



# Strategic Control Tactics of the Tatmadaw in Democratic Myanmar

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Strategic Control Tactics of the Tatmadaw in Democratic Myanmar

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A Thesis in the Field of International Relations  
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## Abstract

In an effort to achieve sustained longevity and economic prowess, the Burmese military (Tatmadaw) implemented a new system of governance that was more acceptable in the eyes of the international community and more in line with calls for democracy that have filled political discourse within the nation. In doing this, the Tatmadaw ignited a political and economic transition which took the nation from direct military rule to military control. After more than five decades of authoritarian governance, the Tatmadaw reestablished civilian rule only after it had fully established a political system that protected its primary economic and political interests (Bunte, 2017). It called this political system a “disciplined democracy,” allowing it to successfully craft an external image conducive to welcomed involvement in the global economy while at the same time guaranteeing its continued central position in economic and political life.

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## Glossary of Acronyms

|       |                                                                |
|-------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| AFPFL | Anti-Fascist Peoples Freedom League                            |
| ALD   | Arakan League for Democracy                                    |
| ARSA  | Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army                                 |
| BGF   | Border Guard Force                                             |
| BIA   | Burma Independence Army                                        |
| BSPP  | Burma Socialist Programme Party                                |
| GONGO | Government Organized Non-Governmental Organization             |
| KIO   | Kachin Independence Organization                               |
| MOGE  | Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise                                 |
| NCA   | National Ceasefire Agreement                                   |
| NLD   | National League for Democracy                                  |
| RC    | Revolutionary Council                                          |
| SAC   | Security and Administration Committee                          |
| SEZ   | Special Economic Zone                                          |
| SLORC | State Law and Order Restoration Council                        |
| SPDC  | State Peace and Development Council                            |
| TRC   | Temporary Registration Certificate                             |
| UMEHL | Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (also MEHL or UMEH) |
| USDA  | Union Solidarity and Development Association                   |
| USDP  | Union Solidarity and Development Party                         |
| YCDC  | Yangon City Development Committee                              |

## Chapter I

### A Brief History

*The past belongs to those who control the present.*

—Joel L. Swerdlow

The region known as Arakan—or more recently, Rakhine State—was a predominantly Muslim entity prior to the arrival of the Rakhine ethnic group around 1000 AD. The Rakhine shared the same ancestral lineage as the larger Bamar ethnic group which dominated Burma and Siam.

The history of unified Burma begins with the rise of the Pagan empire under King Anawrahta in 1044 AD. Within 15 years of his ascension to the throne, Anawrahta expanded the Burmese empire as far east as Siam and began to turn his eye to modern Burma's eastern-most region (Ibrahim, 2016). By the turn of the century, the Pagan empire had conquered the Mons and emerged as the first largely ethnic Bamar state, unifying previously divided areas, and with Theravada Buddhism as the state religion.

A side effect of merging the many ethnicities in the region was cultural pluralism. To address this matter, the throne sponsored the construction of many Buddhist buildings, so much so that it came to be known as the defender of Buddhism, while also incorporating animist deities into the religion. Integration during the Pagan era inaugurated movement away from cultural and societal norms shared with India to a specifically Burmese national identity (Ibrahim, 2016).

Pagan's dominance of the region came to a halt in 1286 AD when a seemingly inconsequential group of armed Mongols launched an attack that ended in the collapse of the once-thriving empire. Soon after, the former kingdom splintered into minor polities, and the region fell into a period of various wars between ethnic factions and the Mongol invaders. The kingdom's fragmentation brought official independence to Arakan, although it should be noted that under the Pagan empire the area still remained largely self-sustaining. As contention and minor armed conflicts in both Bengal and Burma continued, Arakan became a vast mix of ethnicities and religions (Ibrahim, 2016). Despite the warring period, by the mid-14th century, the Kingdom of Ava commanded the territory and once again unified separate entities into a singular Burmese state, and once again Buddhism flourished on a wide scale under the court of Ava.

Ava was not the only kingdom establishing itself during this time, however. In 1430 the last Arakan dynasty was formed in Mrauk-U. Arakan was governed by the Mrauk-U kingdom until the late 18th century when it was reabsorbed by the last Bamar dynasty (Topich & Leitich, 2013).

By the 1750s, the Konbaung dynasty began its reign as the last of the Bamar empire. Under Konbaung rule, Burma came to be a regional power. By the late 18th century, the Konbaung dynasty was strengthened after successful wars with Siam. This led rulers to turn their attention to the western area of Arakan. The impetus for this mobilization lay in a desire to ensure Buddhist purity in the area and a reduction of ties to the Islamic states of to the west.

It was the Konbaung occupation of Arakan that ultimately triggered tensions between Burma and British India (Tahir, 1963). These tensions steadily grew stronger

and eventually led to the First Anglo-Burmese war in the early 19th century. The Konbaung occupation further fused state and religion. A sequence of kings began to see themselves as protectors of Buddhism and Buddhists, even those who eventually came under the control of Britain in Arakan. While this link between state and religion severed during the colonial period in Burma, it remained a critical aspect of the Burmese Buddhist nationalist movement. According to Francis Buchanan, a group called the Rooring existed in the northern Arakan region by the late 18th century although he referred to the natives as Mohammedans and Rakhing (Ibrahim, 2016).

As mentioned above, tensions surrounding the annexation of Arakan were the impetus for the 1824 Anglo-Burmese war. After two years, the Treaty of Yandabo was signed which ended the conflict. According to the treaty, the Konbaung throne ceded to British India the states of Manipur, Assam, Tenasserim, and Arakan as well as paying indemnity and allowing for diplomatic relations to be established between the Ava court and Britain (Aung, 1967). Despite the Yandabo peace agreement, fighting did not stop between the two domains, and in 1852 a second Anglo-Burmese war erupted. Britain was victorious once again, this time annexing the remainder of lower Burma. This move left the Konbaung dynasty isolated from the rest of the world.

The outbreak of the third Anglo-Burmese war in 1885 meant that the country's days of independence were numbered. Lasting just less than a month, the war ended with Britain's annexation of the remaining Burmese territory and the official incorporation of Burma into the British India colony. Almost immediately following the conclusion of the war, Britain formally divided the new colonial region into central "Ministerial Burma" and the outer "Frontier Areas" (Myint-U, 2006). This essentially split the country along

ethnic lines, with the former dynastic Bamar ethnic group residing in the ministerial region and the frontier territories combining a vast mix of many different ethnicities. These internal boundaries came to be strictly enforced and resulted in severely restricted internal migration.

British occupation was a time of great suffering for many Burmese citizens. As the eastern-most annex of British India, the Burmese saw the effects of colonialism similar to that in West Africa. Following the conquest of Mandalay, the British moved the capital of Burma to Rangoon and economic growth quickly ensued (Myint-U, 2006). Burmese society changed quickly as globalism began to steadily find its way into the country. The fall of the monarchy had a significant impact on the decline of traditional Burmese culture. With no monarchy, monks no longer had the political clout they once did. This was further exacerbated by the British implementation of separation of church and state.

Armed resistance to British rule continued into the late 1800s, with the British reacting to these rebel acts by systematically destroying villages. Intermarriage occurred frequently, creating a new Eurasian community that quickly emerged as a middle class—higher on the social ladder than the Burmese, but below the British (Myint-U, 2006).

Meanwhile, the demand for export-rice rose drastically following the 1850s. As Charney explains:

Cultivation was intense, leading to a twenty-three-fold increase in the volume of rice cultivated over the course of the same period. The growth of the rice export economy in the south encouraged a massive migration of cultivators from the north into the delta, attracted by growing prosperity. Because of Lower Burma's sparse settlement, there was a yet unexploited rice frontier in the south that could be opened up for rice cultivation by northern settlers. (Charney, 2009, p. 6)

While the legal economies of Burma soared, so did the illicit ones. Opium was first introduced to Burma as a commodity for consumption by the British, shortly after the second Anglo-Burmese war. Ancient kings in the northern hill regions of the country had used opium for medicinal purposes, but it quickly became a symbol of oppression and inequality.

The Opium Wars between the British and Chinese began just a few years before the annexation of Upper Burma. Four years after the British fully acquired Burma, the second Opium War began and ended with the legalization of opium importation in China. The British began importing opium from India and sold it through a “government-controlled opium monopoly” (Booth, 1996). In 1878 the British passed the Opium Act which restricted opium consumption only to registered Chinese or Indian consumers. The Burmese were banned from smoking opium under any circumstances in an attempt to increase distribution outside of the country.

Despite seeing success in the incorporation of Burma into the India colony, in 1937 Britain officially designated Burma a separate administrative state. Borders were drawn along territorial lines established after the first Anglo-Burmese war, which meant integrating Arakan. Many Bamars resented the British presence in Burma. The British also encouraged Indians and Bengalis, many of whom were Hindu or Muslim, to immigrate to Burma in hopes of increasing the British empire’s influence over its new colony (Adas, 2011). They were also more inclined to employ the migrant population rather than the Bamars because they had more experience with the colonial British administrative system. As a result, the new immigrants were viewed with distain by the Bamars who thought they were taking jobs from more deserving Bamars. Sentiment

worsened as overcrowding increased in major cities like Rangoon, and foreign cultures and religions came to be more prominent. Furthermore, many of the various ethnicities that were once ruled by the Bamar empire were more supportive of British rule and thus offered higher-paying government jobs. This left many Bamars unemployed and vulnerable to abuse at the hands of their colonial rulers. To the British, migrants from India were a way to solidify a veneer of solidarity with the colonized population as well as increase Burma's overall productivity and expend its colonial economy.

The British also introduced wide-scale secularism to Burma. With the complete separation of church and state, Buddhism as a religion and social institution suffered immensely. The links between religion, ethnicity, and anti-foreign sentiment began to grow. All of this has contributed significantly to today's negative sentiment surrounding the Rohingya population, which is regarded as residing illegitimately in Burma and threatening Burmese life.

The outbreak of World War II brought with it a staunch anti-colonial movement in Burma. In December 1941, Burmese general Aung San and a group of young military men traveled to Japan for military training. Soon after their return to Burma these "Thirty Comrades" announced the formation of the Burma Independence Army (BIA) and its alliance with Japan. Burma was a strategic objective of the Japanese government at the time because Japanese occupation of Burma would interrupt China's primary supply line and weaken the Allies' strength in Asia (Smith, 1991). Eventually the BIA came to serve as an auxiliary to the larger Japanese army when Japan invaded Burma in 1942. According to Seekins, the BIA's original leader, a Japanese general by the name of Suzuki, had a great psychological impact on the Burmese:

For the first time since 1885, there was a Burman army commanded by heroic young patriots. As the Japanese invasion progressed, the BIA also established provisional administrations in liberated areas. Official historiography in Burma dates the history of the Tatmadaw, the present-day armed forces, from the BIA's establishment. (2006, pp. 22-23)

The invasion by Japan and the fighting that it entailed lasted less than a year, ending with Japan's victory over the royal forces, thereby acquiring Burma as an extension of the Axis powers. The expulsion of Britain instigated more disconnect between Bamar and non-Bamar ethnic groups. Burma's various non-Bamar ethnic groups were supportive of the British and even aligned themselves alongside the Crown's army during the struggle with Japan. On the other hand, the Bamars showed overwhelming support for Japan, primarily because of the BIA, and the simple fact that it was because of Japan's assistance that the British retreated to India.

These alliances ultimately led to increased inter-ethnic violence. No better example of this exists than Arakan, the Burmese region closest to British India, which had to endure an influx of troops from both sides of the conflict. During the Japanese occupation, some 100,000 Rohingya died and an estimated 80,000 fled to Bengal. Arakan was no longer a violence-free area of ethnic groups, and segregation became a way of life.

Britain's retreat to India kept the military intact for the reoccupation of Burma that was initiated in 1944. After witnessing the hostile and abusive tactics employed by the fascist Japanese forces, Aung San and a band of BIA members formed the secret Anti-Fascist Organization and began renegotiations with the British. Shortly thereafter Burma joined the Allied forces and the Patriotic Burmese Forces (Ibrahim, 2016). By

May 1945, the Allies had recaptured Burma, and Japanese forces were pushed back across the Thai border.

The years immediately following Britain's re-entrance into Burma brought the country to the brink of civil war. The conflict with Japan left the country economically devastated, with increased social tensions between Burma's many ethnic groups running at an all-time high (Seekins, 2006, p. 25). The pre-war government resumed power and was less than welcoming of Aung San and his Anti-Fascist Peoples Freedom League (AFPFL), further antagonizing the Barmars.

At the same time, changes were occurring in the British government in England. The new Labour government appeared, headed by Clement Attlee, and with it a new determination to decolonize. This new sentiment led to the drafting of the Aung San-Attlee Agreement in January 1947, which committed both parties to Burmese independence (Seekins, 2006).

In anticipation of gaining official independence, Aung San and the AFPFL worked to draft a constitution. It is noteworthy that this first Burmese constitution acknowledged that all citizens of Burma were immigrants although it did not explicitly name Rohingya for full nationality. The Union Citizenship Act of the constitution named Arakanese as indigenous to Arakan. No specification was made concerning the Rakhine or Rohingya ethnic groups.

Up to this juncture in Burma's history, the Rohingya did not yet suffer from a wide-scale crisis of identity or citizenship. They were given National Registration Certificates and enjoyed full legal and voting rights. Throughout the decade of the 1950s, during the country's brief democratic period under first Prime Minister U Nu, Rohingya

were acknowledged as an ethnic group, and they did not experience broad denials of their existence as a separate ethnicity. Despite the legal ambiguity that surrounded Arakan, the region remained peaceful following Burma's independence.

The same cannot be said for other groups or regions of the country. Social tensions and grievances were exacerbated when, acting on the orders of Aung San's political opponent and right wing presidential candidate U Saw, a group of armed men burst into the Secretariat Building in Rangoon and assassinated Aung San and all of his high-ranking AFPFL members. Seekins explains: "This irrational act . . . was a terrible national tragedy, reflecting the violence that had become endemic in the country during and after the war and removing the one Burma (*Bamar*) leader who had won trust of the minorities" (Seekins, 2006, pp. 27-28). Following Aung San's assassination, the British governor appointed U Nu to be his successor and to lead Burma as prime minister following Burma's official Independence Day on January 4, 1948.

Not long after the Burmese administration took over governance from the British, Arakan Muslims petitioned Rangoon to integrate Maungdaw and Buthidaung regions of northern Arakan into East Pakistan. This request was denied, and Muslims in general were labeled as hostile to the new, predominantly Bamar, government. This highlights the fact that from modern Burma's earliest conception the northern-most portion of Arakan has been highly contested. Moreover, regions populated by non-Bamar groups were incorporated as part of the new nation which led to fresh debate among the governing elites. Some sought to use this historic moment in Burma's story as a means to create a Bamar Buddhist polity that would exclude other religions and ethnicities. Others, including Aung San, strove to ensure that Burma would be an inclusive state supporting

all groups and religious affiliations and extending citizenship to all within its borders. Argument was not just about citizenship, as discourse quickly shifted to the role of the Burmese military, now known as the Tatmadaw. Many supported Aung San's idea of a conventional military which would act as the armed forces of the state under civilian control. Other people favored total military control (Ibrahim, 2016).

One of the people who favored absolute military power was Ne Win. A former BIA member, Ne Win headed the Revolutionary Council (RC), a socialist faction also concerned with promoting military prowess in Burma. In 1962 Ne Win and the RC executed a coup and effortlessly toppled the democratic system previously in place under U Nu. That action effectively established military dominance that would continue for the next half-century.

