

## Focus 70 - Myanmar's Military is Myanmar's Agony

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### Abstract

The article argues that Tatmadaw's involvement in politics and Suu Kyi's plan for 'ethnic democracy' have ruptured the co-habitation of different social identities from forging inclusive democratization in Myanmar.

### Keywords

Tatmadaw, Democratization, Ethnic Democracy, National League of Democracy, Reforms.

### Introduction

The Myanmar military's (Tatmadaw's) intervention in politics is caused by 'pull' and 'push' factors. Push factors include the military's strict professional discipline and regimentation, corporate interests, possession of modern arms and close identification of the military with national identity and prestige. Pull factors include a low-participation political culture, a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society laden with social tensions, an under-developed economy, and the absence of consensus regarding the rules of the political game. This article argues that Tatmadaw's involvement in politics and Aung San Suu Kyi's plan for 'ethnic democracy' have

ruptured the co-habitation of different social identities, hence preventing the forging of an inclusive democratization in Myanmar.

The Tatmadaw establishment in Myanmar is older than the state itself, as it was formed in 1941 to fight the Japanese occupation (Callahan, 2004, p.237). The military belonged to the *Bamar* Buddhist majority community (Amnesty International, 1993, p.217). Its status as an anti-colonial force that liberated the country from imperialism attracted public support for a very long time. Myanmar became an independent state in 1948 and established itself as a democratic socialist country (Palmer & Colton, 1992, p.922). The nation inaugurated a bicameral parliament and multiparty elections in 1951. Elected civilian governments remained in power until they failed to stabilize the country in 1960 (Egreteau, 2017, p.14). Public support pressed the military to step in and alleviate the country's rising social and economic tensions. The junta was already an all-powerful and omnipotent institution in the country. It safeguarded territorial sovereignty and national identity; it also acted as the ultimate arbiter in the political system. Military officers had the prestige of liberators who became the symbol of national identity. The military's supremacy became institutionalized in politics because it was the most powerful institution during state formation and that responsible for constructing the image of the strong nation-state of Myanmar.

### The Military's Role in Politics

Samuel E Finer argues in his book *The Man on the Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics* that “the military's intervention in politics became a recurring phenomenon because the countervailing civilian forces proved to be ineffective in the face of the multiple structural challenges emanating from the nation-building process (1988, p.89).” The military leadership led by Ne Win staged a coup on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1962 and established the Union Revolutionary Council (URC), comprised of senior military officers (Devi, 2014, p.46). In the beginning, the military had three major concerns: 1) an obsession with national sovereignty and defence against external intervention; 2) a desire to maintain national unity due in the face of rising social and political tensions given Myanmar society's multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition; 3) a management of the rentier economy by the military due to the lack of development of the masses. These factors pushed the regime to prioritize state security over citizen rights. The result was that citizens became

alienated from the state's discourses and institutions, leading to much political resentment.

In the coming years, the military consolidated its position in the political sector under Ne Win's chairmanship. The coup was in motion and paralyzed the political system. The political class was not allowed to revive the parliamentary system. The military, thus, became a united and bureaucratized entity which is still visible in the durability of the military-led authoritarian rule in present-day Myanmar. As a chairman of the URC, Ne Win controlled both executive, legislative and judicial authorities (Bunte, 2011, p.14). The council replaced the election process with an appointment process to fill the institutions' positions and channel finances through a military-dominated bureaucratized structure.

The entrenchment of the military's tentacles within society needed an ideology to formulate citizen perceptions towards military rule. Ne Win implemented the idea of the 'Burmese Way of Socialism' in 1962 (p.5). It was based on the strict centralization of political and economic power. The junta also followed secular policy, restricted Buddhist monks from participating in politics, and limited external enterprises' influence on local businesses. The result was the nationalization of all the large companies, state-run functioning of cooperatives and a one-party system to establish 'practical socialism' so as to fulfil all sections of society's economic demands (p.4610). The strategy was to strike a balance between capitalism and Eastern European-style socialism. Military rule controlled the energy resources; however, Myanmar remained the world's poorest country. Citizen resentment led to sporadic protests that resulted in brutal suppression by the regime.

The civilian parties against the military's socialist policies were permanently banned, and in 1962 the Burmese Socialist Programme Party became the military's political arm (Butwell, 1972, p.902). The junta's national socialist revolution aimed to unite different classes (farmers, doctors, teachers, and bureaucrats, military officers) so as to perpetuate its control over the Myanmar state. The military coup permanently eliminated the hope of democratization and made Myanmar a consolidated military state. The military and the state became a unified political entity. As a result, *Tatmadaw* came out as a 'state within the state'. It was omnipresent because it controlled the economy, and it became the only institution that had the necessary power to perpetuate authoritarian rule.

## The Popular Upsurge

The military's authoritarian rule and economic isolation created strong resentment among civilians, which led to a popular upsurge, called the 8888 Uprising, in 1988 (Kipgen, 2018). It was comprised of students, monks, peasants, doctors and teachers. The military now came to consider that (apart from foreigners and communists) civilians themselves were also the state's enemies. The uprising made Aung San Suu Kyi the iconic leader of the democratic movement in Myanmar. The military junta managed the election of the 1990s in which the Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), won the majority of the seats. The military launched a coup and put Suu Kyi under house arrest (where she remained until 2010).

