

Myanmar Probably Needs a Military ... Just Not the One It Has

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Much of the world has expressed regret (if not outrage) at Myanmar's military coup on 1 February 2021 and the brutal crackdown on the population in its aftermath. Nevertheless, some international analysts continue to contend that the Tatmadaw (the official name of the armed forces) remains an essential force in a country that is riven by ethnic conflict and that otherwise lacks strong institutions.¹ As a result—or so the argument goes—any solution to the current crisis in Myanmar (formerly Burma) requires a deal that allows the Tatmadaw to continue largely intact and maintain significant power.

The current realities on the ground—the Tatmadaw's overwhelming force and willingness to use it, its dogged determination to remain in power, and the scattered and poorly resourced nature of its opponents—could lead those advocating a negotiated settlement to accept that the military would have to remain in place in something close to its precoup shape and form. Accepting the possibility of such an outcome, however, does not mean that it would be healthy or sustainable.

Taking the position that the Tatmadaw is an essential institution ignores two fundamental realities: its own record of fostering conflict and division, mismanaging and subordinating the country's interests to its own obsession with power; and the near unanimity with which the Myanmar population despises the armed forces and will no longer live peacefully under its control. The February 2021 coup sparked a national uprising of a magnitude that should have everyone questioning long-held assumptions about the centers of power in the years ahead.

Fifty Years of Damage

For at least a half-century, the military has been an unrelentingly negative force in Myanmar in nearly every respect. In fact, it is hard to think of another institution anywhere that has done more damage to a country and society over such a long period. The Tatmadaw has been and remains, in the words of David Mathieson, an "Army of Darkness."²

To understand the military's role, one must start with the fact that Myanmar is what the historian Thant Myint-U has called an "unfinished nation,"³ meaning that its hundreds of ethnic groups have never been united by a collective sense of national identity. For much of its modern history, the country has seen a struggle

between the forces of Burman (or Bamar) nationalism, representing the country's majority, and the many ethnic minority communities who demand autonomy or some form of federalism to safeguard their rights and cultures.

During the colonial period, the British reinforced ethnic divisions and identities, brought in large numbers of immigrants from India, and favored certain ethnic groups over the majority Bamar. During World War II, Bamar nationalists led by Aung San sided with the Japanese, while some ethnic minority groups fought alongside the British, resulting in multiple clashes and several horrific massacres. In the leadup to independence in 1948, Aung San sought to unify the country based on the promise of autonomy for ethnic minority communities (the so-called Panglong Agreement), but his 1947 assassination prevented that promise from being implemented.

Army commander General Ne Win led a coup in 1962 that ended the country's messy postindependence democratic experiment and reasserted the dominance of the Bamar majority. The coup, and the policies that Ne Win subsequently enacted, placed the country on a downhill trajectory that lasted for decades. Ne Win's Bamar-Buddhist nationalism and fear of outside intervention led him to isolate the country, expel much of the large Indian population—which included many able administrators and entrepreneurs—and nationalize the economy under military control, calling it the “Burmese Way to Socialism.” He banished foreign education institutions, including missionary schools along with the Ford Foundation and Asia Foundation, and pursued a disastrous socialist-autarkic economic strategy that sent the country in the wrong direction. By 1987, Ne Win's economic policies had so impoverished Burma that it won admission to the United Nations' group of “Least Developed Countries,” officially marking it as one of the globe's poorest states.⁴

Across five decades of rule, Ne Win and successor military leaders would reject any ideas of autonomy or federalism, insisting on a strong Bamar-dominated unitary state and engaging in regular battles with a variety of ethnic minority insurgent groups, largely in border areas, that were seeking autonomy. The autocrats also institutionalized deeply problematic concepts of ethnicity and identity that deprived those not considered indigenous (or “national races”), such as the Rohingya, of basic rights. They paid lip service to the concept of diversity while practicing “Burmanization” of the country's history, language, education, and culture, pressuring all other ethnic groups to assimilate and suppressing attempts to develop or keep alive ethnic minority heritage. Rather than using institutions such as the military to integrate the country, they ensured such institutions became the near-exclusive domain of the Bamar, who in their view were the only group that maintained unquestioned loyalty to the country. By refusing to recog-

nize the legitimate grievances of ethnic minority populations and in fact brutally suppressing them, Ne Win's regime deepened the country's communal divisions and stoked even greater conflict.