The RC introduced a new ideology called the Burmese Way to Socialism, which brought with it a significant decline in the country's economic and political health. The new generals also supported the Buddhist hierarchy in order to gain legitimacy among the masses, and therein began the equation of Burmese national identity with Buddhism. The Tatmadaw integrated Buddhism as the state religion and since there was no homogenous ethnic identity, religion became the foremost criterion for being Burmese (Ibrahim, 2016).

By the 1970s, the Tatmadaw was established as the single most dominant institution in Burma. In 1974, the RC passed a new Socialist Constitution to replace the democratic one drawn up with the British just before independence. The Tatmadaw insisted that a parliamentary democracy was not a sufficient government system for Burma. The new constitution officially made Burma a one-party state and entrenched

Tatmadaw rule via Ne Win's new Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). At this point, the regime was almost entirely divorced from the country it governed, and solely focused on ensuring the longevity of the Tatmadaw's dominance and control.

More importantly, according to the new laws the Rohingya could not be citizens. Their National Registration Certificates were replaced with Foreign Registration Cards, implying that the Rohingya had no legitimate claim to the land on which they lived. Most notable is that this solidified an undeviating expansion of legal discrimination against the Rohingya by continuously shifting the legal definition of national identity.

The BSPP and the regime it inaugurated created more problems for the Rohingya beyond citizenship. The BSPP began standardized and systemic human rights abuses that have continued to the present. Just four years after the Socialist Constitution was ratified, Ne Win initiated a military mission known as Operation Nagamin (Dragon King or King Dragon) carried out by the Tatmadaw and immigration officials in northern Arakan. Government paranoia over the possibility of foreign invaders resulted in an increased military presence (Human Rights Watch, 2000). The primary purpose of the build-up was to register citizens and expel those deemed to be foreigners prior to the upcoming national census. As I noted previously, the Rohingya could not be citizens according to the requirements put forth by the Socialist Constitution. Therefore, they were rounded up *en masse* and forcibly expelled from their villages. Most of them had no choice but to flee across the border to Bangladesh. It is estimated that between 200,000 and 250,000 Rohingya were forced out of Arakan. Refugees accused the Tatmadaw of rape, murder, and other abusive intimidation tactics (Smith, 1991). The government claimed that this mass exodus signified that the Rohingya were in fact illegal immigrants who had come to

Burma as migrant workers under the British aegis and had left. This claim drew legitimacy from the early role that the armed forces assumed under the guidance of Aung San, creating the appearance that the Tatmadaw was the only suitable protector of Burma and Buddhism.

The situation in Arakan further deteriorated in 1982 when the Burma Citizenship Law was passed, again tightening the definition of a citizen and the requirements for citizenship. According to this law, any ethnicity other than those explicitly named in the legislation were deemed to be foreigners. In order to substantiate this claim without sparking a mass civil unrest, three levels of citizenship were constructed (citizen, associate citizen, and naturalized citizen) and arbitrary requirements for each classification. Ethnic groups other than the Bamar were assigned to one of the three categories based on their residence prior to 1823—the year Britain began its nearly century-long campaign to colonize Burma (Ibrahim, 2016). A requirement for naturalization—the only form of citizenship Rohingya would have been eligible for due to the explicit denial of their natural-born citizenship in the 1974 constitution—was documented evidence proving residence before 1948, the year Burma gained independence. The problem for nearly all Rohingya who tried to do this was that following ratification of the Socialist Constitution, their identification cards indicating that they had been living in Burma before the required deadline, were confiscated and replaced with the Foreign Identification Cards, meaning documentation for the Rohingya no longer existed. This effectively denied them citizenship of any form and left them especially vulnerable to abuse and violence.

The 1980s was a turbulent decade for all of Burma. In 1987 Ne Win, known for his paranoia and obsession with astrology, cancelled all bank notes with the exception of 45 and 90 kyat notes on the grounds that they were the only two denominations divisible by his lucky number, 9 (Tucker, 2001). Overnight, Burma's economy was destroyed; by the following morning people had lost their life savings. Tensions flared even further providing the momentum for student-led uprisings that took place the following year.

With the military's increasingly violent nature toward opposition to its tactics and position in society, by August 8, 1988, distrust and discontent with the military and government came to a head in what became known as the 8-8-8-8 or Four Eights movement, or the People's Uprising. Initially comprised only of students on the campus of Rangoon University, the pro-democracy movement quickly flourished into a nationwide uprising against Ne Win and the Tatmadaw. Thousands of people flooded the streets of Rangoon, Mandalay, and other major cities throughout the country.

During this time of public discontent, an alliance of convenience formed between the community of Buddhist monks (the Sangha) and the protestors (Ibrahim, 2016). The Sangha saw the launch of the Four Eights as a crucial time for them to join forces to protect the nation and, more importantly, Buddhism. Although protesting had increasingly built up over the previous month, August 8 marked not only the peak of the demonstrations but also the first serious effort made by the Tatmadaw to thwart pro-democracy sentiment. Soldiers met the unarmed protestors with gunfire; by the end of the protests thousands of civilians had been killed and countless more were injured.

Despite the destruction caused by the Tatmadaw, the Four Eights movement represented a turning point in Burmese history. During the uprising Aung San Suu Kyi,

daughter of the beloved Aung San, witnessed the carnage at the hands of the Tatmadaw and quickly rose to the forefront of the democracy movement, becoming an icon of hope for the Burmese and establishing the National League for Democracy (NLD). Furthermore, the protests brought about the dissolution of the BSPP and the resignation of Ne Win.

The small ray of hope ignited with the rise of Suu Kyi and the fall of Ne Win was quickly extinguished shortly after the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) stepped into the political scene in 1989 under the leadership of General Saw Maung, who effectively took control of the government from the BSPP. Rumors of elections drove Suu Kyi and the NLD to vigorously campaign across the country, hoping to solidify a democratic transition. When they were met with scathing attacks by multiple government-sponsored newspapers and journals, it became clear that the SLORC and the Tatmadaw had no intention of allowing the elections to be fair and free. In July 1989, the SLORC placed Suu Kyi under arrest and banned her from contesting the upcoming elections.

In an effort to control the outcome of the elections, in the early 1990s the Tatmadaw orchestrated a string of forced relocations in at least five major cities including Rangoon and Mandalay, with upwards of 500,000 civilians involuntarily moved to satellite towns. To justify this coordinated maneuver, the state-sponsored *Working People's Daily* newspaper insisted that these people were “squatters” living in slums, who were being offered an opportunity to move into a permanent, more developed area. International diplomats in the region at the time noted that the targeted neighborhoods were actually full of reinforced brick buildings with no real infrastructure problems.

Forcing these people to relocate hours away from their jobs and former homes was not only the Burmese form of gerrymandering, but it set a clear precedent for anyone who doubted the regime at the time (Erlanger, 1990). This was a clear example of one of the numerous ways the Tatmadaw clenched its iron fist in a clever and manipulative fashion in order to guarantee a particular desired result at the expense of the Bamar Buddhist population it insists it has always protected. Despite the SLORC regime's efforts, the 1990 elections brought about a 70% win for the NLD. Nevertheless, the SLORC deemed the results illegitimate, and power was secured for the Tatmadaw and the new SLORC for decades to come. In Arakan at this time, an increased military presence and knowledge of the protests in the central part of the country drove the general population to follow suit, and the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD) was born. It is important to stipulate that although the ALD was a proponent of democracy, it explicitly excluded the Rohingya.

It was soon apparent that the abusive tactics used during the BSPP's reign would persist under the SLORC regime. An example of this was the 1991–1992 Operation *Pyi Thaya* (Operation Clean and Beautiful Nation). The Tatmadaw's explanation for the mission was similar to that of Operation Nagamin. The SLORC claimed that it was responding to the military expansion of the Rohingya Solidarity Organization, a political group formed as a direct result of Nagamin. The operation resulted in a second mass exodus of Rohingya civilians, with sources again estimating that some 250,000 people were forced to flee to Bangladesh. This time, Tatmadaw forces crossed the Bangladesh border following refugees—and action that shook the foundation of the two countries' relations indefinitely.

By this time SLORC leader Saw Maung stepped down and General Than Shwe took the reins of power. Than Shwe proved to be one of the most brutal dictators the world has ever seen. He consolidated and reorganized the military, renaming it the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). As Seekins explains:

Through its control of a “state capitalist” economy, especially the sale of natural resources, such as natural gas, to neighboring countries, the SPDC and the Tatmadaw officer corps have evolved into a class that, in contrast to the pre-1988 Tatmadaw, enjoys little esteem among the general population but is more deeply entrenched in power than ever before. (Seekins, 2006, p. 46)

Than Shwe deviated from the typical Burmese strategy of inward policy making and isolation from the international community. Instead, the new regime encouraged cordial relations with countries such as China, India, Bangladesh, and members of ASEAN. Than Shwe stabilized the country economically in comparison to Ne Win and Saw Maung (Seekins, 2006). It also should be noted that economic changes made in the past two decades have more immediately benefited upper ranking members of the military government rather than the Burmese people.

After increased international pressure and feeling the effects of economic and military sanctions, in 2003 the SPDC announced its “Roadmap to Democracy.” This was a seven-step, systematic plan to implement what the generals termed “disciplined democracy.” This enshrined Tatmadaw privileges and control behind a veil of more internationally acceptable standards and semi-democratic change.

The Roadmap proved to be an extremely slow process—some arguing that it was not truly intended to bring about actual change. Grave human rights violations continued under the SPDC and in 2007 came to the forefront of international news for the first time since the People’s Uprising of 1988. Initially owing to the SPDC’s decision to remove

fuel subsidies that caused Burmese fuel prices to rise 66%, the uprising began in August 2007. Citizens initially protested in demonstrations against the government's decision. In response, the SPDC began to arrest and beat protesters. By September, thousands of monks took to the streets of Rangoon, Mandalay, and five other major cities throughout Burma, not only protesting inflated fuel prices but also peacefully demanding basic human rights for all. Within two days, on September 24, 2007, reports of over 100,000 monks demonstrating in Rangoon began to trickle into international news reports. By the end of the month, Burmese troops and riot police began beating, arresting, and torturing thousands of monks and supporters nationwide (Buncombe, 2007). Allegations of monks being disrobed, burned alive, and drowned were also reported. These events were eventually referred to as the Saffron Revolution due to the color of the monks robes.

To make matters worse, the military's lack of concern for basic human rights became even more apparent in May 2008 when Cyclone Nargis hit southeastern Burma. As the second deadliest named cyclone in recorded history, Nargis made landfall in southern Burma on May 2, 2008. While official SPDC estimates were extremely under-reported, well over 100,000 people were dead or missing (Beyrer, Doocy & Robinson, 2008). The government response was a stark contrast to its domineering and overbearing presence during the Saffron Revolution—initially not helping in any way to assist those impacted by the storm. When Than Shwe finally allowed foreign aid to enter the country, the government immediately attempted to distribute supplies to known supporters. The cyclone and the regime's handling of it forced at least the appearance of political change.

A new constitution was drafted later that same year but it did little to take any real power from the military. Indeed, the Tatmadaw again enshrined its own privileges behind

the facade of a return to limited democracy. The Constitution also perpetuated the regime's restrictive approach to citizenship by largely retaining restrictions established by the 1974 Constitution and the 1982 Citizenship Law.

With increased international pressure following the catastrophe of Cyclone Nargis, the SPDC announced that it would hold general elections—the first in two decades—in the fall of 2010. Just days prior to the elections, the regime also released Suu Kyi from house arrest, where she had been held for most of the time since the previous elections. The NLD boycotted the elections, protesting that they would not be fair and free, and it remained allied with the Sangha. Ultimately the military's new “civilian wing,” the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) won, propelling former military general Thein Sein into the spotlight as the nation's new “democratically elected” president.

It is particularly noteworthy that during this period, persecution of the Rohingya continued and ethnic tensions in Arakan (now officially called Rakhine State) were increasingly exploited as political tools. On a national scale the Tatmadaw increasingly supported a rhetoric of Buddhist Burmese nationalism, further alienating the Rohingya and many other non-Buddhist groups. Out this resurrected definition of national identity, movements such as 969 and MaBaTha coalesced with the assistance of radicalized monks such as Ashin Wirathu and Sitagu Sayadaw. This created a veneer of national solidarity which the Tatmadaw later exploited to garner support from the general public. Also at this time, the political focus shifted toward integration of the Tatmadaw, the newly empowered USDP, and the NLD.

By 2012 this purported transition was fast tracked even further when the USDP announced that it was holding by-elections. This time the NLD contested and of the 44 seats it sought, it won 43. For the first time in Burmese history Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD were able to participate in the legislative branch of government. Soon thereafter the by-elections political engagement began to increase in Rakhine State. The Arakan National Party was formed when the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party and Arakan League for Democracy merged.

Resentment toward Rohingya became a point of unification and solidarity among Buddhist Rakhines. In 2012, violent riots in Rakhine broke out as a result of sectarian tensions following the gang-rape and murder of a Rakhine Buddhist woman allegedly by a group of Rohingya men (International Crisis Group, “Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar”, 2017). As tensions grew, in June 2012, a group of Buddhist men attacked a bus carrying a group of nine Rohingya men who were later executed by the mob after having been mistakenly identified as the perpetrators of the rape/murder (Hla, 2012). A state of emergency was subsequently declared in Rakhine allowing the military to actively engage in and thereby exacerbate the conflict (Keane, 2012). By October 2012, widespread violence had erupted in predominantly Muslim villages. By the end of 2012 over 90,000 people were internally displaced or forced to flee to Bangladesh, an overwhelming majority being Rohingya (BCC, “Burma Profile,” 2012).

The Rohingya were not the only Muslims who felt the increasing tensions. In March 2013, the Tatmadaw instigated riots in Meiktila, in the Mandalay district of central Burma, which resulted in the total destruction of an entire Muslim neighborhood. As I will discuss later, this riot was the root of the infamous Human Rights Watch satellite

images depicting before and after images of the region and inspiring international outrage. The local security forces met with Buddhist residents of Meiktila prior to the riots to devise a plan that would allow civilians to carry out a massacre and destroy nearly ever structure standing. It is important to understand that this particular Muslim community were not Rohingya. They were members of a smaller Muslim group called Kaman, an ethnic group legally recognized as citizens. Furthermore, the violence stopped only when the Tatmadaw stepped in and restored peace. This bolstered the legitimacy of the long-standing claim that the military was the only institution truly capable of defending the sovereignty and stability of the nation and protecting the purity of Burmese Buddhism.

After serving two years in Parliament, Suu Kyi's positive relationship with then-president Thein Sein began to dissolve, and the alleged move toward democracy stalled as the USDP began to tighten its grip on power. Influential USDP official Shwe Mann was briefly arrested and permanently removed from his post. Mann was open to constitutional reform that had the potential to remove significant power from the Tatmadaw and thus was perceived to be a significant threat that had to be eliminated. This signified that despite genuine interest in democratic reform among a small number of powerful individuals, old elites were still pulling strings behind the scenes. In fact, the primary concern remained that of maintaining the carefully constructed plan set forth by the Roadmap to Democracy, with the ultimate goal of sustained military privilege.

