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It's Good to Be the Tatmadaw

Formerly a global pariah, the Burmese military now enjoys a growing embrace by the West and public support at home.

By **Ben Dunant**

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Myanmar's General Min Aung Hlaing takes part in a parade to mark the 72nd Armed

Forces Day in the capital of Naypyitaw (March 27, 2017).

Credit: REUTERS/Soe Zeya Tun

YANGON — Burmese moviegoers were given a special treat this year for the long weekend preceding Armed Forces Day. On Friday, March 24, one of the most lavishly produced Burmese films to date — a battlefield epic called *Pyidaungsu Thitsar* (“Union Loyalty”) — was released in cinemas.

Audiences were invited to revel in the heroism of the military, known in Burmese as the Tatmadaw, as they wage grim, mud-splattered campaigns in the mountainous borderlands. In this harsh terrain, ethnic minorities continue to take up arms against the Union government in spite of a peace process, launched in 2011, that has attracted Western funding and support.

Such cinematic offerings are not unusual, courtesy of an informal Tatmadaw arts budget enabled by the military’s control of a decisive chunk of the economy of Myanmar, the Southeast Asian nation formerly known as Burma. Each year on Armed Forces Day, March 27, TV and cinema schedules are given over to fresh portrayals of military daring.

Meanwhile, in the real world, the commander-in-chief of Myanmar’s armed forces, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, is cutting a confident figure. On April 22, at the invitation of the German military, he embarked on a “goodwill” visit to Germany, with his wife and senior officers at his side. En route, the senior general stopped in Austria, where he was received with an honor guard and dined with the Austrian military chief.

The institution Min Aung Hlaing helms developed under Japanese mentorship during World War II. It dominated Burmese politics

and society for a duration and to an extent rare among even the most ruthless military dictatorships.

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Following a coup by General Ne Win in 1962, the Tatmadaw hollowed out all rival institutions — from the judiciary to the school system — developed during British rule or in the fragile years of multi-party democracy following independence in 1948. Its human rights record is among the worst in the world: the use of rape as a weapon of war and the mass recruitment of child soldiers have been documented at length.

In 2011, the Tatmadaw began a carefully managed liberalization, which resulted in an overwhelming victory for the longstanding opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), in an internationally celebrated election in 2015. The party — led by, and now synonymous with, Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of independence hero Aung San — repeated its landslide win from the 1990 election, whose results were dismissed by the military government, opening the door to a new 20-year chapter in repression.

The euphoria after the 2015 election was palpable: Burmese from across the fractured social spectrum felt their country was being restored to them. The grueling work ahead, to rebuild Myanmar's degraded institutions and foster a semblance of public trust in government, was momentarily brushed aside — as was the lack of any discernible NLD policy, beyond a broad, undeniably resonant messages of "change."

The Statesman Abroad

In his early 60s, Min Aung Hlaing is among the younger members of Myanmar's governing

class, now split between the elected government, helmed by 71-year-old Aung San Suu Kyi, and the military. The latter controls the ministries of home, defense, and border affairs, and takes a quarter of all seats in parliament.

Suu Kyi, disallowed from holding the presidency, holds the prime ministerial position of state counselor. The actual president, long-time Suu Kyi confidante Htin Kyaw, aged 70, was caricatured as a “puppet president” at the time of his inauguration in March last year. But even this overshoot the terms of his role: giving speeches at second tier national events and making the foreign trips that Suu Kyi is too busy to make herself.

Meanwhile, the military maintains its “guiding role” in the nation’s politics, and full sovereignty over its own affairs, as stipulated in the 2008 Constitution, pushed through in a referendum held in the aftermath of a devastating cyclone and slammed internationally as fraudulent. This has proved to be a millstone around Myanmar’s democratic development.

Although the military’s proxy party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), was humiliatingly defeated in the 2015 polls, the power of the military still descends into every corner of society, since the police and the entire local government apparatus remain under the home affairs ministry.

