limited public acceptance, and rejection by international actors
Extraordinary measures	Actions justified as necessary emergency responses	Mass arrests, internet shutdowns, media bans, counter-terrorism charges, and military operations

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Post-Coup and the Transformation of Political Issues into Security Issues in Myanmar 2021

The military coup on February 1, 2021, marked a drastic turning point in Myanmar's political dynamics. The military annulled the 2020 election, which had been won by a landslide by the National League for Democracy (NLD), detained Aung San Suu Kyi and several civilian officials, and established the State Administration Council (SAC) as the new governing body. This move immediately sparked widespread protests in several cities, accompanied by communications cuts and arrests of members of parliament, activists, and civilians who opposed the takeover. This situation marked a shift from a democratic transition phase to a state of emergency under full military control (Ganesan, 2022).

Resistance against the junta then evolved from peaceful demonstrations into a more organized domestic opposition movement, including the formation of the People's Defense Force (PDF) and the involvement of several armed ethnic groups. This escalation meant the conflict was no longer limited to political differences, but transformed into armed confrontations across multiple regions. In this context, the junta began framing the resistance movement as a threat to national stability and order. The state of emergency was repeatedly extended under the pretext of maintaining national security, while various repressive measures were legitimized as efforts to maintain national sovereignty and unity (Firnäs, 2025).

This shift in perspective paved the way for the securitization process. Issues that were initially politically focused, namely, the rejection of the coup and demands for the restoration of democracy, were gradually repositioned as existential threats to the state. Domestic opposition was no longer seen as political actors with differing views, but rather as elements endangering national security. With this framing, the extraordinary measures taken by the junta gained legitimacy through a security narrative. This transformation from a politicized issue to a

securitized issue explains why and how securitization became possible in the post-coup context of Myanmar in 2021.

DISCUSSION

Securitizing Actor

The primary actor carrying out the securitization process following the February 1, 2021, coup was the State Administration Council (SAC), led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. The establishment of the SAC immediately after the takeover of power positioned the military as the supreme authority, controlling the country's executive, legislative, and security functions. With the majority of its members drawn from high-ranking Tatmadaw officers, the SAC enjoys formal legitimacy through the declaration of a state of emergency to establish national policy, including defining and addressing security threats (Htet Myet Min Tun et al., 2021). Within the framework of securitization, this structural position gives the SAC the capacity to elevate political issues into security issues. Since the takeover, the State Administration Council (SAC), established by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing as the military's governing body, has been authorized to control all government functions in Myanmar, with a majority of its members drawn from the military and full control over the country's security structures. The SAC, whose members are mostly high-ranking Tatmadaw officers, assumed formal authority over the executive and legislative branches following the declaration of a state of emergency, demonstrating the military's dominance in the country's post-coup political power structure (Htet Myet Min Tun et al., 2021). This formal authority gives the SAC the legitimacy to set the national agenda, including security policy and crackdowns on the opposition.

Furthermore, Min Aung Hlaing and the SAC have a strong discursive capacity to publicly frame threat narratives through regime-affiliated media. In May 2021, the junta officially declared the National Unity Government (NUG), a shadow government formed by ousted lawmakers and the People's Defence Forces (PDF), a "terrorist group," a move broadcast by state media and used as legal basis to expand repressive measures against opposition groups (The Irrawaddy, 2021). This label not only reflects the military's strategy to criminalize opposition but also demonstrates how the SAC uses political and media power to define who constitutes a threat to national stability. Through formal legitimacy within state structures and discursive power in framing issues, the SAC and military leadership wield powerful authority to define security threats in the context of Myanmar's post-coup conflict.

This was validated through an official document on May 8, 2021, the Anti-Terrorism Central Committee established and approved by the State Administration Council (SAC) officially issued Notification No. 2/2021, an official notification under Myanmar's Anti-Terrorism Law stating that several organizations, including the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), the National Unity Government (NUG), and the People's Defence Force (PDF) and all their subordinate organizations have been declared as terrorist groups for allegedly "inciting Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) participants to commit acts of violence, bombings, arson, murder, and intimidation that disrupt state administration" according to the law. This document confirms that the actions carried out by these groups are considered to violate certain articles and sub-articles of the counter-terrorism law and thus meet the criteria for terrorism offenses under Myanmar's legal framework (Notification No. 2/2021, Ministry of Information, 2021).