The stalemate was short-lived, and by 2015 the USDP announced another round of general elections, this time assuring transparency and free and fair elections this time. To the surprise of the international community this proved to be generally true. The NLD

won a landslide victory, and Aung San Suu Kyi—although still constitutionally barred from holding the title of president—became head of state.

It should be noted that despite appearing to be entirely free and fair, had the military wanted to prevent Suu Kyi or the NLD from winning it could have easily done so. It would have known that the NLD was going to succeed long before the elections were held. Moreover, it benefited the Tatmadaw to have Suu Kyi take control of the civilian government. The Tatmadaw would now be able to focus solely on its economic goals and preserve the privileges of the generals while ensuring the long-term existence of the military as a powerful institution in Burmese social and political life.

By the time of the election, the crisis in Rakhine State had reached an all-time high, and the Rohingya refugee crisis was in full swing, with nearly one million refugees having fled the country to Bangladesh on foot and to Malaysia via fishing boats. Having garnered international attention and causing wide-scale criticism, an apparent democratic victory was a much-needed distraction for the international community, thereby further enabling the Tatmadaw to continue carrying out its economic and social plans under the guise of political transition.

However, while the international community was praising the Burmese authorities, a militant group of Rohingya was mobilizing under the direction of Ata Ullah, resulting in the official establishing of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). Following a string of ARSA attacks on Burmese border guardposts, the Tatmadaw retaliated by killing scores of Rohingya civilians and sending thousands more fleeing to Bangladesh. The advent of ARSA undoubtedly added fuel to the fire in Rakhine State and bolstered the military's claim that the Rohingya pose an inherent threat

to the safety and stability of the nation and Buddhism, which enabled intensified discriminatory sentiment against Muslims in general.

Conversations being held currently, regarding the crisis in Rakhine and Burma's supposed democratic transition, fail to connect the dots between the above contributing components and the underlying psychology of the military. The current constitution in Burma was written in 2008 under the State Peace and Development Council. It offers a legitimizing tool for continued Tatmadaw dominance under the guise of democratic reform.

Many Burma watchers and international media outlets have been swift to claim that Aung San Suu Kyi has "fallen from grace" and allowed Rohingya genocides to continue. What is missing from this understanding of Burma's present political climate is the fact that Suu Kyi and her NLD party find themselves forced to work within the framework of a constitution that is not democratic and was drafted by leading Tatmadaw officials in order to establish their claim to power.

The general consensus among Burma watchers and scholars of international relations is that since the 2010 general elections, Burma has been on a path to some form of democracy. The fact that Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD have been allowed to actively participate in government affairs is a step on the road to a democratic Burma. However, I suggest that this disciplined democracy is part of the Tatmadaw's broader scheme to entrench itself into all aspects of Burmese political and social affairs. As an institution, the Burmese armed forces are incredibly intelligent when it comes to manipulating the national identity of the population and the functioning of its government in pursuit of its unofficial ambitions. In the post-9/11 world, the Burmese military had to

either reorganize its ranks and put forward a veneer of compliance with international norms, or it would have become irrelevant in the international forum and suffer immensely at the domestic level.

The recent democratization process has allowed the military to maintain control over — and manufacture support from — the civilian population with a near-absolute guarantee that the capitalist ambitions of top generals will continue to take precedence over the human rights of any group of people who threaten them. The Tatmadaw continues to masquerade as a pro-democracy political entity while behind the scenes nothing has truly changed. Factual evidence of an unofficial Tatmadaw agenda already exists in the academic dialogue surrounding Burma's political climate and the crisis in Rakhine State. What is lacking is a contextual analysis of military ambitions and tactics historically used to secure the realization of those ambitions. The behavioral traits displayed by the Tatmadaw since the inception of the post-independence junta can be seen when examining Rohingya genocide and the social and political climate that has grown around it.

## Chapter II

### Early Control Tactics of the Burmese Military State, 1948-2008

Maintaining power and control have long been primary concerns of the Burmese military, especially during and immediately following periods of social and political unrest or change. Burma's most prominent political party at the time of independence was the Anti-Fascist Peoples Freedom League (AFPFL). Following the assassination of party leader General Aung San, the AFPFL quickly began to experience internal disagreements, and in 1958 fractured into two separate entities. Up to this point, Burma had experienced a brief period of parliamentary democracy, primarily due to continued British influence post-independence. Resulting from the turmoil of the AFPFL's split, and a motion of non-confidence, then-prominent military general Ne Win was asked to act as interim prime minister and head a "Caretaker Government" that would restore order and solidarity.

#### From a Caretaker Government to the People's Revolution

During the two-year interim government led by Ne Win, the long-lasting strategy for state-military hegemony first becomes apparent. Charged with cleaning up the city, Colonel Tun Sein was appointed mayor of Rangoon by Ne Win. Unlike the previous government, which was reluctant to clear out slum areas due to the large number of potential voters living there, Ne Win's government wasted no time in strategically reshaping the aesthetics of the city (Seekins, 2011). Satellite towns were established

around the periphery of the city in an attempt to move residents in accordance with the government's development agendas. Official reports boasted of better living conditions in the new towns, but in fact most amenities were rudimentary, and the majority of residents made a living through informal work sectors due to a lack of steady employment opportunities and relatively isolated locations (Seekins, 2011). According to a 1987 report by Naing Oo on living conditions in Rangoon's satellite towns:

Many residents, almost three decades after the new towns were established, still earned their income from street vending and other informal-sector activities (construction work, stevedoring) in the city center, but found it difficult to commute there because of the high cost and scarcity of public transportation. Furthermore, the street vendors were vulnerable to government attempts to shut them down: "Their daily existence is such that they had to play a game of cat and mouse with municipal authorities along downtown streets. The municipal[ity] naturally considered them a hindrance to capital city beautification and a nuisance to the people." (Naing Oo, quoted in Seekins, 2011, p. 89)

These relocations occurred during a time when the Burmese government was attempting to establish itself and the nation as a legitimate entity. By removing people who were seen to be undesirable, the Caretaker Government established control over the country's capital city.

Development projects commenced shortly after the relocations. Tun Sein's "Sweat Scheme" was a weekly cleaning campaign focused on beautifying Rangoon. While on the surface this initiative appears to be a positive measure, it was achieved largely through the use of "volunteer" work which ultimately amounted to forced labor, since those who refused to partake were punished or required to pay bribes to military and government personnel (Burma Department of Information & Broadcasting, *Is Trust Vindicated?*). As Seekins explains, maneuvers such as the "Sweat Scheme" and other cleaning and beautification efforts by the Caretaker Government represent the beginning

of a pattern of governance that was quickly entrenched under Burma's successive military juntas.

The employment of mass mobilization campaigns to affirm the regime's legitimacy and image of efficacy rather than to achieve some tangible result. . . . Like the British colonial regime, the Caretaker Government and its junta successors—lacking genuine popular support—depended upon display (in this case, the “egalitarian” spectacle of citizens and soldiers together sweeping away piles of rubbish) to assert its right to rule. (Seekins, 2011, p. 90)

It will become apparent later that the same fundamental ideals of discipline and homogeneity, and the strategies used to enforce them, continue to be employed by the Burmese military behind a facade of democracy.

The period of the Caretaker Government in Burma also provides examples of the long history of infiltrating social and civil life by the Tatmadaw and top government officials. For example, Ne Win appointed himself chancellor of Rangoon University in an attempt to control the student population and divert political activism. In another instance, an increased military presence in border regions was seen as an attempt at “Burmanization” by ethnic locals but in fact only increased animosity toward the Tatmadaw and the government (Seekins, 2011).

During the February 1960 election, Tatmadaw officers attempted to intimidate the public into voting for the pro-military faction of the AFPFL. The idea of a secret ballot was all but ignored as voting was held in open spaces reminiscent of an open voting system. In some instances, military officers were stationed in voting areas with loaded weapons aimed at voters in an attempt to control the outcome of the election. Despite the intimidation tactics used by the military under the Caretaker Government, the 1960 election ended in victory for U Nu and his faction of the AFPFL and democracy was

restored. Unable to effectively maintain control of the government under the guise of legal elections, just two years after U Nu returned to power, Ne Win carried out a palace coup in March 1962, and Burma quickly fell into the chokehold of socialism and martial law. One of the first measures of control taken by Ne Win and the Revolutionary Council was to jail all national and ethnic leaders. The official justification for this was that it was an attempt to preserve Burma's national unity. In truth, this notion has its roots in the idea that the Tatmadaw is the only institution in Burma truly above politics and capable of holding the nation together and controlling all major aspects of social, economic, and political life (Seekins, 2011). Known as the "martial law regime," Ne Win's Revolutionary Council suspended the 1947 constitution and established a nationwide system of Security and Administration Committees (SACs), effectively beginning the hierarchical apparatus that remains to the present day (Taylor, 2015).

As I will discuss in the following section, with the establishment of the SACs, every government has maintained a top-down power flow and similar administrative pattern in order to maximize control over the minutiae of Burmese life. In some instances, these regulatory entities extended as far as local wards and districts, effectively inserting military and/or government officials in a way that gave them access to the day-to-day workings of social life.

By July 1962, Burma's leadership decided it needed to establish more legitimacy in the eyes of the Burmese population and the international community, and thus the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) was born. By 1964 the Law to Protect National Solidarity was passed, effectively making the BSPP Burma's only legal political party (Taylor, 2009). Composed of members of the Revolutionary Council, the BSPP's

primary purpose was to garner popular support for the government (Thwin & Thwin, 2013). It represented an early attempt by high-ranking Burmese officials to safeguard their positions and avoid situations in which their personal power or the military's institutional power could be weakened. As a result, Ne Win's power went unchallenged and his legitimacy grew as he presented himself as the rightful successor of national hero Aung San (Seekins, 2011).

Within the BSPP or the Burmese military, promotions depended on loyalty to Ne Win and the overall government apparatus rather than merit or talent (Seekins, 2011). This tactic allowed the top echelon of Burmese government to maintain systemic order and circumvent any possible internal plans to overthrow the regime like Ne Win had facilitated in 1962. Anyone considered too smart or too popular among the civilian population was purged to ensure that Ne Win's power was unchallenged.

During this time, the government was entirely autocratic, despite claims that it represented all working Burmese people (Taylor, 2009). Dependent on the whim of one leader, the army-party-state hierarchy was yet another measure to ensure total military and state supremacy. It must be said, however, that there was a legitimate aspect of this standard. Seekins (2011) notes that due to the fact that as a nation Burma

had weak institutions save for the army itself, which performed well on the battlefield against communist and ethnic insurgents but failed miserably when it tried to run the economy or gain the allegiance and cooperation of the population of central Burma, mostly through mass mobilization campaigns similar to the Bogyoke government-era "Sweat Scheme." (p. 94)

The military backed the BSPP as an organization for mass mobilization, establishing a pattern that continued throughout the SLORC/SPDC era and into the present day. In fact Ne Win's successor, Senior General Than Shwe, encountered the

same failures when seeking to gain and maintain public support. Both leaders saw popular uprisings against their governments—the Four Eights movement in 1988 under the BSPP, and the Saffron Revolution in 2007 under SPDC— and both leaders had to determine a way to maintain military and state perpetuity while also pacifying the population in a way that would keep the state from falling into total disarray.

For Ne Win and the BSPP the answer to this problem was to step back from governance after the Four Eights and ultimately turn over power to Than Shwe and the SLORC. This was an effort to persuade the general public that the democratic change they demanded was around the corner. In reality however, it was a tactic used to manipulate the country's domestic situation in a way that would eternalize the hegemony of the military-government apparatus.

Under Ne Win, over 15,000 enterprises were nationalized and private property was turned into state property. New positions were created for military officials to manage the newly nationalized stores creating opportunities for individuals to become rich while leaving the national economy in ruins. Control was such a major concern for the BSPP government that even the flow of consumer goods was managed through 'People's Stores' (Seekins, 2011). It is important to note that in addition to these strategic maneuvers, both the Revolutionary Council and the BSPP enacted strict censorship laws (e.g., the Printers and Publishers Registration Law) making it nearly impossible for the civilian population to access any information outside of state controlled media. This only bolstered cultural isolation and assisted Ne Win in his quest to assert a homogenous national identity.

Under Ne Win's regime, the peripheral satellite towns established under the Caretaker Government grew significantly. Residents in these municipalities had little contact with government officials of any kind and were too preoccupied with survival to have any time or inclination to become politically active or engage in any anti-State activities (Seekins, 2011). By keeping citizens isolated from the rest of Rangoon's population, a lack of social solidarity developed, making it even less likely that the population would organize a coherent resistance to Ne Win's government. As Seekins (2011) explains:

Rangoon during the Ne Win era was hemmed in by thinly populated green spaces to the west, north and east, both inside and outside the formal city limits. The Caretaker Government had used the "new towns" ... as dumping grounds for squatters in 1959... Strategic "reshaping" of the city and its population was less ambitious during the intervening Ne Win years... But this did not mean that the army-state ignored the "peri-urban" region. Its limited development of these areas was focused primarily on meeting its own needs, narrowly defined, and those of its constituencies . . . rather than the general public. (p. 110)

These new towns were used to physically control the movement of those parts of the population the state deemed a nuisance or those who lived on land required for infrastructure and development projects beneficial only to upper-level members of the military-state. Furthermore, the towns were established in an attempt to paint Rangoon in a facade of modernity and economic and social advancement. Social mobilization schemes became a staple in Tatmadaw domination strategies.

A major influential aspect of Ne Win-era control mechanisms was the network of patron-client relations. This system was hierarchical and implied reciprocity, where both inferiors and superiors relied on each other for long-term survival and prosperity, as Seekins (2011) explains:

The state could not be completely self-sufficient: it needed to extract resources from society to continue in power. . . . Thus, while reserving the power to command in a frequently unpredictable and counterproductive manner (made more intense by Ne Win's erratic and bad-tempered personality traits), state power-holders also needed the support and cooperation of their inferiors, especially in the economic sphere, where socialist policies had proven ineffective despite repeated talk during the late 1970s and 1980s about market-oriented reform. (p. 103)

The behavior of Burma's socialist government had the hallmarks of the early stages of a scheme initiated to maintain power and supremacy. This is important to remember because it displays the two primary motivations of the Tatmadaw as an institution and of the high-ranking individuals within the Burmese military-state: (1) military longevity, and (2) sustained financial prosperity. These incentives have a long been the driving forces behind nearly all actions taken by Burma's top echelon and continue to be present today despite claims of democratic change.

Those in power rely on their subordinates in order to stay in power, so they partake in coercive measures to garner support. When that does not succeed, the military resorts to outright violence to forcibly control the social atmosphere within which the population functions. Just prior to the 2008 referendum and subsequent "democratic change," those in power in Burma realized that in order to ensure the survival of the military institution as well as personal prosperity and legal security, they needed to engage with the international community. To do this, it was necessary to present a facade of democracy and human rights reform. While outright military violence against civilians does not occur in Burma today, the same coercive and deceptive measures to control the population and the existence of the Tatmadaw are still being used nationwide.

Despite the fact that less than a decade after independence Burma began to adopt socialist tendencies, it preferred to maintain non-aligned partners. The conclusion can be

made that this is due to the fact that a powerful party backed by the military and longevity for that institution were the goals—and they remain so to this day. Not surprisingly, socialism was just one of the many tactics employed by the Tatmadaw to achieve their overall goals rather than disseminating an ideology to which those in power were actually committed.