Politically, Ne Win arrested thousands of opponents, suppressed civil and political liberties, and imprisoned ethnic minority leaders, including the country's first president, the Shan prince Sao Shwe Thaik, who died in prison. In border areas, the Tatmadaw pursued its brutal counterinsurgency doctrine, known as the "four cuts" strategy⁵—cutting off food, funds, intelligence, and recruits—to try to defeat ethnic insurgent forces such as the Kachin Independence Organization, Shan State Army, and Karen National Union, as well as the Chinese-backed Communist Party of Burma. The Communist Party of Burma eventually imploded in 1989, but many ethnic insurgent groups continued to fight.

In 1988, sharply deteriorating economic conditions and widespread frustration spawned a mass protest movement led by students. The protests led to Ne Win's resignation, but a new cadre of generals took charge and bloodily suppressed the demonstrations, resulting in thousands of deaths and many more imprisoned. These generals, who gave their regime the Orwellian name SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council), ended the pretense of socialism but maintained military control over the economy, with an element of deeply corrupt capitalism that ruthlessly exploited the nation's natural resources and concentrated wealth in the hands of the military elite and their cronies, leaving most of the rest of the population impoverished.

For the next two decades, the generals continued the repressive practices and economic mismanagement that had characterized Ne Win's rule, propelling the country further backward in almost every respect. The SLORC held elections in 1990, but it ignored the results when Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party won an overwhelming majority, imprisoning many NLD and other prodemocracy leaders and continuing military rule for another 20 years. The generals suppressed most political activity, strictly censored and controlled the media, imprisoned dissidents, and blatantly manipulated the country's judiciary.

Although the economy probably enjoyed modest growth from 1990 to 2010 (the official figures are questionable, to say the least), much of that growth appeared to come from resource exploitation—amid much corruption—and was neither sustainable nor equitable. According to the World Bank, as late as 2014 the poverty rate was still above 37 percent (the highest within ASEAN), and per capita income was just above \$1,000. The military also failed to invest in infrastructure; the country's electricity grid reached only one-third of the population, and the density of the road network was well below most neighbors.⁶ Few had

access to the internet, and a SIM card cost \$2,500 in 2010. More broadly, military officers regularly interfered in the running of the economy, telling farmers what to grow and when, operating as many as 11 exchange rates (which created huge profit opportunities for them and those connected to them), and overseeing a banking sector better known for money laundering than lending. At the same time, the regime was collecting huge proceeds from its control of the country's state-owned enterprises, which operated most of the extractive industries.

The generals collected few taxes and funneled much of the nation's severely inadequate budget to the military itself, starving the educational and health care systems. According to the World Bank, the military received about 40 percent of the national budget in 2000, compared to only 1.5 percent going to health care.⁷ The World Health Organization's 2000 report ranked Myanmar's health care performance at 190th out of 191 countries, ahead of only Sierra Leone.⁸ That same year, the military regime was spending only 0.5 percent of GDP on education, and more than half the population could not afford even basic education.⁹

The combination of high poverty rates and low investments in education and health had predictable results. According to the World Bank, as the country entered its reform period after 2010, it had the lowest life expectancy in ASEAN and the second highest level of child and infant mortality. Roughly 30 percent of students finished high school, with a quarter going no farther than primary school.¹⁰

The military regime also failed miserably—indeed, it did not even try—to ease the longstanding tensions and mistrust between ethnic minority communities and the Bamar majority that had plagued the country for decades. And though the military did not begin the process of dividing the country by ethnicity, it certainly reinforced it. It sought to “unify” the nation by forcing assimilation, banning the teaching of ethnic minority languages and history, force-feeding the population a Bamar-centric educational curriculum, backed by constant propaganda, and harshly suppressing ethnic insurgencies that sought autonomy. In doing so, it reinforced prejudices, amplified mistrust, and exacerbated the very divisions that were the root causes of decades of conflict and despair.