Referent Object

Viewed through the perspective of speech acts within securitization theory, the construction of the opposition as an existential threat in Myanmar is primarily constructed through official language produced by the junta. Since the February 1, 2021, coup, the military has consistently used terms such as "national stability," "national unity," and "sovereignty" to describe the situation as an emergency that threatens the country's survival. In various public

speeches, including statements by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the political opposition and armed groups have been positioned as potential actors plunging Myanmar into chaos and disintegration. Simultaneously, the military presents itself as the actor responsible for restoring order and maintaining national integrity, even stating that its hold on power is temporary to ensure security and the holding of "stable" elections (VOA News, 2024). Through this articulation, the political issue is shifted from the realm of disagreement to a security issue, where the opposition is no longer viewed as a mere political actor but as a threat to the state's existence that requires an extraordinary response.

However, reports from various human rights organizations paint a different picture. Since the coup, repressive measures against demonstrators, activists, journalists, and opposition groups have escalated, accompanied by mass arrests, media restrictions, and violence against civilians. A Human Rights Watch report noted that these violations have worsened the security situation and deepened the humanitarian crisis, rather than protecting the wider public (Human Rights Watch, 2026). In this context, claims of protection for "national security" are questionable, as their impact is not always aligned with public safety.

Notification No. 2/2021, issued by the Anti-Terrorism Central Committee with the approval of the State Administration Council, clearly demonstrates how the military junta frames the opposition as a threat to the functioning of government and public security. In this official document, the actions of the CRPH, NUG, and PDF, linked to unrest and violence, are deemed to disrupt the state administrative machinery. Based on this, these groups were designated as terrorist organizations under Myanmar's Anti-Terrorism Law. Through this formulation, the junta explicitly positions state stability and security as objects that it claims need to protect, while simultaneously providing legal legitimacy to justify repressive actions against the opposition.

Speech Act

Within the framework of speech act securitization, the Myanmar junta's choice of language is a key element in constructing the opposition as an existential threat to the state. Through Notification No. 2/2021 issued by the Anti-Terrorism Central Committee with the approval of the State Administration Council, the junta officially declared that the activities of the CRPH, NUG, and People's Defence Force (PDF) had disrupted state administrative functions and caused violence that undermined public stability and security. Based on this, these groups were designated as terrorist organizations under Myanmar's Anti-Terrorism Law. Terms such as "incitements," "violent acts," and "terrorist acts" were explicitly used to associate the opposition with a direct threat to state order and stability, demonstrating how the state's official language functions as a tool for producing meanings of threat.

The issuance of Notification No. 2/2021 serves as a clear example of how official discourse can transform political action into a security issue. Phrases like "disrupt the state administrative machinery" not only describe the situation but also construct the opposition as a threat beyond the bounds of normal politics. With this label, the opposition is no longer viewed as a political actor with differing views, but rather as a threat to state security requiring an extraordinary response. The repetition of similar terms in state-controlled media and in various official statements reinforces this construction, resulting in a consistent and institutionalized threat narrative.

The framing of the opposition as "terrorists" continued in 2021. In subsequent years, the same term was reused in various official government publications to refer to other armed groups as perpetrators of terrorist acts. For example, in September 2024, the Anti-Terrorism Central Committee issued another notice labeling groups such as the MNDAA and TNLA as perpetrators of "terror acts" that endanger public safety and state property. This repeated use of the term

demonstrates a consistent pattern of discourse, where the language of security continues to reinforce the narrative that threats to national stability are urgent and existential.

Beyond Notification No. 2/2021, various official statements and policies of the junta throughout the conflict also reinforced the construction of the opposition as an existential threat through consistent repetition of speech acts. One example was when the junta again extended the state of emergency in early 2025, arguing that domestic security conditions were still not conducive and required "stability" before elections could be held safely. In a statement broadcast by official media outlets such as MRTV and quoted by the national news agency, Min Aung Hlaing asserted that this measure was necessary to maintain order and prevent chaos, which he said was being fueled by groups opposing military rule. Through this language, the security narrative was repurposed to frame the opposition as a source of instability while justifying the continued military authority (Antara News, 2025).