### Post-1988 and the Burmese Veneer of Democracy

After the Four Eights rebellion, the rise of the SLORC and the SPDC ushered in a new era of military domination that was unique in its own right but continued to employ control tactics that were originally introduced by the Caretaker Government and Ne Win's regime. As Armao (2015) explains, the events during and immediately after the Four Eights protests launched Burma in an even more militaristic direction which ultimately allowed for the perpetual delay of true democratic reform.

Following the pacification of Rangoon after the Four Eights uprising, the new SLORC military regime immediately rejected the socialist ideology of BSPP and took control over political and social life. Although the new regime dismissed Ne Win's regime and doctrine as inadequate, Burma under direct Tatmadaw dominance still closely resembled the hierarchy of the Revolutionary Council after the 1962 coup, although even tighter controls were used through implementation of multiple administrative levels called Law and Order Restoration Councils ranging from division to township to individual wards (Seekins, 2011).

Due to the extreme violence used by the military during the popular uprising, and the ensuing international outrage, it was clear that the Tatmadaw had to do something to

make it appear as though Burma was on its way to democratization. Hence the 1990 general elections were planned. Although the elections themselves were viewed by the global community as being free and fair, the military-backed SLORC took multiple measures to prevent democracy from thriving and ensure its entrenchment in Burmese politics.

A focal point of the SLORC regime during its early years was a strategic redesign of Rangoon's cityscape, primarily moving the undesired segments of the population from the city center to its periphery and shutting down locations that were linked to earlier nationalist movements:

Regime-instigated evictions and forced relocations after 1988 included not only squatters and slum dwellers but also middle-class families. . . . Neighbourhoods where residents had sheltered or aided demonstrators seem to have been singled out for redevelopment, such as the area near the Myeinigone Market, site of the 21 June incident, where old dwellings were pulled down and replaced by shops and multi-storied apartment blocks. (Seekins, 2005, p. 265)

This is just one example of the ways in which the military-state implemented a redesign policy in order to effectively secure their control over nation. Ten new townships were developed along the periphery of the city in an attempt to confine those who were forcibly removed from the downtown area. It is critical to note that the civilians who were forced to relocate were not targeted due to their religion or ethnicity, but rather because the location in which they once lived was important for specific military-state projects.

This tactic did not originate with the SLORC but came from the Caretaker Government era when as many as 170,000 people were moved to the new towns of North Okkalapa, South Okkalapa and Thaketa (Bansal & Fox, 2016). The new townships

established under the SLORC disregard the livelihoods of the general public if it is beneficial to the military and government to do so. The new town of Shwepyithar, established in 1990, is another example of the relocation tactic continually used by the military-state to secure development or economic gains:

Shwepyithar . . . consisted of paddy land that was confiscated by the SLORC from farmers, who were then obliged to hand over kyats 1,500 to build new houses on land they had originally owned. At the same time poor city people were being forced to relocate to the area from downtown, as authorities determined that the land their houses stood on was needed for construction of new highways, buildings, and markets. (Seekins, 2005, p. 266)

Seekins goes on to explain that neither the farmers nor the urban poor were compensated in any form for their troubles in this “exercise in military-style eminent domain” (2005, p. 266). Many residents of Shwepyithar fell into debt after borrowing from lenders with extremely high interest rates. Furthermore, the remoteness of these peripheral townships required extensive public transportation to reach their jobs or even to work in the city center.

It should also be noted that while the new towns were essentially dumping grounds for those the military-state deemed undesirable or those it needed to physically move for the sake of development objectives, they were also home to so-called VIP Wards — areas designated for military and government officials as well as some civil servants (Seekins, 2011). This supports the theory that the primary concern of Burma’s top officials revolved around maintaining Tatmadaw longevity and the personal ambitions of the nation’s most powerful individuals. Under the guise of social welfare, the military-state was able to clear regions for economic and infrastructure development

needed to secure Burma's national sovereignty and the financial welfare of the Tatmadaw elite.

Strategic population reconfiguration was not the only tactic used by the military-state during the post-1988 era. As part of the campaign to redesign the capital city, the Yangon City Development Law was enacted in May of 1990 formally establishing the Yangon City Development Committee (YCDC) (Kraas, Gaese & Kyi, 2006). The YCDC was given full autonomy over city planning and maintenance to carry out the responsibilities originally given to its predecessor, the Rangoon City Development Committee, under the Rangoon Municipal Act:

Additional powers vested in the Committee by virtue of Yangon City Development Law authorize territorial limits of the city, to operate city development works independently with its own funds, to assess and levy its own taxes, to utilize the funds currency derived from the lease of its own lands and premises for development works and to take loans and grants from the Government or from foreign organizations on its own responsibility. (Khin Maung Phu, n.d.)

The YCDC was used as a legitimizing force for the SLORC/SPDC regime in that it had the ability to undertake international joint ventures as well as development and infrastructure projects throughout the capital city. Most of these endeavors greatly benefited individual top-tier members of the military-government at the expense of the civilian population, as they aided in securing the longevity of the SLORC/SPDC on an institutional level.

While securing financial endurance was critical concern for the SLORC/SPDC regime, popular support was essential to its survival. To obtain this, the military-government established the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) under the guise of a social welfare body. Founded in 1993 under the SLORC government

with active support from the military, the USDA was a network of branches operating at the division, district, township, and ward levels—an administrative scheme that was closely mirrored in the years to come during the SPDC era with individual Peace and Development Councils. As M. Skidmore (2004) explained, the USDA was one of numerous Government Organized Non-Governmental Organizations (GONGOs) established as a mechanism of micro-control (Skidmore, 2004).

GONGOs have played a crucial role in the Tatmadaw's formula for control and power maintenance. As Skidmore (2004) illustrated in *Karaoke Fascism*, GONGOs such as the USDA and other military and government-controlled organizations provide a rapid way to mobilize the Burmese populace in a strategic fashion:

This serves the dual function of promoting the myth of absolute State power and establishing control of urban space by controlling the movement of individuals through this reconfigured landscape of domination. (p. 117)

Controlling the urban space in Burma is crucial in terms of prolonging the power of the military enterprise. Nearly all of the successful popular uprisings that occurred throughout Burma's modern history took place in urban locations, primarily Rangoon. Reshaping the Burmese citizens' existence in a way that prevents popular uprisings through passive participation in their own oppression—as a conscious strategy of survival—the military-state thereby eliminates the possibility of active popular solidarity and organization.

An example of this as a result of the Tatmadaw's use of GONGOs can be seen in mid-1990s socialist-style mass rallies. As Skidmore (2004) explains, these ceremonies of forced participation consisted of public assembly and movement in strategic formations particularly in the urban centers. This compulsory engagement in spectacles of State

power was accompanied by xenophobic messages from the military and political elite calling on the general public to “commit violence against foreign ‘interferers’ and Burmese who support them” (p. 116). Long before the official transition to democracy and the shifting of the appearance of Tatmadaw power, seeds were sown to draw public participation in active maintenance of the status quo in terms of the dominance and economic prowess of the military and political elite.

GONGOs and other military and government-controlled operations played an important role in controlling the direction in which public solidarity was experienced and acted upon. Skidmore (2004) elaborates:

From the period of resistance to British colonization, through the period of resistance to Japanese fascism, and onward through more than four [at the time of writing] decades of military dictatorship, a collective historical memory of resistance has been formed and articulated by urban and educated opposition groups. (p. 61)

Underlying each period of resistance is the fact that it was directed toward the central power apparatus. To the Burmese populace, there is an inherent relationship between the government and/or military and resistance sentiments. This dichotomy created a critical point for the Tatmadaw in terms of preventing threats to its power from being actualized. To do this, the military has strategically rewritten Burmese history through publications of new history books, opening of museums dedicated to the glory of Burmese kings and the military, and public commemoration and celebration of ancient kings and military generals. In re-creating public perceptions of Burmese history, the military is able to disrupt the solidarity of those who have shared experiences of resistance.

Public USDA membership was based on pragmatism rather than actual ideological beliefs, as it was necessary in order to secure favors for business reasons (Seekins, 2011). Special privileges were also given to members of the USDA, “such as free courses for members in subjects like computer science or foreign languages” (Seekins, 2011, p. 158). In reality, the association was a coercive apparatus used to incite negative sentiment toward Aung San Suu Kyi and the democracy movement she was spearheading at the time. The USDA was also able to gain closer access to the minds of the public, as Seekins (2011) explains:

The association distribute[d] money for local development projects such as provision of running water to city neighborhoods or the installation of telephones; one observer compares it to Japan’s Liberal Democratic Party, which stayed in power over five decades through pork-barrel politics. He reports that it [the USDA] is very effective in ‘penetrating civil society,’ controlling most ward-level Peace and Development Councils and paying their members. This places the group in an ideal position to form political parties and participate in the general election. . . under the new, military backed constitution. (p. 158)

Although the role of the USDA has shifted with regard to its relationship with the military, namely, its reconfiguration into the Union Solidarity and Development Party, it remained a patronage device which directly benefited the top echelon of the state for decades to come.

The intelligence apparatus of the SLORC government played a crucial role in further tightening controls on the civilian population as well as Burma’s international profile. As mentioned by V. Boudreau (2004), at the time of the Four Eights rebellion, the SLORC quickly undertook a campaign of propaganda in an attempt to prevent further civil unrest from breaking out. Intelligence head Khin Nyunt gave multiple press conferences presenting the SLORC and the pacification of the Four Eights in a favorable

light in order to garner legitimacy and public support. Khin Nyunt proved to be one of the most prominent Tatmadaw leaders during the SLORC and SPDC eras, as Seekins (2011) explains:

He was also the face of “new” Burma (“Myanmar”), and the “new” Rangoon, carefully cultivating the image of a reformer and internationalist and playing a principle role in interactions with friendly foreign governments, businessmen, ethnic armed groups that signed cease-fires with the SLORC and (generally pro-regime) scholars who came to Rangoon for government-sponsored academic conferences. (p. 157)

The new regime strategically constructed a preferred image in the eyes of the international community and the Burmese public. Despite the country’s history of isolationism up to this point, it was important to top-ranking Tatmadaw and government officials to maintain an identity compatible with international norms.

Khin Nyunt’s critical role in the military-state’s plan to maintain control of social, economic, and political sectors did not end with the intelligence apparatus or the new image of Burma that he helped to create. In an attempt reshape Burma’s physical spaces in a way that was conducive to state control and economic profitability, Khin Nyunt introduced his infrastructure program in the late 1990s. Part of this scheme entailed funding the restoration of the famed Shwedagon Pagoda in the heart of downtown Rangoon. However, this push for modernization proved to be a challenge for the military’s cohesion. The military intelligence apparatus Khin Nyunt headed became heavily involved in business activities that contradicted the interests of general Tatmadaw forces. As Khin Nyunt began to gain power due to his involvement in negotiating ceasefire agreements, and with the international community, it became clear to leading SLORC generals that he posed a threat to their individual power. As a result, by September 2004 Khin Nyunt was purged from the regime bureaucracy and MI was

dissolved (Bunte, 2017). This is an example of the ways in which the Tatmadaw regimes simply deleted individuals as well as facets of the government in order to maintain their hold. Furthermore the purging of Khin Nyunt demonstrates the immense power of the Tatmadaw, enabling it to simply erase aspects of Burmese political life that were not conducive to its overarching goals without any serious public scrutiny or recourse.

The early-to-mid 1990s also saw tensions between the Tatmadaw in Rangoon and regional commanders who held the autonomy to execute their own administrative affairs and military activities;

The power of these “warlords” was subsequently “re-centralized” by requiring regional commanders to serve as members of the junta and by regularly assigning regional commanders to positions in the War Office and the cabinet in Rangoon. (Bunte, 2017, p. 20)

In carrying out these strategic exercises, the military was able to once again merge its control by gaining the cooperation of regional political and military figureheads (in some instances against their will). This gave the Tatmadaw top echelon an entrance into Burma’s ethnic regions, ultimately easing their push to near total control over every one of the nation’s territories.

Much like the Caretaker Government, the SLORC/SPDC regime also took part in active reconfiguring the social and cultural life of the civilian population as a way to ensure its own survival and economic ambitions. The opening of Dagon University is a prime example of the State’s fascination with dictating the social livelihoods of those it governs. Established in 1993, Dagon University catered to students who attended Rangoon (Yangon) University in the central part of the city. This was a systematic scheme by the ruling junta to disperse students, effectively cutting them off from one another and away from the main population of central Rangoon, driven by the paranoia

that another wave of student-led popular uprisings would occur and threaten the military-state apparatus. Other civilian institutions were relocated to remote areas, all of which provided minimal public transportation for attendees or opportunities to associate with downtown Rangoon residents, and it had explosive consequences in 1988 (Seekins, 2005). The remoteness of these campuses and the difficult commutes to and from the center of the city not only cut student access to the residents of Rangoon, but it also undermined a sense of unity among students thereby ensuring that no genuine student solidarity or organizing could develop, thereby diminishing threats of another rebellion. Much like the forced relocations to outskirt townships, the state realized that an isolated and disorganized population is much less likely to organize a comprehensive threat (Seekins, 2011).

The military's use of Aung San and his legacy is also of critical importance when examining control mechanisms. When Ne Win first began his campaign to gain support and legitimacy he was eager to align himself with Aung San, claiming that he and the Tatmadaw were the rightful successors to the late figurehead. Aung San was designated the original father of Burmese Socialism and hailed as a national hero. Following the Four Eights uprising, it became clear that socialism was not sustainable in Burma and the ruling elite needed a new way to justify its perpetuity. The state began a campaign of "Aung San amnesia" (Houtman, 1999) in an attempt to broaden public acceptance of Tatmadaw political supremacy. As Houtman explains, the Tatmadaw had to reinvent a political ideology that would better substantiate its cardinal role in Burmese politics (pp. 15-17).

Preventing unrest also meant protecting the armed forces and government from the wrath of a resentful population. By 2005 the military-state decided to shift the country's capital from Rangoon to Naypyidaw. Although that move should have symbolized completion of the state building process, in reality it augmented the *illusion* that Burma had achieved a national identity, thereby serving the interests of the Tatmadaw generals (Armao, 2015). The relocation of the capital was accompanied by the renaming of many locations within the country. Although not a new occurrence at this point in Burma's history, the campaign held significance in the social implementation of control. It reasserted military power over the country on a national level (as did the renaming of the country to Myanmar in the early 1990s), as well its authority over the minutiae of every day life in forcing the language of ethnic groups to change in order to fit the preference of the majority (Houtman, 1999).

### Legal and Economic Control Tactics

A major issue facing the Tatmadaw earlier and today is maintaining economic and legislative control. By keeping an iron fist around these two key aspects of society, the military is essentially given *carte blanche* in all of its operations, functions—and related corruption. As an institution, the military has a long history of dominating both the public and private sectors of Burma's economy as well as major dealings in the black market trade of drugs, timber, and blood rubies. It has been speculated that 50% of the nation's GDP came from illicit dealings, with money laundered through the state-run conglomerate, Myanmar Oil and Gas Company (Kar & Spanjers, 2015). The state's involvement in Burma's various illicit economic dealings further tightened its grip on

ethnic communities and their reliance on the regime for economic and social survival. To further solidify the authority of the generals, legislative maneuvers have been strategically implemented in order to ensure military command of the constitutional process as well as the ability to legally justify its enormous presence in all state functions.