The military combined brutal counterinsurgency campaigns, with constant efforts to exploit and expand the divisions among the different ethnic groups. Its four-cuts tactics involved massive human rights violations—forced labor, systemic use of rape as a weapon of war, indiscriminate shelling, wholesale destruction of villages, and widespread torture and murder—that among other things produced hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced people.¹¹

Starting in the early 1990s, the military entered several cease-fire agreements, mostly so it could concentrate its forces against other insurgent groups. It also

struck deals with certain groups that, in effect, turned them into proxy militias in return for virtual licenses to engage in smuggling, illegal timber trade, and narcotics production and distribution. The military, in that sense, is largely responsible for the massive expansion of illicit activity, including one of the world's biggest narcotics industries, which is wreaking havoc inside the country and causing widespread suffering outside.

By 2011, when a newly elected government led by general Thein Sein unexpectedly began to reform and open the country, the military had directly or indirectly run the country for nearly 50 years. During that time, Burma—it has been known as Myanmar since 1989—had regressed from a country that was near the forefront or at least in the middle ranks of the various Southeast Asian nations on a number of indexes (economy, education system, rice exports, and quality of civil service) to a deeply impoverished, conflict-ridden, and isolated state known more for its horrific human rights record and for producing drugs, refugees, and fear than anything else. It is hard to think of any positive contribution the military made to the country during that time. It reflected one of the worst records of rule and governance of any institution in the world.

The Military During the Reform Period

The Thein Sein government introduced significant reforms and established a nascent national peace process. Between 2011 and 2015, it freed political prisoners; allowed the establishment of political parties, independent media, and civil society; ended censorship; boosted spending on health and education; and liberalized the economy—all while opening the country to the world. The military largely accepted these reforms while maintaining its monopoly of power over security issues and 25 percent of seats in parliament—both guaranteed by the 2008 constitution that the generals had written. The military also—however reluctantly—accepted the 2015 elections results, which brought longtime opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD party to power. In addition, it began working with the International Labor Organization and others on issues such as recruitment of child soldiers.

During this period, some Western countries, included the United States, held out hope that the military could be persuaded to accept further reform in return for the prospect of greater international recognition and—over time—an enhanced ability to engage and work with Western militaries. As US ambassador to Myanmar beginning in early 2016, I had multiple conversations with General Min Aung Hlaing and other military leaders in which I made clear that further reform and increased respect for human rights could lead to greater engagement from the US military.

The generals insisted they supported the democratization process and looked forward to increased military-to-military engagement, but over time it became clear they were not willing to change the military's behavior. The Tatmadaw continued its habitualized "four cuts" approach, particularly in operations against the Kachin Independence Army in the northeast, with no improvement in its human rights performance. It also greatly hindered progress in the national peace process, insisting that ethnic armed groups surrender their arms and also failing to honor agreements embedded in the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement. While the generals for the first time allowed discussion of the concept of federalism, they made it clear through words and actions that they still did not accept anything less than a Bamar-dominated political system in which the military continued to play a leading role.

Then, in late 2016 and again in mid-2017, the Tatmadaw responded to attacks by a small group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), by launching a horrific, bloody operation against the Rohingya population in northern Rakhine State. Amid widespread reports of rape, torture, and murder, the security forces razed hundreds of Rohingya villages, causing more than 700,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh. The United States determined that the operation constituted ethnic cleansing; others characterized it genocide.