Critically, the junta's speech act did not simply describe violence or instability. It actively produced a political category through which opposition actors could be legally and morally excluded from normal politics. By labeling the NUG, CRPH, and PDF as terrorist organizations, the junta removed them from the category of legitimate political opposition and placed them within the category of existential threat. This discursive shift allowed the regime to present repression not as a violation of political rights, but as a necessary act of national defense. Therefore, the speech act functioned as both a security claim and a mechanism of political delegitimation.

Audience Acceptance

Within the framework of audience acceptance, the response to the securitization narrative constructed by the Myanmar junta is not singular. Within the military's sphere of power and the institutions under its control, the threat framing put forward by the State Administration Council (SAC) has garnered relatively solid support. Since 2021, the junta has consistently asserted that its actions are legitimate and necessary, including through elections in late 2025 and early 2026, promoted as part of efforts to maintain national stability and security. However, several independent reports indicate that the process does not reflect widespread public acceptance. Voter turnout was low in many areas, some areas under the influence of resistance groups did not participate, and some observers viewed the elections as more of a means of consolidating military power than a representation of the will of the people (Jeyaretnam, 2026).

At the international level, the junta's threat narrative has also failed to gain significant legitimacy. The Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) concluded that the military-managed electoral process fell short of standards of freedom and credibility due to restrictions on the opposition and the repressive security situation (ANFREL, 2025). Similar assessments were made by various analysts and regional organizations, including the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar, which urged ASEAN not to recognize the legitimacy of the junta-organized elections (Borderlens, 2025). These criticisms demonstrate that the claims of stability and security underlying the policy are not widely accepted by the international community.

This situation demonstrates that the legitimacy of the threat narrative constructed by the junta has not yet fully gained acceptance from audiences outside the military. Although institutions under the regime's control support this security framing, public response and global reaction indicate strong rejection and skepticism. In the context of securitization, this lack of broader consensus indicates that the securitization process has only been partially successful—accepted within the military's sphere of power, but has not yet gained comprehensive legitimacy from society and the international community.

The limited acceptance of the junta's securitization narrative shows that securitization in authoritarian contexts does not always require broad public consent. Unlike democratic settings, where audience acceptance often depends on public persuasion, authoritarian securitization can

operate through institutional coercion and controlled media. In Myanmar, the narrative was accepted mainly within military-controlled institutions, while wider society and international actors largely rejected it. This indicates a partial securitization process: effective enough to justify repression within the regime's institutional sphere, but insufficient to produce broad legitimacy.

Extraordinary Measures

In the context of extraordinary measures, the steps taken by the Myanmar military junta since 2021 demonstrate a clear shift from ordinary political practices to extraordinary measures. One example is the designation of the CRPH, NUG, and People's Defence Force (PDF) as terrorist organizations through Notification No. 2/2021, issued by the Anti-Terrorism Central Committee with the approval of the State Administration Council under the Anti-Terrorism Law. Through this official document, groups that previously served as political and social actors were legally reclassified as threats to state security. This designation provides the legal basis for authorities to take repressive action against them (Notification No. 2/2021, Ministry of Information, 2021).

Beyond these regulations, repressive measures are also evident in the practice of mass arrests and the use of military force against civilians, demonstrators, and pro-democracy activists. A Human Rights Watch report notes that tens of thousands of people have been detained since the coup, many arbitrarily, with thousands more reportedly killed or tortured in detention. Furthermore, the establishment of "special courts" within prisons has been used to impose harsh sentences without due process. This pattern suggests that the state's response to opposition has gone beyond normal political mechanisms and led to the systematic use of coercive instruments (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Furthermore, the regime has expanded the legal framework enabling a crackdown on criticism and resistance. Amnesty International reported that in the run-up to the junta-managed elections, there has been a significant increase in arbitrary detentions, restrictions on freedom of expression, and attacks on civilians suspected of being affiliated with opposition groups. The organization also noted the use of new legal instruments that increase penalties for political activism and journalistic work, drastically narrowing public space (Amnesty International, 2025). This series of policies and actions demonstrates how the junta's threat discourse has been translated into concrete measures that fall outside the bounds of normal political practice.