Colonial economic policies created conditions for a plural society (Furnival, 1952) in which Burma's numerous ethnic groups remained isolated from one another except in the marketplace economy dominated by the colonial powers. This caused anger among the Burmese population and sparked nationalism, establishing a foundation on which the Tatmadaw could maintain its chokehold on both the private and public sectors of the economy by ensuring that private industry could be manipulated via public industry. Clear evidence of the use of strategic control tactics can be seen throughout the Ne Win and BSPP era (1952-1988) of Burma's post-independence history.

Superstition dominated Ne Win's approach to governance and economics. As mentioned earlier, In 1987 the BSPP to order the demonetization of most kyat notes, leaving many Burmese citizens bankrupt having lost all of their life savings. These were replaced by the 45 and 90 kyat notes, both of which were divisible by Ne Win's favorite number, 9. The introduction of new kyat notes accompanied the removal of Aung San's image from Burmese currency in an effort to further downplay his role in nation building.

At the same time the monetary restructuring occurred, the military-state began to realize that socialism would not continue to benefit the Tatmadaw and the Burmese elite—they had garnered all the spoils they could from this mode of production. As a result, the military began distancing itself from Aung San, whom it previously had portrayed as

the father of Burmese socialism (Houtman, 1999). Furthermore, the military decided that more money could be made in a free market economy (Lintner, 2009).

The Burmese economy, referred to as the Burmese Way to Capitalism, at its conception and in its present-day form, is a military-dominated economy. Following the collapse of socialist and communist states worldwide at the end of the Cold War, a socialist economy was no longer a viable option for the Burmese military, particularly from a global standpoint. Instead, it turned to what was termed a “disciplined democracy” with a capitalist economic design in order to maximize its prominence in Burmese society. In reality, Ne Win and the BSPP had a covert aim to centralize the economy so the Tatmadaw could exercise control either directly or indirectly through military-affiliated businesses (Houtman, 1999).

At this time it also became clear that isolationism was less advantageous than previously established. Under the SLORC regime (late 1980s and early 1990s), China had been Burma’s sole international business and economic partner. In the years leading up to Burma’s so-called “transition,” the military-state became acutely aware of the disadvantages of relying on a single source of trade and foreign direct investment. Like the SLORC regime’s abandonment of socialism for capitalism, the SPDC began to step further away from isolationism in order to reap the benefits of an open domestic market that participated in the global economy.

The centralized Burmese state created more personal autonomy and greater economic advantages, but the distribution of those opportunities was far from uniform given the 20 years of international economic sanctions as well as mismanagement by the central government. Military holding companies—crucial actors economically and

important devices for preserving Tatmadaw power—were suffering financially, further pushing the Tatmadaw to change the way institutions operated as well as its image in order to sustain economic longevity (Felbab-Brown, 2017). Military figureheads and top tier government officials “increasingly came to believe that its power interests could be better served by stable, parliament-approved budgets in the context of a growing and liberalized economy (p. 12).

With political and economic repression as the status quo for more than five decades, it became increasingly onerous domestically and more visible to the international community. The military used Burma’s parliamentary process to gain legitimacy domestically and internationally while at the same time locking in its political prowess and economic stronghold. Despite the facade of democracy, any instance in which political forces threatened the Tatmadaw’s monopoly of control, it established laws to ensure its perpetuity in the hands of presiding top echelon military generals or designated successors (Felbab-Brown, 2017; Skidmore, 2003).

### Key Sources of Economic Impact

In order to fully understand the Tatmadaw’s involvement in the Burmese economy it is essential to examine the key sources of economic impact in the country. The Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (UMEHL, MEHL or UMEH) is a conglomerate that is woven into the country’s political architecture. Among others, it controls the jade and gemstone mining sector and the timber industry, each of which provides further sources of revenue to the military-state. I discuss each of these sectors below.

## Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited

Established under the 1990 Special Companies Act, the UMEHL's primary function is managing the economic wing of the Tatmadaw, and fostering profit from commercial trade and small industry (Thein, 2004). It is important to note that when the United States suspended sanctions in 2012 following the democratic by-elections, penalties remained in place against the UMEHL due to its close affiliation with the Tatmadaw (Brady, 2012).

A crucial aspect of the military link is the UMEHL's management of the Myawaddy Bank and the Tatmadaw's pension reserve (Zin, 2003). The UMEHL oversees a variety of businesses and corporations that provide the military with ways to maintain monetary sustainability and the funding needed for various operations. As author J. Emont (2019) explains:

Military-controlled conglomerates spanning industries from gem mining to telecommunications bring in revenue for the army and give it operational independence from civilian oversight. to conduct military operations without any regard for consequences. . . . The business activities of the Tatmadaw enabled and enhanced the capability of the Tatmadaw. (p. 2)

Emont goes on to discuss speculations that profit from UMEHL and its subsidiaries are now used to purchase weapons and fund clearing operations in Rakhine State. Although these suppositions have been disputed by those working within UMEHL, they highlight the ease with which the Tatmadaw can access both the public and private sectors of the economy if it is deemed necessary for maintaining the financial growth of the both military-institution and the top-tier generals and government officials who dictate its behavior.

The UMEHL controls or oversees all vital foreign and domestic economic activity and most of the revenue generated through it or its subsidiaries goes directly to high-ranking generals rather than government ministries (Lintner, 2009). In requiring that foreign businesses establish a working relationship with UMEHL, it is able to maintain awareness of and monitor what international players are doing with regard to the economy.

Overseeing legitimate business interests is not the only task of the enterprise. It is speculated that the economic conglomerate is intertwined with more illicit business dealings, even going as far as black market trading both domestically and internationally. According to a WikiLeaks' report, companies involved in the manufacturing sector have been known to pay bribes to UMEHL in order to secure contracts and licenses. As the report explains; "Having a relationship with MEHL, even if it's not an official joint venture, is essential if a company wants to make a profit" (Carl-Yoder, 2018). Further conjecture holds that UMEHL is a partner with the Chinese business Wanbao in Burma's largest copper mine complex, a company that has long-standing allegations of violence against civilians by security forces as well as land rights abuses (Peel, 2017). UMEHL has a long history of human rights violations and interactions with the black market economy.

#### The Jade and Gemstone Mining Industry

According to a confidential report, UMEHL controls production in Burma's gem and jade mines, and any private domestic company interested in extraction must establish a joint venture with UMEHL in order to obtain the permits required to mine:

The regime strictly controls Burma's jade and gem sector. State-owned enterprises, including Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd. (MEHL) and Myanmar Gems Enterprise, control the production of Burma's gem and jade mines and the sale of any extracted products. (Carl-Yoder, 2008)

Not only does this enable the military and state officials to monitor the activities of various businesses in the private sector, it also establishes a means by which officials can control who has access to certain geographical locations in the country and who is able to participate in specific aspects of the economy. This is crucial when controlling industries like the jade and gem trade—both of which are linked to gross human rights abuses, as keeping a close watch on who is involved allows the military to protect itself from international scrutiny and domestic outcry. Burma's jade and gem mines have a long-standing record of deaths related to inhumane conditions and inadequate attention to the health and safety of workers. Moreover, a *Time* magazine article entitled “Battling for Blood Jade” by Hannah Beech (2019) explains that the jade industry exemplifies the limits of democracy in Burma:

Most stones are smuggled over the border to neighboring China; only a fraction are subject to the tax needed to fill government coffers in one of Asia's poorest countries. The scale of graft and unaccountability is such that Global Witness calls Myanmar's jade economy the “biggest natural-resource heist in modern history.”

Considering UMEHL's business connection to China's state-owned Wanbao, it is not surprising that over 95% of Burma jade is exported to China or Hong Kong. Burmese government pressure on local mines to drive up production to meet China's demands further reflects the close economic ties between UMEHL and high-ranking government and Tatmadaw officials (Carl-Yoder, 2008). Many of Burma's gemstone mines are in Kachin State in the northernmost part of the country. By maintaining control of the

mines, the military also safeguards against rebel attacks by armed ethnic groups such as the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO).

Beech explains that Burma's precious gems have escaped the international scrutiny that African blood diamonds receive (Beech, 2019), largely because of the secrecy surrounding UMEHL and its business dealings in the region. Like most of the military-controlled businesses and enterprises in Burma, UMEHL operates extremely carefully in a fashion that mirrors the paranoia of the top generals. As history has displayed, this paranoia has allowed the generals to maintain total control over the entire country for more than five decades, and installing the operations of UMEHL only extends that domineering presence despite the transition back to a civilian government. The UMEHL's success in maintaining control over the activities of the gemstone trade and operations in those geographical regions is also due in part due to the difficulty of enforcing international sanctions from the EU and the US. Because it is almost impossible to differentiate with the naked eye between Burmese jade and stones from other regions, exporting companies are able to simply alter the country of origin paperwork to escape detection (Carl-Yoder, 2008). In addition, the WikiLeaks document posits that many gems are sent to China via illegal border trade or are sold in local markets in order to profit from lower and medium quality stones (Carl-Yoder, 2008). By selling directly to local markets, the UMEHL further entrenches itself in the every-day lives of Burmese citizens, creating added dependence on government and the Tatmadaw.

## Oil and Gas Exports

With the jade economy booming, control of it became a strategic priority for the military. As a result, UMEHL and other conglomerates linked to the military were given special access to Burma's various economies, including the jade mines, and were accorded monopolies in various consumer industries, in particular, the export of oil and gas. Keeping Burma's major profit-producing economies in the hands of enterprises with direct links to the military guaranteed that yields would go directly to the generals or the military.

A clear example of this is the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE). Established in 1963, MOGE is the sole operator of exploration and production of oil and gas as well as domestic gas transmission (Total SA, December 2003).

## The Timber Sector

Another example of the military's creative methods for controlling and monitoring the national economy is seen in the timber sector. The value of timber extraction grew rapidly in the late 1990s and early 2000s causing the military to renegotiate existing ceasefire agreements in order to support its own economic interests in extractive economies. Because these various extraction economies are important, control of land became a crucial aspect of also controlling those economies. As Felbab-Brown (2017) explains, the military on a large scale and even some individual Tatmadaw commanders engaged in major land grabbing efforts in order to accelerate various economic activities. These land grabs (including clearance operations in Rakhine State as

discussed below) generated personal and institutional revenue as well as providing strategic advantages. Tatmadaw and its linked companies and enterprises

occupied large tracts of land, particularly those close to roads from which extraction and transportation were more efficient but which were also strategically important for military movements. . . . Often, however, the military units occupied far more land than they officially required for their airfields or military bases, often multiple times that amount. They compensated local people from whom they seized the land poorly and sometimes not at all, selling extra land to other Myanmar businesses or Chinese companies. (Felbab-Brown, 2017, p. 11)

By maintaining such a strong physical presence, the military kept pressure on the ethnic populations to comply with military demands and suppress rebellion. Furthermore, remaining in the region also allowed the Tatmadaw to continue closely monitoring operations to ensure it would reap the benefits of various resource economies in the region. The fact that the Tatmadaw also sold land to other state-owned and military-linked companies further supports the argument that the top concerns of military and top generals has always been their economic success and longevity.

Furthermore, despite the 2016 NLD government, illegal logging and trading continued to undermine the intent of new government reform policies and decreased economic incentives for peace agreements in the region (Felbab-Brown, 2017). This could not have happened without the explicit consent of military units in the area. Individual military commanders benefited directly by allowing the collection of taxes in exchange for allowing loggers and traders to continue their activities unabated. After growing international criticism regarding the destruction of Burma's forests, Burma and China struck a new trade deal that

banned export of unprocessed logs from Burma, unless through Yangon and under the auspices of the state-run MTE... The Myanmar government also imposed an additional timber export ban... These policies also

undercut economic profits for the Kachin ethno-nationalists and their businesses, thus reducing their economic incentives for peace in a context they considered economically disadvantageous. (Felbab-Brown, 2017, p.13)

It is evident that the Tatmadaw engages in constant shifting of economic and political agreements with Burma's ethnic organizations any time it becomes unhappy with the existing situation or sees an opportunity to benefit from both legal and illicit economies. Under the existing circumstances, there is no balance of power between the military and the civilian government or ethnic groups; rather, the military continues to hold most of the power (formal and informal), and limits the scope of democratic transition. The military strategically implements economic policies to increase the feelings of vulnerability among the general population, making it easier for the Tatmadaw to control Burmese society unhindered by any significant popular resistance (Skidmore, 2003).

In an environment that lacks any public faith in security institutions, where fear of violence penetrates all facets of everyday life, a common response is silence, making it impossible for the population to organize against the regime. Furthermore, as Skidmore (2003) states:

Fear is intimately associated with time. As a response to a future possibility, it is inherently temporal. In generating fear, the military confuses, distorts, and controls time with the aim of stopping Burmese people from imagining futures other than one mandating their incorporation into a totalitarian state. (p. 10)

A population that cannot envision change will not organize to induce it. In keeping civilians bogged down by fear, the Tatmadaw solidified its dominance with ease. Everything the military does has a strategic role in its overall durability as a dominant figure in Burmese politics and economics.

## Chapter III

### Strategic Constitutional Maneuvers

The Tatmadaw's lock on constitutional power means that any reforms or actions attempted against the various sectors and industries discussed above, which would not directly benefit the military or the commanders, can easily be subverted or vetoed. As part of what Felbab-Brown (2017) called the Tatmadaw's "golden parachute" (p. 5), a formal budget with extremely restricted transparency still surrounds the military and its officers.

Legal power tactics have a history beginning with pre-independence Burma still under colonial rule. The Government of Burma Act, implemented in 1935, is best known as the official motion designating Burma as a colony of the Royal Empire rather than an annex of British India. In the context of power maneuvers, the Government of Burma Act allowed Burmese politicians for the first time to take part in managing the country. This laid the foundation for future governmental (mis-)management at the hands of the Tatmadaw and various dictatorial regimes.

This foundation was further expanded under Japanese occupation in the early 1940s. A promise of independence was made by Japanese commanders, and indeed, by August 1943 Japan had declared Burma a fully sovereign nation. However, during this time the Tatmadaw was in its infancy and still under the direction of General Aung San. It quickly became apparent that the Japanese rulers had no intention of granting Burma actual independence and autonomy.

The Burma Independence Army (BIA) (later called the Tatmadaw) began negotiations with Allied forces, and worked alongside British forces to expel the Japanese army. Ultimately that cooperation with British forces led Burma to gain official independence. The military's crucial role in securing Burma's sovereignty not only increased distrust of foreign powers but also further substantiated the military's argument that it is the sole savior of the nation.

Following the end of World War II and the commencement of decolonization, the central Burmese government represented by General Aung San, and the formerly named Frontier Areas of Shan, Kachin and Chin signed the Panglong Agreement. Signed on the eve of Burma's independence, the agreement stated that "Freedom will be more speedily achieved by the Shans, the Kachins and the Chin by their immediate cooperation with the Interim Burmese Government." This was the key aspect of the Panglong Agreement in that it set the precedent for full control by central government and future military regimes. The Panglong Agreement also laid the groundwork for implementation of the Constitution of 1947, which officially established the federal structure of governance. Significantly, the 1947 Constitution granted the right of succession to designated "special division states" after a period of ten years (Human Rights Watch, n.d.). Future military regimes abandoned this right, instead creating the social and political circumstances conducive to warfare between ethnic armed organizations and the central military-dominated government. The fact that this aspect of the Panglong Agreement was essentially ignored highlights the military-state's acute awareness of potential threats to its overall power as well as its obsession with maintaining absolute control.

