

Griffith Asian Institute

Regional Outlook

CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS IN BURMA:
PORTENTS, PREDICTIONS AND POSSIBILITIES

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Author's Note

After the Burmese armed forces crushed a nation-wide pro-democracy uprising in September 1988, Burma's official name (in English) was changed from its post-1974 form, the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma, back to the Union of Burma, which had been adopted when Burma regained its independence from the United Kingdom (UK) in January 1948. In July 1989 the new military government changed the country's name once again, this time to the Union of Myanmar. At the same time, a number of other place names were changed to conform more closely to their original Burmese pronunciation. The new names were subsequently accepted by the United Nations (UN) and most other major international organisations. Some governments and opposition groups, however, have clung to the old forms as a protest against the military regime's continuing human rights abuses and its refusal to hand over power to the civilian government elected in 1990.

In this paper the better-known names, for example Burma instead of Myanmar, Rangoon instead of Yangon, and Irrawaddy instead of Ayeyarwady, have been retained for ease of recognition. Quotations and references, however, have been cited as they were originally published. Also, formal titles introduced after 1989 have been cited in their current form, such as Myanmar Police Force and Myanmar Red Cross.

The armed forces have ruled Burma since 1962 but, from 1974 to 1988, they exercised power through an ostensibly elected civilian parliament. On taking back direct political power in September 1988, the armed forces abolished the old government structure and created the State Law and Order Restoration Council.

1. Predicting Burma's Future

and I saw people in the valley's circle,
silent, weeping, walking at a litany's pace
the way processions push along in our world.

And when my gaze moved down below their faces,

Than Shwe himself, and from all accounts reading his mind has proven difficult even for those in his immediate circle. Also, it is believed that Than Shwe is deeply superstitious and often seeks guidance from astrologers, numerologists and magicians.⁷ If so, this would add another degree of difficulty to attempts to foresee developments in Burma. As the Central Intelligence Agency's Herb Meyer once observed, determining how governments and national leaders think is one of the most essential tasks for an analyst, but it is also one of the toughest.⁸

Fourthly, despite being home to the world's oldest and most resilient military dictatorship, Burma has a well-deserved reputation for unpredictability.

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2. The People and the Armed Forces

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The armed forces are meant for this nation and this people, and it should be such a force having the honour and respect of the people. If instead the armed forces should come to be hated by the people, then the aims with which this army has been built

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effective, totally subservient means to mobilise the population for the leadership's perceived ends.³³

There is thus some continuity between Burma's military governments before and after 1988, but there are also important differences. After the initial Revolutionary Council period, Ne Win created a highly bureaucratic socialist state that was controlled by the BSPP and the elected

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Burmese have reportedly lost patience with the active pacifism of the NLD under her leadership, and are keen to pursue more confrontationalist policies.⁴⁶

corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency and restrictive government regulations, will continue to deter foreign investment.

Notwithstanding the maintenance of economic sanctions, if the regime made a number of key policy changes the chances are good that Burma would experience more sustained and balanced growth, and thus greater prosperity.⁵³ This would have a social and possibly even political impact. For example, there have already been a few indications that better economic management and improved local conditions could lead in turn to a greater, albeit grudging, acceptance of the military government.⁵⁴ Continued arbitrary and uninformed policy making, however, is bound to

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maintain their credibility with their constituents and make deals acceptable to them during a period of active counter-insurgency campaigning, with its inevitable increases in human rights abuses, displaced populations and refugee flows.⁶²

For all these reasons, resolution of Burma's long-running ethnic tensions would appear to be a long way off.

The Regime's Mindset

Despite countless references in the press, on websites and in academic papers including this one to the armed forces, the Tatmadaw is not an homogenous organisation, all members of which think and behave alike although it observes military

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representatives of various ethnic communities, who will make a real effort to represent the interests of their constituents.

At the same time, the Tatmadaw itself will be going through a number of major changes. It is believed that Senior General Than Shwe is unwell and preparing to retire, possibly to become the President, or perhaps an advisor to the new government.⁷⁶ Over the next five years, several more senior generals will pass from the scene although most will have no doubt ensured that they and their interests will be protected by protégés still in uniform.

Burma's security conscious and energy hungry neighbours, one of which is a permanent member of the UN Security Council. The chances of Burma being expelled from ASEAN are equally remote.⁸⁴ Even if either event were to occur, the generals seem quite prepared to see Burma return to its pre-1988 isolation and poverty, if that was the price of remaining masters of the country's and their own destiny.

It is gradually becoming more widely accepted that there are few practical ways to influence a government that is convinced of its self-appointed role in national affairs, does not seem to care for the welfare of its own people, does not observe international norms and is protected by powerful friends. If this is the case, then the international community faces a seemingly intractable problem over Burma, one that argues for a fundamental re-evaluation of approaches being taken towards the regime.