The securitization process carried out by the Myanmar military junta has had a significant impact on the decline of democracy within the country. The February 1, 2021, coup not only overthrew the elected government but also effectively ended the period of political liberalization that had been underway since 2010. Freedom House notes that since the coup, Myanmar has been classified as "Not Free," with the dissolution of the elected parliament, the detention of civilian leaders including Aung San Suu Kyi, and the consolidation of power by the military without a legitimate political transition mechanism (Freedom House, 2024). The International Crisis Group report also asserts that the military takeover dismantled previously functioning civilian governance structures, expanded the Tatmadaw's control over state institutions, and systematically closed off the space for political competition (International Crisis Group, 2022).

The implications of securitization are also stark in the context of human rights and public security. A recent report by Human Rights Watch shows that since the coup, the junta has engaged in widespread and violent repression of civilians in various aspects of life, including arbitrary arrests, repression of protests, and violations that reach the level of widespread and systemic cruelty. The regime has expanded military operations and coercive measures as part of its efforts to maintain its power, which international observers say has escalated over the past year, with condemnation from global human rights organizations (Human Rights Watch, 2026).

The dynamics of the ongoing conflict also hamper social stability and the reproduction of military power outside the formal political sphere. This is evident in the increasingly widespread

armed resistance, while the junta has responded by restricting access to humanitarian aid, shutting down communications networks, and escalating attacks on civilian areas. A report from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights noted that the conflict has driven many residents to seek refuge in safer areas or become refugees, while opposition forces and ethnic armed groups maintain control over large areas, reflecting the fragmentation of the country and the regime's failure to peacefully unite society (OHCHR, 2024).

The extraordinary measures adopted by the junta reveal a central tension between state security and regime security. Although the junta framed its actions as necessary to protect public order, the empirical pattern shows that these measures mainly protected military rule by weakening opposition networks, silencing independent media, and narrowing civic space. In this sense, securitization did not resolve insecurity. It deepened political fragmentation and transformed state institutions into instruments for authoritarian survival.

Research Novelty

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the domestic securitization of political opposition in post-coup Myanmar. While previous studies have examined Myanmar through democratization, human rights, ethnic conflict, and regional security perspectives, this article shows how the junta transformed domestic opposition into an existential threat through legal and discursive mechanisms. The main contribution of this study is the distinction between state security and regime security. The findings show that the junta's securitization narrative did not primarily protect society or democratic order. Instead, it protected military rule by legitimizing repression, criminalizing opposition, and narrowing civilian political space. This argument expands the application of the Copenhagen School framework in authoritarian contexts, where securitization can function as a strategy of regime survival.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Myanmar military junta securitized domestic opposition after the February 1, 2021 coup by constructing pro-democracy actors as existential threats to national stability, sovereignty, state unity, and public order. Through the State Administration Council (SAC), military leadership, state-controlled media, and legal instruments such as Notification No. 2/2021, the junta transformed political opposition from an issue of democratic contestation into a matter of national security. This securitizing move enabled the regime to justify extraordinary measures, including mass arrests, restrictions on civil liberties, internet shutdowns, media suppression, counter-terrorism charges, and military operations against civilians.

The findings show that the securitization process was only partially successful. It gained acceptance within military-controlled institutions, but it did not receive broad legitimacy from Myanmar society or the international community. This partial acceptance reveals an important feature of securitization in authoritarian contexts: security narratives can still become politically effective even without broad public consent when they are supported by coercive institutions, legal instruments, and controlled information channels.

Theoretically, this study contributes to critical security studies by showing the importance of distinguishing between state security and regime security. In the Myanmar case, securitization did not primarily protect the state as a political community. It protected the military regime by delegitimizing opposition and consolidating authoritarian control. Practically, the findings suggest that international actors, civil society organizations, and regional institutions should critically assess the use of counter-terrorism and national security language by

authoritarian regimes, especially when such language targets civilian opposition and pro-democracy movements. Future research should compare Myanmar with other post-coup or authoritarian cases to examine whether domestic securitization follows similar patterns across different political contexts. Further studies may also examine how civil society, ethnic armed organizations, and international actors resist or counter the securitization narratives produced by authoritarian regimes.

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