Despite the fact that the 1947 constitution established a democratic form of governance, the Tatmadaw accepted civilian supremacy giving it the platform to continue gradually expanding its political influence (Bunte, 2017). Bunte continues:

The outbreak of ethnic and communist rebellions after the departure of the British triggered the institutional modernization of the armed forces, which did not keep pace with the civilian government capacities of the nation state. (p. 13)

By prioritizing the modernization of only the military, the Tatmadaw gave itself a significant leg up on the rest of the institutions of government in Burma. As a result, the Tatmadaw quickly increased its influence in all facets of Burmese society while preventing any real hope of civilian intervention. Since the Tatmadaw assumed such a prominent role, by the 1950s it had controlled much of the nation's administrative and civilian functions and was able to secure a significant portion of the national budget, claiming it was necessary for internal security—a claim that was legitimized by the earlier ethnic and communist rebellions.

Despite the clear dominance of the Tatmadaw, Burma remained under a federal structure and parliamentary democracy until Ne Win and the Revolutionary Council (RC) constructed and implemented the 1974 Socialist constitution. This resulted in the official power transfer from the RC to the BSPP. In reality this shift between dominating parties was merely a reorganization of bureaucratic positions within the existing government, once again displaying the military-state's paranoia regarding its power position. Moreover the new constitution demarcated seven minority states and seven principally Burman divisions (Human Rights Watch, n.d.). The Burmese Way to Socialism was introduced under the 1974 constitution as the official state ideology and as a blueprint for

economic development, reducing international influence and solidifying the military's role in Burma's political and economic spheres (Holmes, 1967).

Although Tatmadaw leaders realized in the 1980s that they stood to gain more by engaging in a free market economy, it remained constant through the 1990s and early 2000s. It was not until 2003 that the SPDC announced the Roadmap to Democracy which, according to Bunte (2017),

codified the military's leading role in the participation of the state... The drafting of the new constitution was finalized in February 2008, and in May 2008 it was formally approved in a nationwide referendum. The referendum was apparently manipulated, since the official results of 94.4 per cent in favor with a voter turnout of 98 per cent lacked any credibility. (p. 16)

According to this new legal ideology, Burma was on the road to a "disciplined democracy," implying that the Tatmadaw would eventually step back from holding exclusive power following the conclusion of a seven-phase democratization process. The announcement of the Roadmap also included talk of reconvening the National Convention to draft a new constitution and then to hold elections to reconvene parliamentary sessions.

In 2008 the new (less-than-democratic) constitution was officially implemented. The last step in the Roadmap to Democracy, the new canon retained significant control for the Tatmadaw, especially with regard to parliament and the central government's various ministries (Fisher, 2016). According to the constitution, the military holds one-quarter of the seats in parliament, thereby giving it veto power over any law proposed by the NLD or any other participating parties. Furthermore, in order to change the constitution, the NLD and Suu Kyi must obtain more than 75% of seats in both houses of parliament (Robertson, 2015). This guarantees that unless the military agrees to

something different, it will still retain power and control over political, legal, and economic aspects regardless of maneuvers attempted by the NLD. Furthermore, other mechanisms were put in place to further entrench military dominance and guarantee Tatmadaw control of governmental processes:

They [Tatmadaw] added other constitutional assurances, including creating a coup mechanism in waiting that empowers the military-dominated National Defense and Security Council to seize power if it unilaterally declares a “state of emergency. (Robertson, 2015, para. 7)

As it has done in the past, the military made sure that if at any time opposition force gained too much power or public support, the military could legally and easily reclaim total control. Robertson (2015) explains that the constitution also stipulates that legislative scrutiny of the Tatmadaw budget is forbidden and that only active military officials can act as head of the government’s most powerful ministries, which are: Home Affairs, Border Affairs, and Defense. By maintaining sole discretionary power over these three critical governmental junctions, the military maintains a veneer of democratic reform while still guaranteeing that all of its crucial operations continue unrestrained. With regard to legal extraction trades and the illicit black market economy, the constitution preserved individual Tatmadaw commanders’ privileged access, guaranteeing that any transition impacting economic relations would occur at the direction of the military (Felbab-Brown, 2017). The military crafted an image of Burma as a newly democratic country but in fact the central government remained tied to an entirely undemocratic constitution.

A note should be made here regarding the military’s strategic constitutional entrenchment of power. According to Bunte, there are four key attributes of a democracy:

Free, fair, and competitive elections, full adult suffrage, broad protection of civil liberties (freedom of speech, press and association) and the absence of non-elected “tutelary authorities” that limit governing the power of elected officials. (Bunte, 2017, pp. 6-7)

By labeling Burma’s new mode of government a “disciplined democracy,” the military is able to subvert these primary requirements of democracy whenever it is deemed necessary to perpetuate its control. The military maintains an illusion of democracy for the benefit of the international community while continuing to heavily influence how the government operates.

Bunte (2017) explains that in order for a democracy to be authentic, civilian control of the armed forces is required. As long as the Tatmadaw continues to prevent the full liberalization of the government, a flourishing democracy will not be realized in Burma, and the status quo will continue to be dominated by the military.

## Chapter IV

### Citizenship Laws and the Illusion of a Collective National Identity

The embedding of military dominance into Burma's constitutional process is not the only legal maneuver taken by the Tatmadaw to ensure its perpetuity. Crucial to the continuity of military control is the illusion of a national Burmese identity, and the idea that the Tatmadaw is the only institution capable of developing and defending it.

Legally, Burma's citizenship laws provide a window into the mindset of the military. Throughout the colonial period, Burma operated as a plural society, and various ethnicities crossed paths only in the marketplace. Other than that, the sectors of society lived entirely separate lives (Furnivall, 1952). In 1922, Burma was granted a semi-elected parliament while still maintaining the power to make crucial decisions. This created an environment conducive to the cultivation of revolutionary sentiment, particularly among the younger generation. Further incentives for young nationalists came when the British began categorizing Burma's various "native" people:

The British had divided the "natives" of Burma into "martial" and "non-martial." The Burmese were classified as "non-martial." This rankled the young nationalists who imagined a Burma restored to its past glory, free of colonial rule, with a new and proud army. (Myint-U, 2019, pp. 27-28)

To this generation of nationalist young adults, past glory meant the days when Burma was dominated and administered entirely by Burman kings, a past where those ethnic groups privileged under British rule were subject to each king's unhindered political and economic preeminence.

The Great Depression had a significant impact on the Burmese nationalist movement. The economic catastrophe left many poor Burmese unable to pay taxes or repay loans they had taken from foreign money lenders (overwhelmingly Chettiars from India). Consequently, bankers seized millions of acres of land in lieu of monetary repayment. Tensions rose as a result, eventually erupting in violent anti-Indian protests in Rangoon in the early 1930s. This created tremendous incentive for young nationalists—including Aung San—to form the first mass nationalist organization: *Dobama Asi-ayone* (We Burman Association):

They consciously used the more colloquial ethnonym *Bama*, or “Burman,” to emphasize a folk identity. . . . They called themselves *Thakin*, or “master,” a style formerly reserved for the British. All drew from a popular well of antagonism toward both big business and immigrants. Their protest song, the basis of today’s national anthem, includes the refrain “*da do-mye, da do-pye*”: “this is our land, this is our country.” Meaning, it’s not yours. (Myint-U, 2019, p. 29)

Almost two decades prior to independence, the idea of a national identity was used to reach political goals. Aung San’s prominent role in both the nationalist movement and as founding father of the Tatmadaw, opened opportunities for future authoritarian rulers to continue using the concept of a Burman nation to garner support from the majority ethnic group as well as legitimize and justify their continued rule.

During World War II, the idea of a Burmese identity began to take root with the nationalist independence movement initially led by Aung San and the BIA. As previously mentioned, the 1937 partition of India separated Burma on the basis of racial identity and designated it as its own colony (Myint-U, 2019). During the war, in the midst of back-and-forth fighting with Britain and Japan, Aung San and other Burmese figureheads formed the Anti-Fascist Organization (later renamed the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom

League). This political coalition garnered massive public support and served as the foundation for the modern-day nationalist movement (Aung-Thwin, 2019).

After the conclusion of World War II and the decision by Britain to decolonize its colonial empire, General Aung San and a group of Burmese politicians and military figureheads traveled to London to determine the future of Burma as an independent nation. As a result of their discussions, the Aung San-Atlee Agreement was written and signed in January 1947 (Aung San-Atlee Agreement, 1947). The arrangement stipulated that general elections to establish a parliamentary democracy in Burma, elections would

take place in April for the general non-communal, the Karen, and the Anglo-Burman constituencies as constituted under the Act of 1935, and for each constituency two members shall be returned. Any Burma nationals (as defined in Annex A) registered in a general constituency other than one of those mentioned above shall be placed on the register of a general non-communal constituency (Aung San-Atlee Agreement, 1947)

Annex A of the Agreement defines a Burma national as a means to determine voting or candidacy eligibility. According to Annex A, to be considered a national, an individual had to be a British subject or the subject of an Indian State who was born within Burma's borders and "reside there for a total period not less than eight years immediately preceding either 1 January 1942 or 1 January 1927" (Aung San-Atlee Agreement, 1947). Nationality and citizenship as stipulated in the Agreement is important because it sets the groundwork for future manipulation by the Tatmadaw. At Burma's inception as an independent nation, ethnicity and citizenship were intimately linked together and used to achieve an outcome desired by the most powerful and influential politicians of the country. This provided the legal background upon which the Tatmadaw built its framework of maneuvers for maintaining control over the composition and functioning of the Burmese population.

In 1948, shortly after independence, the Union Citizenship Act was passed (and amended a decade later under Ne Win's Caretaker Government) in conjunction with the 1947 Constitution of Burma. This new legal measurement provided further instruction on the definition of a citizen: "There shall be but only one citizenship throughout the Union; that is to say, there shall be no citizenship of the unit as distinct from the citizenship of the Union" (Constitution, 1947, Ch. 2, Sec. 10). This definition consolidated the population of Burma in a way that placed it permanently under the jurisdiction of the central government—and thus ultimately the military. Since then the Tatmadaw have continued to use this legal stipulation to prevent unification of individual ethnic groups around political or economic causes not in line with military goals. Furthermore, this has also been used to thwart efforts of ethnic states to secede from the Union of Burma — a right designated to them by Panglong Agreement of 1947.

The 1947 constitution lays out further stipulations regarding means of control to those in authority. According to the constitution:

Citizens . . . are persons who belong to an "indigenous race," have a grandparent from an "indigenous race," are children of citizens, or lived in British Burma prior to 1942. Under this law, citizens are required to obtain a National Registration Card (NRC), while non-citizens are given Foreign Registration Certificates (FRC). (Ullah, 2017, para. 7)

Despite the fact that the 1947 constitution largely followed a democratic outline, requirements such as those laid out above provided the military with the ability to survey who was and who was not legally considered a citizen—and therefore who the military could or could not coerce, manipulate, or abuse in pursuit of its agenda. An example of this can be clearly seen in the Rakhine case study discussed later, as Rohingya Muslims are considered to be outsiders according to current Burmese law. Therefore, the military

and political elite suggest, the Rohingya can legally be subjected to forced displacement and other human rights abuses.

The Union Citizenship Act of 1948 was added to define and differentiate indigenous and non-indigenous races of Burma—largely due to the numerous ethnicities within Burma’s borders and the various claims over territory and depends for differing degrees of autonomy apart from the central government. The 1948 legislation stipulated:

Automatic acquisition of citizenship ... included: a) permanent residents whose grandparents had resided in Burma permanently, b) children born in the Union after 4 January 1948 one of whose parents was a citizen and c) children born outside Burma and one of the parents was a citizen serving for the state authorities of the Union. Citizens could apply for a “Union Certificate of Citizenship” (UCC) as proof of citizenship of the union ... only foreigners were required to register under the Registration Foreigners Act, 1940. (Arraiza & Vonk, 2017, p. 6)

This shows that the post-independence government of Burma was far more concerned, at the time, with the surveillance and monitoring of foreigners within the country. This is not surprising given the unstable relationship Burma had with major foreign powers in the years leading up to national sovereignty. The Citizenship Act also underscores the pervasive paranoia associated with Burma’s power structure regarding fears of foreign invasion or domination: it requires foreigners to register with the government, and those in high positions of power were able to control the whereabouts and activities of non-nationals.

With respect to military control, the 1948 act set a precedent in terms of the way the central government viewed those whom it deemed outsiders—a view the military has clearly taken to justify its mistreatment of the Rohingya. Since independence, the Tatmadaw has continuously referred to the Rohingya as illegal Bengali immigrants in

order to legitimize Tatmadaw clearance operations carried out to secure territory it sees as important to its economic ambitions in the Rakhine state.

The 1948 act attempted to provide a clearer definition of independent Burma's indigenous races, thereby establishing a baseline for future military justification of its persistent stronghold on economic and governmental power and control. Elaborating on the 1947 Constitution, the Act listed eight specific major ethnic groups that it considered to be indigenous to Burma:

Arakanese, Burmese, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayah, Mon or Shan race and such racial group as has settled in any of the territories included within the Union as their permanent home from a period anterior to 1823 A.D.  
(quoted in Arraiza & Vonk, 2017, p. 6)

Since the First Anglo Burmese war in 1823, the stipulation added at the end of the above section further expanded the foundation for future military manipulation. The Act marked the beginning of a historic but legal precedent of exclusion in Burma. Aside from the eight listed ethnic groups, the clause is considered open for interpretation and therefore was easily construed by the military in order to justify or legitimize its claims with regard to Burma's various ethnic groups.

The ambiguity of the 1947 Constitution and the 1948 Union Citizenship Act allowed for the restructuring of an imagined community—instigated by the nation's elite—in order to garner support and justification for actions taken to reach specific military and political goals. Although it could be argued that these two legal covenants were largely written during a time of democratic fervor, it is clear they were soon used by those in the upper echelons of Burma's political framework as a tool to maintain power.

In addition, by 1949 all citizens were required to report to the government under the Residents of Myanmar Registration Act, thus signifying the infancy of a process that

quickly developed into a policy of close governmental scrutiny over the movement (Arraiza & Vonk, 2017). It is at this point in Burma's history that the slow process of increased population control tactics began under the aegis of the central government, even during the early years of Burma's independence (despite formally calling itself a parliamentary democracy).

Although the 1949 act might be considered to be somewhat like a census, the more openly involved the Tatmadaw became with the political and economic operations of the country, the more closely Burma's citizens were monitored. As Arraiza and Vonk (2017) explain, following registration citizens were outfitted with National Registration Cards (NRCs):

Males were issued with green cards and females with pink cards. By the end of 1960, the government claimed to have registered most of the population and have issued them with 18 million NRCs. While these NRCs were not strictly speaking citizenship certificates, they were *de facto*, as foreigners were registered through the Registration of Foreigners Act. In addition to the NRCs, there were also Temporary Registration Cards (TRCs), widely known as the "White Card." TRCs were issued only temporarily and with a fixed deadline in cases of loss, damages or pending applications in order to provide with a document while the new one was processed. (pp. 6-7)

Once again, actions taken in the early years of Burma's sovereign existence laid the foundation for the behavior of the future military-dominated government. Despite the fact that post-World War II Burma was largely a parliamentary democracy, the use of NRCs and the differentiation between male and female, gave added legitimacy to the Tatmadaw's future population control measures. For example, White Cards were later used to denote minority ethnicities that were not officially recognized by the central government and therefore not legally protected by Burmese law (Arraiza & Vonk, 2017).