Its grip was felt keenly when the government was formed in March last year. The military put forward Myint Swe as vice president — a choice the NLD was unable to veto. The retired lieutenant general and former intelligence chief is notorious for heading a brutal crackdown on democracy activists after the monk-led protests of 2007, known as the Saffron Revolution.

Myanmar's previous military rulers were marked by their international isolation — enjoying warmer relations with Pyongyang than with Washington — and could be parochially minded in the extreme. Min Aung Hlaing, however, has been able to burnish his image as a Burmese statesman abroad, hobnobbing with EU military chiefs.

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U.S. and EU policymakers acknowledge that the Tatmadaw is the most powerful institution in the country — and keeper of the keys to further democratization, through constitutional amendments that it can singlehandedly veto. Therefore, the logic goes, the Tatmadaw should be engaged in a similar way to its former civilian proxies in the USDP government of President Thein Sein, whose term ran 2011-16.

After 2012, the more sweeping sanctions began to be lifted and Western nations started re-opening embassies in the country. Enhanced relations with civilian authorities and the provision of aid and technical assistance helped realize Myanmar's first credible election in a generation, in 2015. Might not a similar charm offensive persuade the military to drop their old authoritarian habits?

Hearts and Minds

Although cautious and limited so far, the policy of direct engagement could transform the legitimacy the Tatmadaw enjoys, internationally as well as domestically. Yet the dividends in terms of more “professional” conduct, adherence to global humanitarian norms, and acceptance of greater civilian oversight, are uncertain at best.

In a speech before the assembled brass of the European Union Military Committee in

November last year, Min Aung Hlaing put on a less than encouraging performance. He praised Myanmar's constitution, specifically for the balance it sets between military and civilian authorities in frontline governance.

At the event in Brussels, he doubled down on the stance that the persecuted Rohingya Muslim minority, resident in Rakhine State by the Bangladesh border, were “not included” in Myanmar's multi-ethnic yet strictly bounded national community: a designation that renders most Rohingya stateless, in breach of international law. The senior general then left for Italy, where he toured the premises of the ARIS and Leonardo companies, purveyors of armored vehicles and fighter jets.

Myanmar is still subject to an arms embargo from the EU and the United States; the former's was renewed at the end of April. For “lethal” assistance, Myanmar is turning to sellers such as Israel, with whom they signed a defense deal in late 2015, and Pakistan, with whom they are negotiating to license-build JF-17 fighter jets. The Tatmadaw is moving away from 20 years of overreliance on China, which supplied jets that routinely incinerated their Burmese pilots.

Britain, meanwhile, has been leading the Western advance on the hearts and minds of the Tatmadaw. Starting in early 2014, the U.K. Defense Academy has run two-week courses for Tatmadaw officers in Myanmar, with sessions on humanitarian law, the recruitment of child soldiers, and “democratic control of the armed forces.”

Senior Tatmadaw officers have since been flown over to join the annual intake of the Defense Academy in Oxfordshire, where, outside of workshops on human rights in conflict, participants are taken on trips to Warwick Castle or are at leisure to enjoy the

academy's heated outdoor swimming pool and 18-hole golf course. The latter is likely to go down well: the spread of army bases across the far corners of Myanmar has gone hand-in-hand with the construction of golf courses.

But while EU military chiefs have been putting on banquets for Myanmar's senior generals, the United States has stayed shy of wooing the Tatmadaw directly — although not for want of desire from some corners of the American military establishment.

In a June 2012 meeting of Asian defense chiefs, then-U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta announced the American government's interest in pursuing a military-to-military relationship with the Tatmadaw, reviving ties that had been ditched with the imposition of U.S. sanctions in the 1990s.

Certain U.S. domestic legal hurdles have cooled this pursuit — for instance, the onerous reporting requirements contained in the National Defense Authorization Act — and an influential collection of congressmen with friendly links to the exiled Burmese democracy movement remain apprehensive. But as Myanmar continues to slide down the global human rights agenda, the path could be cleared — depending on the abrupt whims of President Donald Trump's foreign policy.

