

Inside Myanmar's Army: 'They See Protesters as Criminals'

Four officers spoke about life in the feared Tatmadaw, which has turned its guns on civilians again. "The Tatmadaw is the only world" for most soldiers, one said.



By Hannah Beech

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Capt. Tun Myat Aung leaned over the hot pavement in Yangon, Myanmar's largest city, and picked up bullet casings. Nausea crept into his throat. The shells, he knew, meant that rifles had been used, real bullets fired at real people.

That night, in early March, he logged on to Facebook to discover that several civilians had been killed in Yangon by soldiers of the Tatmadaw, as Myanmar's military is known. They were men in uniform, just like him.

Days later, the captain, of the 77th Light Infantry Division, notorious for its massacres of civilians across Myanmar, slipped off base and deserted. He is now in hiding.

"I love the military so much," he said. "But the message I want to give my fellow soldiers is: If you are choosing between the country and the Tatmadaw, please choose the country."

The Tatmadaw, which says it has a standing force of up to half a million men, is often portrayed as a robotic rank of warriors bred to kill. Since ousting Myanmar's civilian leadership last month, setting off nationwide protests, it has only sharpened its savage reputation, killing more than 420 people and assaulting, detaining or torturing thousands of others, according to a monitoring group.

On Saturday, the deadliest day since the Feb. 1 coup, security forces killed more than 100 people, according to the United Nations. Among them were seven children, including two 13-year-old boys and a 5-year-old boy.

In-depth interviews with four officers, two of whom have deserted since the coup, paint a complex picture of an institution that has thoroughly dominated Myanmar for six decades. From the moment they enter boot camp, Tatmadaw troops are taught that they are guardians of a country — and a religion — that will crumble without them.



A military official watching while soldiers and police officers stood by during a protest last month in Yangon, Myanmar, against the coup. The New York Times

They occupy a privileged state within a state, in which soldiers live, work and socialize apart from the rest of society, imbibing an ideology that puts them far above the civilian population. The officers described being constantly monitored by their superiors, in barracks and on Facebook. A steady diet of propaganda feeds them notions of enemies at every corner, even on city streets.

The cumulative effect is a bunkered worldview, in which orders to kill unarmed civilians are to be followed without question. While the soldiers say there is some dissatisfaction with the coup, they regard a wholesale breaking of ranks as unlikely. That makes more bloodshed likely in the coming days and months.

"Most of the soldiers are brainwashed," said a captain who is a graduate of the prestigious Defense Services Academy, Myanmar's equivalent of West Point. Like two of the others who spoke with The New York Times, his name is not being published because of the possibility of retribution; he is still on active duty.

"I joined the Tatmadaw to protect the country, not to fight our own people," he added. "I am so sad to see soldiers killing our own people."

The Tatmadaw has been on a war footing since the country gained independence in 1948, battling communist guerrillas, ethnic insurgencies and democracy advocates forced into the jungle after military crackdowns. In the cultlike confines of the Tatmadaw, the Buddhist Bamar ethnic majority is glorified at the expense of Myanmar's many ethnic minorities, who have faced decades of military repression.

The enemy can also be within. A target of the Tatmadaw's ire is Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the civilian leader deposed and locked up in last month's coup. Her father, Gen. Aung San, founded the Tatmadaw.

Today, the Tatmadaw's foes are again domestic, not foreign: the millions of people who have poured onto the streets for anti-coup rallies or taken part in strikes.

On Saturday, which was Armed Forces Day, Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, the commander in chief and instigator of the coup, gave a speech vowing to "protect people from all danger." As tanks and goose-stepping soldiers paraded down the broad avenues of Naypyidaw, the bunker-filled capital built by an earlier junta, security forces shot protesters and bystanders alike, with more than 40 towns seeing violence.

"They see protesters as criminals because if someone disobeys or protests the military, they are criminal," Captain Tun Myat Aung said. "Most soldiers have never tasted democracy for their whole lives. They are still living in the dark."



On Saturday, the deadliest day since the Feb. 1 coup, Myanmar's security forces killed more than 100 people. Relatives of a man shot in the chest mourned as his body was taken away in Yangon. The New York Times

Although the Tatmadaw shared some power with an elected government over the five years preceding the coup, it kept its grip on the country. It has its own conglomerates, banks, hospitals, schools, insurance agencies, stock options, mobile network and vegetable farms.

The military runs television stations, publishing houses and a film industry, with rousing offerings like "Happy Land of Heroes" and "One Love, One Hundred Wars." There are Tatmadaw dance troupes, traditional music ensembles and advice columns admonishing women to dress modestly.

The vast majority of officers and their families live in military compounds, their every move monitored. Since the coup, most of them have not been able to leave those complexes for more than 15 minutes without permission.

"I would call this situation modern slavery," said an officer who deserted after the coup. "We have to follow every order of our seniors. We cannot question if it was just or unjust."

Officers' children often marry other officers' children, or the progeny of tycoons who have profited from their military connections. Often, foot soldiers breed the next generation of infantrymen. The ecosystem of the State Administration Council, as the junta that grabbed power last month calls itself, is a tangle of interconnected family trees.



Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, the commander in chief and leader of the coup, during the military parade on Saturday, Armed Forces Day, in Naypyidaw, Myanmar's capital. Associated Press

Even during the five years of political opening, a quarter of the seats in Parliament were reserved for men in green. They didn't mix with other lawmakers or vote as anything but a bloc. The most important government ministries remained in military hands.

"I am happy to be a servant to the people, but being in the military means being a servant to the leaders of the Tatmadaw," said a military doctor in Yangon. "I want to quit, but I can't. If I do, they will send me to prison. If I run away, they will torture my family members."