It is true that the mistreatment of the Rohingya, which goes back decades, was not just an issue of the Tatmadaw. Aung San Suu Kyi and her government—along with much of the media and, it seemed, the population—failed to support Rohingya rights and even defended the military's operation, denying the widespread allegations of severe human rights violations. Nevertheless, it was the Tatmadaw that actually carried out the ethnic cleansing, proving once again that its behavior had not changed and that it continued to operate with impunity. Conversations with military officials during this time bordered on the bizarre, with top generals insisting there had been no human rights abuses and wondering aloud why the world did not believe them. In one meeting, military commander General Min Aung Hlaing brought out a photo album filled with gruesome pictures of dead soldiers and police as evidence of ARSA atrocities, as if that somehow justified the military's ethnic cleansing operation against the entire Rohingya community.

Ahead of 2020 national elections, the military again showed its hostility to reform by blocking proposed constitutional changes that, among other things, would have gradually reduced the Tatmadaw's role in parliament. Then, when the military-aligned Union Solidarity and Development Party suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the NLD in the election, the Tatmadaw cried foul, demanded an investigation into alleged electoral fraud, and then—when the NLD rejected its demands—staged a coup on 1 February 2021.

When a Country Despises Its Military

The coup and the military's subsequent brutal suppression of protests, along with its aggressive attacks against several ethnic armed groups and newly formed "people's defense forces" that also opposed the coup, have revealed a Tatmadaw that operates—and is seen by the public—more like a foreign occupying force than a legitimate national institution. First, the coup itself had no legitimate justification; the military simply wanted to seize power. Second, the widespread, indiscriminate violence, torture, and looting the military has inflicted on the civilian population clearly have been designed to terrorize or cow the public into submission, an outrage that has stripped the Tatmadaw of what little support and respect it previously enjoyed in the country. Third, the military's actions have revealed that it continues to operate and to think inside its own cocoon, almost hermetically sealed from the society at large. It engages in constant self-aggrandizing propaganda, is largely oblivious to the thinking and attitudes of the public, and indoctrinates its members to see anyone who disagrees as an enemy.

The Tatmadaw enjoys almost no support among the public, save for a few who are either related to military officers or financially connected to the organization. In fact, the overwhelming sentiment of Myanmar's population appears to be that there is neither hope nor opportunity for the country as long as the military remains in power. The dominant view among protestors and others resisting the coup is not to return to the status quo ante but rather to eliminate the military as an independent political actor and to fundamentally reform the institution. Some of the ethnic armed groups—more accustomed to dealing with the military and perhaps more aware of its force superiority—might be amenable to cutting a deal in return for greater autonomy, but that is not where the majority of the country's population is now.

In sum, nearly 60 years after it seized power, the Tatmadaw has shown itself to be a driver of conflict and division, not a force for unity. It has failed miserably at economic management, not to mention developing health and education systems. It has fostered corruption and a massive illicit economy, including one of the largest narcotics production operations in the world. It has promoted the dominance of the majority Bamar–Buddhist community in a country that has no chance of peace and success absent the establishment of some form of federalism that addresses the grievances and aspirations of its significant minority populations. And in the past several months, its obsession with power, its brutality, and its failure to understand today's Myanmar society has sparked a national revolt and created massive turmoil and instability that it has almost no chance of ending.

Hypothetically, one can make a good argument that Myanmar needs a military to serve as a national institution and as a force for unity in a country full of conflict and centrifugal forces. There is, however, no evidence that the current military—the Tatmadaw—is serving or can serve in these roles. The Tatmadaw is a cancer. Until and unless it changes dramatically, there is little hope for Myanmar to achieve peace, unity, economic development, or any true sense of nation.

If Myanmar is to enjoy a truly national military, the current institution needs to be torn down, at least in part, and rebuilt with new leadership, a different culture, and a new vision. The Myanmar people will need to create their own vision for what a better military might look like. Presumably, it would be an integrated institution, answerable to elected civilians, without economic interests, and with a different culture that respects human rights and prizes accountability. It likely will require years if not decades of transition, but it is critical now for the Myanmar people to develop a vision for such a military, and then they can begin to discuss steps needed to achieve it. Maybe a new national military college that is fully integrated can be a first step, in addition to eliminating ethnic identity from any military documents and developing a completely new training regimen.