Following a direct request from Suu Kyi during her trip to Washington DC in September last year, the remaining U.S. economic sanctions were lifted in recognition of “substantial advances to promote democracy.” Only sanctions targeted at alleged drug kingpins and the arms embargo remained in place.

Yet U.S. engagement with the Tatmadaw has not moved beyond a handful of training workshops on professional conduct and visits by mid- to high-ranking officers. Burmese soldiers have not been invited to the United

States' flagship educational initiative aimed at the militaries of friendly nations, the International Military Education and Training program.

In lieu of more direct ties, the United States has made some efforts to draw the Tatmadaw into its broader security alliance in Southeast Asia. In 2013, Myanmar participated for the first time, as an observer, in the U.S.-led Cobra Gold military exercise in Thailand, featuring the forces of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, and South Korea, among other nations. In December last year, U.S. Army Pacific organized a disaster preparedness workshop in Myanmar under the Lower Mekong Initiative.

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The motive underlying the greater part of this regional alliance building is a desire to counter China. Veteran Myanmar scholar David Steinberg told the Yangon-based *Irrawaddy* news outlet last year that American policy in the Asia Pacific “has been a constant for about 150 years: to prevent the rise of any hegemonic power in the region.”

Civilian Aid

As 10,000 saluting soldiers marched up and down the parade ground of Myanmar's capital city Naypyidaw, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing laid out the priorities of the Tatmadaw — and therefore, of the Myanmar nation — in his annual Armed Forces Day address.

Chief among them was military modernization: equipping Myanmar for “21st century modern warfare,” with all the smart hardware and imported technical expertise that this requires. Addressing European military chiefs in Brussels in November, he spoke of his dream of building a

“standard army” — namely, overhauling a bloated structure hobbled by obsolete equipment and high desertion rates. Increased tutoring from the West in professional conduct aligns well with this dream, as does better access to the international arms market.

Advanced weapons systems may be expensive, but the NLD has yet to challenge the Tatmadaw’s outsized haul of the nation’s finances. In March this year, the NLD government passed its first annual budget, whose contents were enough to sober anyone still searching for signs of a radical agenda. At almost 14 percent (up from last year), the defense budget amounts to more than the health and education budgets combined — sectors where ambitious reform plans continue to stumble from lack of investment, breeding the prospect of further generations lost to lives of low-paid labor and preventable illness.

For the Tatmadaw, another cause for cheer over the last year has been the cooperation received from a long-time adversary. Since military members of parliament accused the NLD of “democratic bullying” over the creation of her state counselor position in April last year, Aung San Suu Kyi has chosen to play nice with her former jailers.

As the Tatmadaw stepped up offenses in far northern Myanmar against the Kachin Independence Army in the latter half of last year, Suu Kyi remained silent, infuriating members of the Kachin public who had largely voted for her party in 2015.

More alarming is the manner in which the state media, whose officers report up to the president — and therefore to Suu Kyi — via an NLD-installed information minister, has provided crucial cover for the Tatmadaw in its recent “clearance operations” in northern

Rakhine State by running a propaganda campaign reminiscent of the days of full military rule.

After militants claiming to represent the persecuted Rohingya mounted deadly raids on police posts near the Bangladesh border in October last year, the Myanmar army sealed off the border townships in a months-long hunt for perpetrators. Save for a handful of dubious guided tours, aid workers and foreign journalists have largely been barred.

More than 70,000 Rohingya fled into Bangladesh, telling of reprisal killings and gang rape by the Tatmadaw. Meanwhile, state-run papers met a mounting body of evidence from human rights groups and international media with flat denials. In one move, the state counselor's official Facebook account posted a banner reading "fake rape."