The cloistered nature of the Tatmadaw may help to explain why its leadership underestimated the intensity of opposition to the putsch. Officers trained in psychological warfare regularly plant conspiracy theories about democracy in Facebook groups favored by soldiers, according to social media experts and one of the officers who spoke with The Times.

In this paranoid world, the thumping that Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy delivered to the military's proxy party in last November's elections was easily portrayed as electoral fraud.

A Muslim cabal, funded by oil-rich sheikhdoms, is accused of trying to destroy the Buddhist faith of Myanmar's majority. Influential monks, who count army generals among those praying at their feet, preach that the Tatmadaw and Buddhist monkhood must unite to combat Islam.

In the Tatmadaw's telling, a rapacious West could conquer Myanmar at any moment. Fear of invasion is thought to be one reason that military rulers moved the capital early in this century from Yangon, near the coast, to the landlocked plains of Naypyidaw.

"Now soldiers are killing people with the mind-set that they are protecting their nation from foreign intervention," said the captain on active duty. His brigade is among those that have been deployed in a city to subdue an angry populace by force.



A makeshift treatment ward for people with gunshot wounds at a hospital in Yangon. The New York Times

The feared invasion isn't necessarily by plane or sea, but by the "black hand" of foreign influence. George Soros, the American philanthropist and democracy advocate, stands accused in Tatmadaw circles of trying to subvert the country with piles of cash for activists and politicians. A military spokesman implied during a news conference that people protesting the coup, too, were foreign-funded.

Understanding the Coup in Myanmar

A military coup. Following a military coup on Feb. 1, 2021, unrest gripped Myanmar. Peaceful pro-democracy demonstrations gave way to insurgent uprisings against the Tatmadaw, the country's military, which ousted the country's civilian leader, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

Captain Tun Myat Aung said that in his first year at the Defense Services Academy, he was shown a film that portrayed democracy activists in 1988 as frenzied animals slicing off soldiers' heads. In truth, thousands of protesters and others were killed by the Tatmadaw that year.

One of Captain Tun Myat Aung's men was recently struck in the eye by a projectile from a protester's slingshot, he said. But the captain acknowledged that the casualties were remarkably lopsided in the other direction.

Tatmadaw Facebook feeds may show soldiers besieged by violent protesters armed with homemade firebombs. But it is the security forces who have assaulted medics, killed children and forced bystanders to crawl in obeisance.

According to the soldiers who spoke with The Times, a suspension of mobile data access over the past two weeks was aimed as much at isolating troops who were beginning to question their orders as it was at cutting off the wider population.

Shortly after the coup, a few soldiers expressed solidarity with the protesters on Facebook. "The military is losing. Don't give up, people," one captain, who is now in hiding, wrote on his Facebook feed. "The truth will win in the end."



A soldier with the 77th Light Infantry Division in Yangon last month. The New York Times

The Tatmadaw's insularity serves another purpose. For decades, the military has been fighting multiple enemies on multiple fronts, mostly ethnic armed groups clamoring for autonomy. Tight esprit de corps is needed to keep desertions low and loyalty high.

Casualty rates are not published in Myanmar because they are considered a state secret. But leaked documents viewed by The Times, such as a tally of fallen soldiers in western Rakhine State a few years ago, indicate that hundreds of soldiers die each year, at a minimum.

The captain on active duty said it was common for unmarried soldiers to draw lots to marry the widow of one who died in battle. The woman, he said, has little choice about who her new husband will be.

"Most of the soldiers have been disconnected from the world, and for them the Tatmadaw is the only world," he said.

Ethnic minorities, who make up roughly a third of Myanmar's population, live in fear of the Tatmadaw, which has been accused by United Nations investigators of genocidal actions, including mass rapes and executions. Such campaigns have been unleashed most notoriously against Rohingya Muslims, but they have also targeted other ethnic groups, like the Karen, the Kachin and the Rakhine.

When the 77th Light Infantry Division was fighting in Shan State, in northeastern Myanmar, Captain Tun Myat Aung said he could feel the disgust of people from various ethnic groups. As a member of another ethnic minority, the Chin, he understood their fear of the Bamar majority.



Captain Tun Myat Aung in uniform. "Most soldiers have never tasted democracy," he said.

Although he says he shot only to wound, not to kill, Captain Tun Myat Aung spent eight years on the front lines. He developed a rapport with just one group of ethnic minority villagers during that entire time, he said.

"People hate soldiers for what the soldiers did to them," he said.

But the Tatmadaw also saved him. His mother died when he was 10. His father drank. He was sent to a boarding school for ethnic minority students, where he excelled. At the Defense Services Academy, he studied physics and English.

"The military became my family," he said. "I was automatically happy when I saw my soldier's uniform."

On Feb. 1, in the pre-dawn torpor of Yangon, Captain Tun Myat Aung clambered onto a military truck, half asleep, strapping on his helmet. He didn't know what was going on until a fellow soldier whispered about a coup.

"At that moment, I felt like I lost hope for Myanmar," he said.

Days later, he saw his major holding a box of bullets — real ones, not rubber. He cried that night.

"I realized," he said, "that most of the soldiers see the people as the enemy."



Captain Tun Myat Aung is in hiding after deserting. “I love the military so much,” he said, while urging soldiers to put Myanmar first. The New York Times

Hannah Beech has been the Southeast Asia bureau chief since 2017, based in Bangkok. Before joining The Times, she reported for Time magazine for 20 years from bases in Shanghai, Beijing, Bangkok and Hong Kong. @hkbeech

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