Democratization was not the only challenge to military supremacy; the military's authority also struggled to accommodate the aspirations of multi-ethnic and multi-religious identities. In the subsequent years, the military junta suppressed all anti-regime protests including the Saffron Revolution of the monks in 2007 against increasing fuel prices and the protracted civil war against ethnic minorities such as the *Han, Wa, Kachin, Shan, Lahu* and *Karen* minorities as well as the *Rohingya* Muslims (Amnesty International, 2010, p.18). In fact, the junta faced a protracted civil war with several ethnic and religious identities. For the military identified itself with the *Bamar* Buddhist majority population and did not realize the significance of solving the long-standing citizenship and equality issues among different ethnic groups. The lack of substantial representation of the various ethnic groups in politics, economics and bureaucracy reduced the chances of establishing a substantive democracy in Myanmar, let alone electoral democracy. In the initial years of after Independence, Myanmar witnessed the banning of the democratic parliamentary system and of multiparty politics that could have accommodated the different social groups' demands. The lack of inclusion of several social groups created social tensions that led to the protracted civil war against the regime that prioritized the security and stability of the state over the democratization in Myanmar.

Historically, the military is the only institution that survived the political turmoil because it controlled the oil, gas and mining resources valued in billions of dollars in the international market. The so-called the rentier economy became the

military's central lifeline. The result was that the army flourished and strengthened so as to perpetuate its control over the state's apparatuses. The situation became paradoxical because the military's founding principles were to fight against imperialism as well as protect national security and civilian interests. However, in the growing authoritarian structure, the military lost legitimacy and embraced violence against civilians. Furthermore, violence against minorities became a vital tool to change the masses' priorities from democratization to 'terrorism', violence and national security. The military, thus, came to strongly hinder the junta's civilianization values under a democratic set-up. The result was that the generals had no responsibility towards society or the masses.

### **Military-led Political Reforms**

With the civilian emerging resentment against the military, the officers enacted the Burmese constitutional referendum in 2008 (Human Rights Watch, April 30, 2008). This allowed the military to promulgate a new constitution. The generals did not allow the opposition's participation in framing said constitution. 25 per cent of the seats in both the national and local parliaments were reserved to military officers (Maizland, February 10, 2021). Furthermore, Tatmadaw was now able to veto any legislation put forward by the parliament's civilian legislators. The result was that precious little change in the political system, for the junta remained the sole decisive force vested with all the state's powers. The military gained legitimacy from society through its regular financial and political backing of the Buddhist Sangha.

Under the constitutionally mandated military supremacy, Myanmar experienced multiparty elections in 2010. The military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), dominated by military generals, claimed to obtain 80 per cent of the votes (Human Rights Watch, November 3, 2010). Still, the pro-democracy opposition (NLD) asserted that the military was involved in rampant electoral irregularities. The military council subsequently dissolved itself in 2011 after securing its interests in political and economic sectors. Military General Thein Sein was elected as President and formed a government. It was not surprising that the electoral process was staged to establish the 'façade of democracy' so as to repair the military's authoritarian image in the name of 'disciplined democracy' (Bunte, p.6). A mere changing of the military's role from barracks to politics was nothing but camouflaging authoritarianism under a façade of democracy. Small doses of

civil liberties were allowed while there occurred a deepening of the military's involvement in politics. It meant that the generals did not return to the barracks and instead consolidated their power in the political system.

Under the backdrop of the military's consolidation of power over the state, Suu Kyi participated in the electoral process hoping for the success of democratization in Myanmar. In the April 2012 by-elections, the NLD successfully gained 43 seats out of 45 (under international bodies' observation; Than, 2013, p.204). The NLD achieved absolute majority in the parliamentary elections in 2015 (Dinmore, November 13, 2015) . Since the 1962 military coup, the NLD was the only party that formed the government with a non-military President. Generals also allowed for the creation of a post of state counsellor for Suu Kyi which was equal to a Prime Minister function.

Ironically, while on the one hand the military initiated political reforms to democratize the country, on the other the same military, along with the local Buddhist militia, launched a series of 'clearance operations' in 2017 in the Rakhine state against the Rohingya Muslims (Fortify Rights, 2017, p.8). The army claimed that Rohingyas constituted a 'terrorist group' and this increased the military's legitimacy in the public eye as regards the genocide of these Muslims (Albert & Maizland, January 23, 2020). The UN claimed that Rohingyas faced 'ethnic cleansing' as their houses were burnt and their religious, cultural and educational leaders were targeted so as to diminish their culture, history and knowledge (BBC, September 11, 2017). The grave tragedy was that the leader of democracy, Suu Kyi, also openly denied the Muslim minorities' military and monk-engineered genocide in 2019.