According to the 1974 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Burma, the term “citizen” was afforded a new definition (all people born of parents who are both nationals and all people who, up to that point in Burmese history, were granted citizenship). However, the legal framework of the 1948 citizenship provisions remained intact (Arraiza & Vonk, 2017).

It was not until passage of the 1982 Citizenship Law that citizenship became blatantly intertwined with military coercion and control tactics. The new law (still in effect under the current NLD-led government) is a prime example of the way in which post-independence laws have been used by the Tatmadaw to legitimize totalitarian control tactics. Under the influence of a failing socialist government ideology, this legislation established a three-tiered citizenship apparatus (Ullah, 2017). That allowed the ruling military generals to micro-manage the populace far more efficiently than ever before. According to the 1982 system, there are three levels of citizenship in Burma: full citizen, associate citizen, and naturalized citizen. It should be noted that this citizenship law fully embraced an institutional, government-wide principle of discrimination via categorization in Burma—an instrument of oppression crafted directly by the military-state, aimed at Burma’s non-indigenous ethnic groups (Ullah, 2017).

The 1982 citizenship law is an example of one of the many ways the Tatmadaw strategically embedded its power in the legal framework of the country. Written in a conflict-ridden era, General Ne Win and the military regime he led wrote the 1982 law in an attempt to further delineate the indigenous groups of Burma—with an undertone of Burman nationalism. As Arraiza & Vonk (2017) clarify:

The law signified a further shift towards an exclusively ethnic conception of citizenship when compared to the 1947 Constitution of Burma, the 1948 citizenship legal framework, which had defined belonging to the indigenous races as criteria for accessing citizenship, but had in addition provided for naturalisation through residence as well as *ius soli*. (pp. 7-8)

In highlighting the importance of ethnicity regarding the legal right to belong in Burma, the law allowed the Tatmadaw and the central government to construct a national identity based on an exclusivity, one strategically crafted by the military itself for the purpose of furthering its political and economic ambitions. The 1982 citizenship law remains in effect today and has been used continuously as a tool for justifying the Tatmadaw's genocidal clearance operations in Rakhine State.

Under the authority of the 1982 law, the three levels of citizenship mentioned earlier are used to denote status within society as well as signify which rights an individual is entitled to, based on the category to which they are designated. Full citizens—the only group that is fully protected under Burmese law—are identified as members of the eight ethnic groups (later subcategorized into 135 national races) determined to have settled in Burma prior to the First Anglo-Burmese War of 1823. Full citizenship is also attainable for “(a) persons who were citizens on the date the law entered into force, (b) persons both of whose parents hold a category of citizenship (including at least one parent full citizen), and (c) third generation offspring of associate and/or naturalized citizens. (Arraiza & Vonk, 2017, p. 8)

The disenfranchisement of the other two categories of citizens served to elevate “national races” to a societal status unattainable by entire groups of people. This also put various ethnic groups at greater risk of abuse by the military because they did not have legal designations to protect them from such exploits. An example of this is the case of

the Karen peoples, which is discussed in further detail later in this thesis. It is important to note the history of abuses in border regions as a result of legal subjugation.

The categories of “associate citizen” and “naturalized citizen” serve to strategically and structurally separate entire groups of people according to their perceived significance in terms of whether or not they can be of use to the military and central government. By establishing these two categories, the military-state at the time further solidified a sense of alienation felt by those not recognized ethnicities to whom any form of citizenship was not available. Both brackets of citizenship—still alluded to as mixed-blood races—are given peripheral rights relating to political association and engagement, health, education, and freedoms of movement, marriage and property. Arraiza & Vonk (2017) state:

What started as an exclusive nation-building and “otherisation exercise” by the military became state policy and defined the legislation and policy up to the present . . . the rule of law and the access to claim and exercise one’s rights is hampered by a degree of arbitrariness and lack of accountability embedded in the 1982 Citizenship law. (p. 8)

As noted by Ullah (2017), jurisprudence holds that no reason is required by entities in which authority is vested to uphold the law. This gives the Tatmadaw, its individual officers, and all subsequent law enforcement partners *carte blanche* regarding who they persecute or how they carry out the application of the law.

The popular uprising in the late 1980s and the SLORC regime’s accession to power marked a significant shift in judiciary codes and practices nationwide—a development enhanced by the 1982 citizenship law. Significantly, the national register cards distributed under the 1949 Residents of Myanmar Registration Act were replaced by Citizenship Scrutiny cards. Color coded to denote citizenship status, these cards

represented a step further toward complete military control and surveillance over the Burmese populace. Furthermore, similar efforts have been taken to prevent those not eligible for citizenship from obtaining cards in order to protect the central authority's vision of national race and religion—an additional tactic to control the appearance of Burma as a nation (Aung, 2007).

Today the Tatmadaw employs a National Verification Card scheme based on the Citizenship Scrutiny Cards introduced by the 1982 law. Specifically targeting the Rohingya, these so-called “genocide cards” are “part of a systematic campaign by Myanmar authorities to erase their identity” (Milko, 2019). Discussed in further detail below, this scheme is used to legitimize the Tatmadaw's actions in Rakhine State. White cards were distributed to Rohingya as a form of identification. This allowed them to participate in the 2008 referendum to reform the constitution and the 2010 general elections, both meant to signify the official beginning of the country's democratic transition. Following ascension of the USDP to power, “these white card holders' vaguely defined legal status was being abused by the USDP and government for political gains” (Ullah, 2019).

It should be noted that white cards (officially called Temporary Registration Certificates or TRCs), used as another tool of the national verification process, also have been used as a legal tool to further marginalize the Rohingya minority group:

In 1995, TRCs were given to large numbers of Muslims in Rakhine as well as persons of Chinese and Indian descent across the country. This was a clear example of the flexibility and political expediency used in citizenship matters and the tendency to find temporary, legally uncertain solutions . . . the TRCs were treated *de facto* as an official ID card which allowed its holders to vote in subsequent elections (Arraiza & Vonk, 2017, p. 9)

It is clear that the Tatmadaw has a long history, which continues to this day, of shifting the legal weight of identification cards and certificates depending on when and how such an action would benefit overall military objectives or individual ambitions.

Long before the most recent violence in Rakhine state, the idea of citizenship as a tool for the Tatmadaw's and central government's political and economic gain was entrenched in Burma's political system. In 2015, under the NLD government and at the guidance of Tatmadaw officials in high-ranking political positions, a new type of identification card (called Identity Cards for National Verification) were distributed "to scrutinize whether the applicant meets the eligibility to become a citizen of Myanmar and to identify them as residents of Myanmar during the citizenship verification process" (Arraiza & Vonk, 2017. p. 9). Much like the case in Rakhine State, these cards were also distributed to civilians in the self-administered Kokang region of Shan State. To this day the citizenship status of such cardholders is unclear, and in many instances altogether unknown (Arraiza & Vonk, 2017).

## Chapter V

### Ceasefire Agreements and the Perpetuation of a Military-Oriented State

Not unlike other actions taken by individual military officials and the Tatmadaw as an institution, the development of ceasefire agreements with Burma's various armed ethnic organizations is underpinned by political and economic motivations. It can be summarized thus: the military engages in ceasefire negotiations when it is beneficial to do so.

Following the 1990s ceasefire agreement, the Burmese military government legalized all forms of cross-border trade with China, Thailand, and India with the stipulation that Tatmadaw checkpoints be established to collect taxes for the central government (and therefore, top military generals) (Felbab-Brown, 2017). As Felbab-Brown note, this strategy is named 'ceasefire capitalism' and they explain: "The Burmese regime allocates land concessions in ceasefire zones as an explicit postwar military strategy to govern land and populations to produce regulated, legible, militarized territory" (Felbab-Brown, 2017, p. 747).

Under direct military rule even small and seemingly pro-democracy actions initiated and undertaken by the Tatmadaw still contained a strategic element of control. It is evident that the Tatmadaw's interest in achieving communal peace was not driven by a genuine desire to secure safety and stability for Burma's various ethnic groups. On the contrary, economic and political incentives were abundant. In reluctantly allowing various ethnic organizations to continue trade in their respective territories, the Tatmadaw

ensured that the taxes they collected would remain abundant for the foreseeable future. It should be noted that Burma's illicit economies—including the drug trade and the illegal timber industry—although not *officially* taxed, still played an important role in the Tatmadaw's economic motivations behind ceasefire deals. Individual military commanders as well as military-linked companies were involved in massive land-grabbing campaigns and sought to control essential roads used for the transport of both licit and illicit goods.

This division of illegal industry allowed the military to co-opt would-be insurgents, thus further tightening its iron clasp on power. This move was driven primarily by the Tatmadaw's desire to garner support from regional figureheads rather than harbor any sustainable peace arrangement. Felbab-Brown (2017) goes further to make this claim:

The junta incorporated key organized crime figures . . . to come in from the cold and formalize their illicit gains in exchange for their support of the country's economy and political survival. . . . The illicit and resource economies were thus key to conflict mitigation in the 1990s and for two decades after that. (pp. 8-9)

While it is true that illegal industries played a crucial role in the peaceful negotiation of (temporary) ceasefire agreements, one can posit that this was simply a side effect of a greater military scheme aimed primarily at economic and/or political gain rather than genuine interest in regional peace and development. Moreover, this strategy also resulted in the creation of an environment in which it was strategically and economically advantageous for insurgent groups to end fighting and cooperate with military demands.

The ceasefire agreements of the 1990s allowed the military-state to avoid the kinds of expenditures that would be needed to curb internal conflict. At the same time, the reforms ultimately increased Tatmadaw presence throughout the country, especially in regions where ethnic resistance was present and persistent. This increased presence added pressure on armed ethnic groups, coercing them to accept the terms of Tatmadaw-dictated ceasefire agreements (Felbab-Brown, 2017). Despite the existence of ceasefire agreements, this improved the mobility of the military in case a tentative peace was broken. Regulated militarized territories guaranteed the Tatmadaw's continuous presence and thus the means to monitor the everyday minutiae of Burmese civilian life. Felbab-Brown (2017) notes a further incentive for ethnic groups to oblige the military:

The Tatmadaw also reshuffled economic spoils among the insurgent groups, as a mechanism to reward the pliant and co-opted and to punish those who militarily or politically threatened local arrangements or engaged in military actions against the central government and the Tatmadaw. (p. 10)

The military's use of economic and political incentives in order to secure desired beneficial arrangements shows a pattern of Tatmadaw manipulation in pursuit of its own agenda. Regardless of claims that the military regime of the 1990s was devoted to eventual democratic change, there was still every intention to secure political and economic superiority. These tactics are still in use today as a mechanism of continued control but under the veil of democracy.

Further evidence exists supporting the claim that military-sponsored ceasefire agreements exist with the primary goal of maintaining political control and power as well as creating an environment conducive to the economic growth of the military. The renegotiation of ceasefire deals in the late 1990s and early 2000s are indicative of a

continued pattern embedded in the Tatmadaw's behavior. The initial peace obtained by the early 1990s agreements was centered largely around the black market and proved unsustainable in the long term, exacerbated by pressures from the international community to enforce drug and illicit trafficking laws (Felbab-Brown, 2017).

Restructuring of early 1990s ceasefire agreements also served the growing interests of the military-state at the turn of the century.

A significant example of the Tatmadaw's plan to maintain control over Burma's various export economies is the redesign of ceasefire deals around the jade and gemstone industry. In the late 1990s, international demand for Burmese gemstones was rising quickly, and the political importance of the industry heightened. Control over production became a focal point for the military-state. Hughes (2000) explains that now, under the new Myanmar Gemstone Law, the restructured ceasefire protocols allow for third-party participation in the extraction and dealing of jade and precious gems. Furthermore, not unlike the taxation schemes of the earlier ceasefire deals, the new contracts allow private parties to own and sell products extracted from Burma's numerous mines in exchange for a tax on exportation, further expanding the industry (Hughes et. al., 2000).

The Hpakant Mine in Kachin State provides a clear picture of this issue and is relevant even in "democratic" Burma. It offers a unique insight into the ways the military has historically engaged in specific and highly strategic matters to maintain a course toward its overall goal. The Tatmadaw allowed some smaller private parties to own and sell gem and jade products, and itself engaged in collecting taxes from such parties. However, when mining involved larger operations, the military shifted its methods of

engagement to maximize economic and political gains. As Felbab-Brown (2017) details, after realizing the economic potential of the jade and gemstone industry, the Tatmadaw

took over the highly profitable Hpakant Mine, taking that area away from the KIA which was left merely taxing transport routes from the mines. When the taxed companies, including Chinese, became dissatisfied with the KIA taxation policies, they could mobilize the Tatmadaw, guarding the mine, to suppress and reign in the KIA. The major profits from the mine would accrue to Gen. Than Shwe . . . and his close associates and so-called cronies, key privileged businessmen associated with the junta. (p. 10)

This quote shows that uniformity did not exist with respect to the Tatmadaw's behavior. Policies that have the highest potential to provide the most benefits are the policies that the military enforced. In instances where it was more financially advantageous for the military to hold authority over the mines, ethnic organizations had only taxation as a means of financial livelihood.

Control of mines and other land resources became a crucial aspect of the Tatmadaw's overall domination. As Chinese demands for the extraction industries grew, the military rushed to amend former ceasefire deals in order to maximize their control over such industries so as to reap the maximum benefits possible at the expense of ethnic groups. Ceasefire agreements were used to halt excessive fighting between the Tatmadaw and armed ethnic organizations such as the KIO/KIA, for the purpose of mitigating the severe negative effects that internal conflict had on extraction and transportation of product from such industries.

This so-called "ceasefire capitalism" is still important in Burma today and is crucial to the military's continued chokehold on Burma's economic affairs. Little international attention was given to the central government's creation of the Border Guard Force (BGF) following the 2008 constitutional referendum. The Tatmadaw began

to pursue a new round of ceasefire initiatives with individual major ethnic opposition groups in an effort to lay the groundwork for its carefully constructed version of democracy. The 2008 constitution made it obligatory for armed ethnic groups to shift allegiances and military capabilities to the BGF branch of the military and all previous ceasefire agreements were voided (Vandergrift, 2010).

Two primary goals were achieved by this maneuver: first, it inadvertently expanded the military by bringing the ethnic factions under direct Tatmadaw authority; second, it guaranteed the military a strong hand in border regions, thus enabling it to maintain operational control over everyday workings and a means to mobilize against any resistance movements that could potentially arise. According to Felbab-Brown (2017):

The constitution formally centralized resources in the hands of the central state, giving ethnic areas disproportionately little. It also concentrated in the hands of the central state control of all land not licensed to other actors. . . . As if to add insult to injury, anti-insurgent militias constituted a core of the BGF . . . the Tatmadaw also used the BGF ploy to splinter and co-opt the rebel groups, provoking divisions and in-fighting over political goals as well as economic spoils. (p. 11)

This quote highlights the fact that the BGF plan was merely another aspect of the military's larger scheme to maintain power and control. By instigating fighting among and between rebel groups the military was able to effectively carry out a divide and rule strategy. It would prove essential in the years to come for the military to expand its control in the border regions as decentralization began to take hold as a national ideology.

Up to the 2008 constitutional referendum, it was lucrative for the military to engage in ceasefire deals with armed ethnic groups because it allowed them to benefit from Burma's illicit economies. By 2008 those in the highest positions of authority in Burma discovered that in order to continue to be economically prosperous and powerful

they had to follow through with promises of a democratic transition. The most effective way to prevent a Tatmadaw retreat from political, social, and economic power was to carry out its BGF plan.