Implications

The obvious question remains what good this analysis even offers given that the Tatmadaw right now seems entrenched in power, uninterested in reforming itself, and far from a position in which it would be compelled to accept restructuring or major reform.

The answer comes in three parts. First, it should lead analysts and foreign governments to recognize that Myanmar is likely to continue to suffer from conflict and instability (and be a headache for ASEAN) for as long as the Tatmadaw (a) remains in power and (b) continues to operate in its current form and in an overbearing political and economic role. The Myanmar people already know this. It would be helpful if foreign analysts and foreign ministries also understood it and thus stopped arguing that the Tatmadaw is an essential institution that needs to be maintained.

Second, given this analysis, foreign governments and other actors ideally will resist the temptation to think that the current crisis will either ease on its own or be satisfactorily resolved via limited compromises that free a few political prisoners, offer promises of future elections, or propose yet another long-term road map to better politics. While a deal that ends or reduces the violence and/or allows humanitarian assistance to reach vulnerable populations would be welcome, it would not resolve the underlying problem or restore stability.

The third aspect should be a greater effort on the part of foreign governments to support the efforts of the Myanmar people to compel the Myanmar military to change as a precondition to any political resolution. This is not a call to arm the resistance but rather to do everything possible to ratchet up the pressure on the military. Many people believe the Tatmadaw cannot be defeated militarily. They might be right, but today everything in Myanmar is up in the air, and nothing should be taken for granted. As the analyst Zaw Tuseng recently wrote: “There is nothing pre-determined about what will happen in Myanmar, certainly not the Tatmadaw’s survival.”¹² Even if the Tatmadaw is not defeated militarily on the battlefield, it is possible that the intense pressure it is under—if sustained and even increased—will force it to make concessions that right now seem unimaginable. This is not a prediction but a potential scenario.

In the near term, the only positive way ahead is for enough officers in the Tatmadaw to recognize that the current situation is not viable and to look for a way out that would involve negotiations that lead to at least the beginning of reform of the military itself, as well as restoration of the many earlier reforms that the postcoup regime has reversed. That will require intense pressure on the Tatmadaw in all forms, including financial, combined with a clear message that the goal is not to eliminate the military or to punish all members but rather to initiate significant restructuring and reform while pursuing justice—including in international legal forums—against top generals and some individuals clearly involved in massive violations. The key is to encourage more defections from the rank and file as well as new calculations from more senior officers.

For the international community to play a constructive role in resolving the chaos in Myanmar, it must adopt strategies that recognize there is no sustainable solution to Myanmar’s woes without substantial reform of the Tatmadaw and that reasoning with the current leadership in the hope it will change its behavior is fruitless. Compelling change within the military might seem unthinkable right now—and efforts might well fail—but the alternative is to accept that Myanmar will remain a source of instability, conflict, refugees, narcotics, and distress for the foreseeable future. ★

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Notes

1. See, for example, Bilahari Kausikan, “Five Hard Truths About Myanmar,” *Global Brief*, 2 April 2021, <https://globalbrief.ca>, and Dewey Sim, “Keep Myanmar’s ‘Hated’ Military or Face Another Iraq or Libya: Singapore’s George Yeo,” *South China Morning Post*, 11 March 2021, <https://www.scmp.com>.

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3. Thant Myint-U, “Myanmar, An Unfinished Nation,” *Nikkei Asia*, 17 June 2017, <https://asia.nikkei.com>.

4. Committee for Development Planning, “Report of the 23rd Session: Supplement No. 10,” UN Economic and Social Committee, 21–24 November 1987, at <https://undocs.org>. See also David Steinberg, “Crisis in Burma,” *Current History* 88, no. 537 (1 April 1989), <https://www-proquest-com.stanford.idm.oclc.org>.

5. @Kim_Joliff described the “four cuts” approach in an excellent thread on Twitter on 15 June 2021. See also Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, (London: Zed Books, 1999), and Mary P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

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9. Council on Foreign Relations, “Burma: Time for a Change,” Report of an Independent Task Force Sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations, 2003, 13, <https://cdn.cfr.org>.

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