### Reversal of the Democratization Process

The people of Myanmar again voted to ensure the NLD's landslide victory in parliamentary elections in 2020. The USDP suffered a colossal defeat, and subsequently, the military rejected the result (Stanly, February 2, 2021). Many smaller parties also complained about irregularities in the elections. The USDP and military threatened to take action against electoral fraud. On 1<sup>st</sup> February 2021, the military launched a coup, arrested NLD leaders (including Suu Kyi) and declared a state of emergency for one year (Al Jazeera, January 31, 2021). It closed borders,

restricted the travel ban and imposed restrictions on electronic communications. The civilians' reactions to the coup were more significant than before, which proved that Myanmar was gradually coming out of the military's grip. The coup was the first against a civilian government since 1962 and violated the military's mandated constitution.

The country's socio-political climate revealed that both the military and Suu Kyi forgot the importance of 'tolerance' to arrange institutions and disenfranchise ethnic and religious minorities. The denial of genocide directly questioned Suu Kyi's authenticity as a leader of democracy in Myanmar both at the domestic and international levels. A democracy cannot be a liberal democracy if it does not protect and cherish the fundamental rights, freedom, equality, and social justice of all civilian groups. It seemed that the NLD's leader Suu Kyi viewed democratization as limited to the electoral process.

Besides the lack of 'substantive' democratic aspirations by the NLD, the military's structural supremacy over the state's institutions and resources became the stumbling block for democratization. The following reasons explain the structural persistency of the military. 1) The military has to protect its security, autonomy and economic interests, all of which will be harmed in a gradually democratizing Myanmar. 2) The prolonged civil war in Myanmar created a sense of protracted national insecurity that could only be tackled by the military's domination over the state. 3) Post-independence Myanmar failed to accommodate the various, multi-ethnic and multi-religious aspirations who came to show their resentment through both violent and non-violent methods. 4) The democratic NLD remained ambivalent about assuaging the aspirations of ethnic and religious minorities; this aptly made it a protagonist of the *Bamar* dominated 'ethnic democracy'. 5) Suu Kyi's political approach was to consolidate the Buddhist voters without taking an accommodative approach for the other ethnic minorities and this created an opportunity for the military to intervene in politics and remove the democratically elected government. 6) The decline of the economy and the lack of development of the masses. These factors produced mixed results for transitional politics. At the same time, they are identified by the military as a sign of a fractured political and social framework allowing it to perpetuate its control. It also tainted the image of Suu Kyi as the torch-bearer of democracy. Conflicting narratives and approaches



by different political segments became the primary facilitator for the military to augment its authoritarian rule.

The present situation in Myanmar explains why the military has become immune from all kinds of legal scrutiny from both national and international legal agents. Earlier, it targeted the so-called 'terrorists' so as to obtain legitimacy from the public. Still, after the new start of democratization and the huge setback the military faced in the 2011, 2015 and 2020 elections, the military launched a coup against the democratically elected government. The series of military interventions proved the dictum of Amor Perlmutter that “once the army comes to power, it would not leave voluntarily (2014).” The military has turned democratic protests into a bloodbath that mainly targeted civilians who voted for the NLD. The military's frustration is visible because it senses that its power is gradually being lost. The obsession with controlling power has become a significant 'psychological' effect in the generals' minds, one that justifies an increase in violence against protestors.

The democratization process, therefore, needs to deepen so as to reach the institutional and cultural aspects at both elite and grassroots levels. It is a tool to inter-woven society's fabric, which is comprised of multi-ethnic and religious identities, and thereby facilitate equal participation in political, social and economic developments. Tatmadaw's involvement in politics and Suu Kyi's plan for 'ethnic democracy' have prevented between different social identities from forging inclusive democratization in Myanmar.

### The Way Forward

The military is born out of the colonial era, with its rigid bureaucracy and its peasant social structure. The more pervasive the role the military plays in Myanmar's society, the more difficult it becomes for an independent civil society to survive. The military has announced a maintenance of the coup and state of emergency for a year. It holds on to political influence with the excuse that the army will play the civilian government's 'guardian' and thus maintain political order. In reality, the Myanmar army has now established itself as the only legitimate political ruling group because it remains the centre of power and the only ruling class.

The success of democratization in Myanmar demands a civilian control over the military that ensures its effectiveness and accountability. There is a need to create



a coherent relationship between the military's means and the political ends that ultimately shape the army as an influential institution. The military is not a democratic institution, both because of its internal structure and because of the nature of its operations. However, the military needs to become compatible with civilian control. The democratic polity will only become consolidated when the military is subordinated to civilian rule. The liberal democratic set-up keeps the military always under the civilian leadership, laid down by the laws and regulations enshrined in the constitution.

Anti-coup protesters are still demanding the democratically elected NLD's reinstatement to power and the release of Suu Kyi. But the military is not willing to lose any political power, all the more so because losing a series of elections questioned its legitimacy and prestige. While protests intensify in the cities, the chances of full-fledged civil war are emerging as disgruntled ethnic groups use this opportunity to attack the military regime. The prospects of democratization in Myanmar remain bleak because of the combination of three factors: the military's domination in politics; Suu Kyi's desires for ethnic democratization, and the ethnic and religious minorities' desires to be accommodated within national identity.

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