Fifthly, while engaging with the Burmese government may be politically difficult – for some, even morally repugnant – there are compelling arguments to do so. Burma's geographical position between the nuclear armed giants of China and India, its shadowy relationship with pariah states like North Korea, and its influence on Asia's broader strategic environment, all mean that Burma is too important to be ignored. Also, it is a key factor in international programs to combat transnational problems such as narcotics trafficking, people smuggling, money laundering and the spread of communicable diseases.⁸⁸ Some analysts have suggested that Burma is also a factor in global efforts to stem religious extremism, the spread of ballistic missiles and even nuclear proliferation.⁸⁹

All these concerns are in addition to the pressing needs of the Burmese people themselves – both inside Burma and outside its borders. Although there are around 50 non-government organisations still operating in Burma, the regime has made the delivery of humanitarian aid very difficult. It imposes onerous conditions on providers,

- 19 For details of the disastrous demonetisation measures of 1964, 1985 and 1987, see Sean Turnell, *Fiery Dragons: Banks, moneylenders and microfinance in Burma* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2009), pp. 237–40 and pp. 252–4.
- 20 The uprising is described from two different perspectives in Bertil Lintner, *Outrage: Burma 1988* (London: White Lotus, 1990); and Dr Maung Maung, *The 1988 uprising in Burma*, Yale Southeast Asia Studies, Monograph No. 49 (New Haven: Yale University, 1999).
- 21 Interviews, Rangoon, February 2008 and January 2009.
- 22 *Sold to be Soldiers: The recruitment and use of child soldiers in Burma* (New York: Human Rights Watch, October 2007). See also Fink, *Living Silence in Burma*, pp. 154–7.
- 23 Andrew Selth, 'The 1988 Uprising in Burma', *Regional Outlook* No. 21 (Brisbane: Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University, 2009), pp. 19–22. See also Fink, *Living Silence in Burma*, pp. 153–70.
- 24 Callahan, *Making Enemies*, p. 10. See also *The Irrawaddy*, vol. 8, no. 3 (March 2000), <http://www.irrawaddy.org/print_article.php?art_id=
- 25 *Defence Weekly*, 4 April 2007, p. 14.
- 25 Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar: What everyone needs to know*, p. 101. See also Andrew Steinberg, 'The 1988 Uprising in Burma', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 31, no. 2, August 2009, pp. 272–95.
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- 55 These issues are examined in *Current realities and future possibilities in Burma/Myanmar: options for US policy*, Asia Society Task Force Report (New York: The Asia Society, March 2010).
- 56 *The Irrawaddy*, 30 December 2009, <http://www.irrawaddy.org:80/article.php?art_id=17509>.
- 57 See, for example, *Myanmar Backgrounder: Ethnic Minority Politics*.
- 58 Smith, quoting Tin Maung Maung Than, *State of Strife*, p. 51.
- 59 *The Irrawaddy*, 5 March 2010, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=17967>.
- 60 Published estimates of the size of the UWSA range between 20,000 and 36,000. See, for example, National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, *Burma: Situation Update* (November 2009–January 2010), <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/26085284/NCGUB-Burma-Situation-Update-January-2010>>. The true figure is likely to be closer to the lower end of the scale.
- 61 Zaw Oo and Win Min, *Ass*, p. 57. Some of these groups are reportedly recruiting soldiers and acquiring arms, against the possibility that they may have to go back to war, but their ranks are often filled with young men lacking battle experience. See *BBC News*, 22 February 2010, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/8528985.stm>>.
- 62 See, for example, Ashl *The World Today*, vol. 66, no. 5 (May 2010), pp. 27–9, <http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/files/16401_wt100527.pdf>.
- 63 *ew of the world*, Asia Report No. 28 (Bangkok/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 7 December 2001); and M.B. Pedersen, *Promoting Human Rights in Burma: A Critique of Western Sanctions Policy* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), pp. 79–124.
- 64 Andrew Selth, *Burma and the threat of invasion: Regime fantasy or strategic reality?*, Regional Outlook No. 17 (Brisbane: Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University, 2008)
- 65 Some social scientists have acknowledged the weight of such claims. See, for example, Morris Janowitz, *The Military in the Political Development of New Nations: An Essay in Comparative Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964); and S.E. Finer, *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975). Also relevant is Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).
- 66 *The Interpreter*, 6 June 2008, <<http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2008/06/06/Burmas-armed-forces-How-loyal.aspx>>.
- 67 In 1976, a group of junior officers was reportedly discovered plotting to assassinate Ne Win. One of those who gave evidence against the plot leader (who was hanged) was then Lieutenant Colonel Than Shwe.
- 68 *The Pacific Review*, vol. 22, no. 3 (July 2009), pp. 271–91.
- 69 *Constitution*

- 91 MP, Australian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Canberra, 8 February 2010, <http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2010/100208_burma_statement.html>.
- 92 *CBS News*, 11 November 2009, <<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/11/11/world/main5611639.shtml>>.
- 93 In 2009, Washington signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, a step the Bush
- 94 Testimony of Kurt Campbell, Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, US Department of State, before the Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Washington, DC, 30 September 2009, <<http://foreign.senate.gov/testimony/2009/CampbellTestimony090930p.pdf>>
- Democratic Voice of Burma*, 8 March 2010, <<http://www.dvb.no/interview/kurt-campbell-no-change-in-burma/>>.