However, on this one issue, Suu Kyi is not privileging relations with the military over the Burmese public, or expending any of her political capital as a popular icon. Quite the opposite: on the Rohingya, and on the "threat" they pose to Myanmar's sovereignty as presumed illegal settlers, the military and the wider public find themselves blissfully aligned.

Myanmar's military rulers have demonized the Rohingya over decades, stoking anti-immigrant hatred with roots in the British colonial era, when hundreds of thousands migrated from India to Burma across an open border. Although colonial records suggest many Rohingya are descended from 19th century economic migrants from Bengal, Muslims of eclectic origins have lived along the Rakhine coast for most of the last millennium.

Today, the Islamic culture of the Rohingya is cast as incompatible with Buddhist-majority Myanmar, their allegedly higher birth rates a demographic threat, and Rohingya men a

danger to Buddhist women; a wave of anti-Rohingya violence in 2012 was sparked by a rape accusation. Since 2012, a monk-led Buddhist nationalist movement has warned against a possible “Islamization” of Myanmar, and spread hatred on social media.

Even from the perspective of ethnic minority communities such as the Kachin and Shan, who have also suffered under decades of Tatmadaw brutality and an exclusionary state structure, the Rohingya remain definitively outside of the national community. They are widely labeled “Bengalis,” to impute foreign origins. Even the more progressive domestic news outlets in Myanmar, known for their opposition to military rule, refuse to call them “Rohingya.”

A campaign against the Rohingya is therefore the most patriotic of fights. Since the army sweep began in northern Rakhine State, a surge of support for the Tatmadaw has been visible on social media, in particular Facebook — one of the very few, albeit skewed, proxies of public opinion in Myanmar at a time of surging internet access.

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A Skyful of Lies

There have been growing international demands for an independent inquiry into alleged military atrocities in Rakhine State. On March 24, the United Nations Human Rights Council elected to send a “fact-finding mission” to Myanmar. The foreign ministry, which Suu Kyi controls, promptly rejected the proposed mission, saying it would “do more to inflame, rather than resolve the issues at this time.”

The brutal counter-insurgency campaign in Rakhine State, and the cultivating of public support, has become a shared endeavor

between the military and civilian branches of government — and a site of trust building between the two. In an April interview with the *Reuters* news agency, the NLD-appointed information minister said the October attacks on police posts were “like 9/11 in America.”

Abetted by crude propaganda from state media organs — which at one point ran travel features on the bucolic delights of northern Rakhine State, with its gentle streams and verdant rice fields — the recent crisis has also cemented distrust among the Burmese public toward international media for its focus on the plight of the Rohingya.

Regular targets of opprobrium are outlets, such as the *BBC* and *Voice of America*, that were once prized by Burmese dissidents during the days of blanket media censorship. The generals spent decades denouncing these agencies as the “Skyful of Lies”; now a civilian government made up of former dissidents seems to have taken up the baton, and brought the public along with them.

Meanwhile, kitsch trappings of military authoritarianism are still seen across the country: bright red signboards exhort citizens to be resolute against internal and external “destructive elements.” The continuation of Myanmar’s intrusive surveillance apparatus — in the form of Special Branch, a plainclothes police bureau that answers to the military via the Home Affairs Ministry — is seldom talked about. Special Branch officers routinely trail political activists and trample freely over the private lives of ordinary citizens.

Min Aung Hlaing has said that any loosening of the Tatmadaw arm-lock would not be countenanced until “internal peace” is achieved — passing the onus onto Suu Kyi to negotiate an end to more than 60 years of civil war with ethnic minority groups. Peace within

the term of the current government is a very tall prospect. In November last year, an alliance of ethnic-based armies launched coordinated attacks on a string of towns by the Chinese border.

While everything else is in flux, the position of the Tatmadaw in national affairs appears more stable than ever. Snug in its constitutional bunker, it can reap the fruits of improved foreign relations, a cooperative civilian government, solid public support for their crackdown on the Rohingya, and the increased revenue that comes with a rapidly growing economy. The taciturn senior general can afford a brief, complacent smile.

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