In the years following the 2010 general elections and Burma's "overnight" democratic transition, the military continued its pattern of manipulating ceasefire deals to advance its agenda. In 2015, the central government and military, along with the country's major armed ethnic groups, agreed on a draft ceasefire deal that would eventually develop into the landmark National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). Many Tatmadaw officials and aligned foreign diplomats hoped the NCA would cause ethnic groups to abandon their decades-long fight for autonomy and self-determination (Weng, 2019).

The process behind the peace talks and the NCA itself offers insight into the attitudes and behaviors of the military post-democratization. Significantly, in the current political climate it is clear that while the military and executive branches of government often disagree, they find common cause when dealing with ethnic groups and potential insurgents; both would benefit from a longstanding peace in the nation's border regions. The Tatmadaw and its BGF only stand to expand their influence in border regions if non-state armed groups participate in a cooperative relationship with the central government. A successful NCA would likely be used by the military as another method of silencing dissent and disseminating their ideology in a way that garners civilian support in regions historically difficult for the military to control.

In recent years, multiple ethnic armed organizations have accused the Tatmadaw of breaking the terms of the NCA. Groups including the Karen, Mon, Kachin and

Ta'ang, and Kokang have all reported instances of armed skirmishes instigated and/or exacerbated by the Tatmadaw.

It is important to consider the extent to which the military's breaking of the NCA is centered around economic objectives. The NCA is considerably inspired by the Tatmadaw's desire to reshape its international image and attract foreign industry and investors. In recent years, following the commencement of multiple special economic projects—some without the official approval of the central NLD government—it has become more economically and/or politically beneficial for the military to break the NCA and gain control of regions they believe have the highest earning and development potential. The military knows that actively breaking the NCA might reignite full-blown civil war in any of the regions in question, so it remains large enough, strong enough, modernized and bureaucratized enough to shut down any offensive launched by even the largest armed ethnic organizations.

## Chapter VI

### The Post-Democratization Era: Continued Military Control

Legislative control of what is considered Burma's indigenous population is the way the Tatmadaw constructs an imagined community in order to create a false sense of unity in the military institution. This is furthered by the military's role in creating a collective conscience through the use of strategic constraints on the dissemination of information within the country.

Foremost, it is important to note that the military played an essential role in framing Aung San Suu Kyi as a national heroine, as well as the NLD as saviors of democracy. In doing this, the Tatmadaw laid the groundwork for further entrenchment of its tyrannical reign. No information in Burma—even under the most recent constitution—is disseminated without the knowledge of military officials. Some Burma watchers have drawn attention to the fact that the Tatmadaw and the so-called “transition regime” of Thein Sein, gravely miscalculated the results of the 2015 general elections, assuming that the USDP had gained enough civilian support to withstand relatively free elections against the NLD and well-known democratic figureheads. While this seemed to be true, it must also be remembered that the results of that election were allowed to stand by the military. Had it wanted to prevent the NLD and Suu Kyi from gaining (largely figurative) power, it had the means to do so.

## Strategic Military Control of Information

As explained by Monique Skidmore (2004), there were four ways in which control tactics used by the Burmese military-state were experienced prior to democratization. I argue that the same control methods Skidmore discusses are still being used by the upper echelon of the Tatmadaw to maintain relevance and control despite the veneer of democracy. According to Skidmore, these key elements of state control are: “community organization, and the use of propaganda, censorship, and informers” (p. 64). Although she focuses on the ways absolute control is experienced by the Burmese populace (in pre-democracy Burma), her list is also relevant when examining the way the Tatmadaw exerts domination today. It is important to highlight that with regard to military control tactics, all four of the above-mentioned points blend together in a way that makes it difficult to categorize.

*Community Organizations.* The first mechanism I examined is the insidious ways in which the military infiltrates and controls the everyday functions of society through the use of community organizations. Much like the USDA under the SLORC/SPDC reign, community organizations today are still used as tools for mass mobilization and the dissemination of Tatmadaw—and therefore State—ideology. Many community networks exist in Burma today, aiding the Tatmadaw to secure legitimacy and support from the civilian public.

A major organization in the context of military control is the Patriotic Association of Myanmar (known by its Burmese abbreviation MaBaTha). In English, MaBaTha is translated as the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion. Described by Marte Nilsen (2015) as an ultranationalist Buddhist movement, this association of largely

political monks has become infamous for rallying the Burman Buddhist population in developed cities to protect Buddhism against the threat of Islam. Through MaBaTha, “Buddhist nationalism has been able to equate itself with national identity” (Nilsen, 2015). The primary mechanism used by MaBaTha monks to disseminate their ideology has been to perpetuate the myth of an imminent Islamic invasion that would overtake the nation. To this end, MaBaTha has focused its efforts on promoting and securing support for controversial laws to protect religion—in this case meaning Buddhism.

Examples of two such laws are the 2015 interfaith marriage law and the subsequent population control bill. Two of four bills together titled the Protection of Race and Religion Laws (likely named thus due to the critical role MaBaTha played in its promotion), both bills were drawn up by stringent Buddhist monks espousing unwavering anti-Muslim agendas (Poole, 2015). Poole explained that the population control bill mandates

a 36-month gap between children for certain mothers and giv[es] regional authorities the power to implement birth spacing in overcrowded areas. Some argue the legislation is aimed at curbing high birth rates in the Muslim community. The population bill is vague about the penalty for unauthorized birth less than three years apart, but it could include coerced contraception, forced sterilization, or abortion. (Poole, 2015)

The law is justified by a Tatmadaw-perpetuated stereotype that Muslims reproduce at an excessive rate and plan to overrun the nation (particularly the Buddhist religion and the majority Burman population). The population control bill provides Burma’s elite with the means to *legally* physically constrain the non-Burman races within Burma. The vagueness of the bill’s language, coupled with the fact that regional authorities are vested with the power to implement it, leaves excessive room for its abuse. It also allows the military to avoid implementing it in regions where it may not be

beneficial to do so, such as densely populated regions with predominantly Burman populations.

The interfaith marriage law sheds light on discrepancies between the central authorities' claim of democracy and Burma's political and social reality. Many scholars of international relations, as well as Burma watchers, have argued, with reason, that the law was enacted specifically to discriminate against Muslims. As Radio Free Asia explained:

The law requires Buddhist women and men of other faiths to register their intent to marry with local authorities, who will display a public notice of the engagements. Couples can marry only if there are no objections; but if they violate the law, they could face imprisonment. (Toe, 2015)

The significance of this law as it relates to Tatmadaw control tactics is that it allows the military and central authorities to gain the support of the general public, especially the Burman majority, by creating an environment in which public dissent is celebrated by those in power. Historically public objection in Burma is seen as rebellious or treasonous. Having a mechanism like the interfaith marriage law available to provide positive affirmation to the public that their demurral is supported by those in power, allows the military to gain the trust of the civilian populace thereby further limiting the likelihood that it will step back from actual power.

Despite claims by monks that the BaMaTha operated independently of the government or other national institutions, recent reports from the well-known Burmese news source *The Irrawaddy* indicates a different story. In early 2019, the military made a cash donation to BaMaTha claiming that the group is necessary to maintaining the welfare of Burmese society and should be supported in the name of Buddhism (Naing Zaw, 2019). In an attempt to save face within the international community, the state-

backed Buddhist organization, Ma Ha Na, banned MaBaTha from operating under its current name. Thereafter the group rebranded, now calling itself Buddha Dhamma Prahita Foundation;

“This foundation is a Sangha [Buddhist clergy] organization, and we made the donation for the Sangha. The Tatmadaw will make donations to organizations which it thinks are necessary for our religion,” Brig-Gen. Zaw Min Tun told *The Irrawaddy*. (Zaw, 2019)

By officially stepping back from absolute political power, the military freed itself from the confines of the democratic separation between church and state. To this day, this allows the military to openly and aggressively denounce any non-Buddhist aspects of Burmese society that do not conform to the needs or desires of individual generals. In openly supporting ultranationalist organizations and individuals, the military meddles with an already delicate and potentially explosive situation. MaBaTha monks, including the renowned U Wirathu, have given anti-Muslim sermons and were heavily involved in garnering support for Tatmadaw operations against Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine state. Military support for this underscores the necessity of a Tatmadaw that is still politically and socially influential and adds legitimacy to its claim that only the military is able to secure peace and prosperity in Burma.

The perceived threat raised by community organizations such as MaBaTha and the Tatmadaw was largely constructed by monks and societal figureheads who were strongly connected to the central government and/or generals in the military through the use of propaganda, censorship, and informants. Skidmore describes the Tatmadaw’s adoption of panoptic surveillance of the globalization of Southeast Asia by using

communication, transportation, and construction as central elements of modernization ... Such changes have occurred alongside a transformation in the way of intelligence and “information” apparatus of the State

functions. Manual surveillance is still intensive, but a range of supra-panoptic methods are additionally now used by Military Intelligence ... Amid these changing forms of both intelligence gathering and the delivery of state ideology through repetitive propaganda, Burmese people are continually having to make distinctions between what is real and meaningful and what are lies in their everyday lives. These new forms of intensive surveillance and the effective targeting . . . of the population with propaganda are thus primary methods by which the regime maintains control . . . . Without access to alternate forms of information, the sheer volume of this propaganda threatens to trip Burmese up in the “facts” of their nation’s history and current political situation, and thus through a combination of silencing the public sphere and filling it with repetitive propaganda, the regime creates gray spaces of confusion in which complicity may begin (Skidmore, 2004, pp. 70-71)

*Propaganda.* Globalization and modernization opened the door for the military to broaden its control tactics while at the same time more easily presenting itself to the international community under a veil of democratic reforms. In the post-democratization era, the military relies heavily on propaganda to proliferate stereotypes strategically designed to support its totalitarian ideology.

In 2018, the Tatmadaw’s Propaganda Unit published a book series entitled *Myanmar Politics and the Tatmadaw*, referring to it as a “true news” book (McPherson, 2018). McPherson explains that in Part One of the series, a section discussing the ethnic riots of the 1940s provides an image allegedly depicting “Buddhists murdered by Rohingya—members of a Muslim minority the book refers to as “Bengalis”—to imply they are illegal immigrants” (McPherson, 2018). Closer examination by Reuters journalists revealed that the image was actually taken in 1971 during the Bangladesh war for independence. Other images also falsely depict instances alleged to be part of Burmese history. One shows Rwandan refugees attempting to flee genocidal attacks in the early 1990s and being turned away by Tanzanian soldiers. This image was used by the Tatmadaw with the caption “Bengalis intruded into the country after British

Colonialists occupied the lower part of Myanmar” (Oo, *Myanmar Politics and the Tatmadaw: Part 1*, 2018). The military has used images like these to justify anti-Rohingya operations in Rakhine while maintaining that the institution as a whole was devoted to protecting Buddhism and the sovereignty of the state. The significance of this is that it is an example of the blatant ways in which the military “reinterprets” history to support a proliferation of stereotypes that support its totalitarian ideology.

*Surveillance and Control of Information.* These tools have long been an important part of the Tatmadaw’s overall power command structure. In today’s global world, the military has to manipulate information that it does not have control over, namely, the international news media. Under a democracy, the military and central government had no choice but to lift some of the restrictive information laws preventing the populace from accessing media sources beyond those directly run by the Tatmadaw.

This is where the veil of democracy becomes exceptionally important. In presenting Burma as a newly emerging democracy, the military effectively protected itself from international scrutiny of its continued human rights violations for years prior to the emergence of Facebook live streams that recorded the genocidal acts in Rakhine State. To prevent the international news media from accessing the realities of Rakhine State, the military imposed an internet blackout during the summer of 2019. As reported by *New York Times* writers H. Beech and S. Nang (2019), the internet blackout severed parts of Rakhine State from the rest of the world, especially the areas in Rakhine State that were plagued by guerrilla warfare between ARSA, the Arakan Army, and the Tatmadaw. This allowed the military’s ethnic cleansing operations to continue far away from the view of international scrutiny. The authors stated:

Government-mandated internet or social media shutdowns, which have occurred with increasing frequency in places like Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Sudan [regions known for massive human rights violations and genocide], are often deemed necessary for silencing the kind of innuendo and rumor that causes online mobs to catalyze real ones . . . . But such telecommunications embargoes can be designed to foil members of the political opposition as well. And they can . . . hurt vulnerable communities . . . who depend on internet connections to keep them out of the crossfire or publicize abuses in remote locations. (para. 2)

The media blackout quickly spread to parts of neighboring Chin State when fighting between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw began to intensify. It is clear that the blackout was meant to prevent aid workers and NGOs from monitoring the human rights situation without actively targeting them in a physical capacity.

The 2013 Telecommunications Law allows the Ministry of Transport and Communications to legally suspend services in case of an “emergency situation” (Human Rights Watch, 2020). This is another example of how the military has successfully orchestrated a legal basis from which it can maintain absolute power if it feels as though its control is at risk. In Burma, access to the internet and alternative sources of information is essential to maintaining the safety of the population and providing the populace with the means to form their own conclusions and thoughts regarding the nation’s political and social reality. Without connectivity, the Tatmadaw can easily manipulate the collective consciousness of the civilian population through propaganda and censorship as well as carry out human rights abuses without accountability.

*Informants.* The use of informants, although more rampant under the SLORC/SPDC regimes, is still used today, offering the military a unique method of control. A crucial aspect of the Tatmadaw’s control lies in self-censorship by the civilian

population, perpetuated by the collective knowledge that informants can be present in nearly any social setting in Burma. Skidmore (2004) explains:

Nothing creates more self-censorship and fear than the possibility of one's actions and words being reported to the regime ... In effect, the Burmese population takes upon itself the task of the military ... the mere possibility of informers and "bugs" is a powerful force for self-censorship ... Individuals are regularly threatened and coerced to become informers if they work in hotels or other facets of the economy where they might encounter foreigners or political activists (pp. 76-77)

In present day Burma, informants are still used by the military though the practice is less prolific than pre-democracy years. According to a report by the *Myanmar Times*, informants in present-day Burma report back to the police. Informants are likely to be present for protests and other political activities undertaken by members of the civilian populace, and are a vital source of information gathering for potential prosecution of political activists (Aung, 2015). While the political atmosphere in present-day Burma is much more open and lenient than in the pre-democracy era, the fact that military and police informers continue to pose as civilians in order to maintain surveillance on them provides evidence that the ideology driving the actions of the Tatmadaw and its affiliates has not actually shifted toward democracy but has remained centered around the perpetuity of the institution and longevity of individual power.

A major result of the Tatmadaw's use of these control tactics is the active participation of civilians in their own oppression, primarily via self-surveillance and self-censorship. An example of this is the central government's "household list programme." Initiated by the Tatmadaw-controlled Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Immigration and Population, village and ward officials nationwide

are required to compile and register births and deaths and move people to and from household lists. As such, households are required to report any

changes, including relocations and marriages, to Township Administration Offices... Households are also required to present a copy of their list to authorities upon request. (DFAT Country Report, 2019, p. 53)

In allocating the responsibility for collection to lower levels of the government, the opportunity for abuse and the use of coercion and intimidation methods arises. Furthermore, due to the fact that there is no regulated method of enforcing the recording and updating of household lists, they can easily be used in a discriminatory fashion, such as in northern Rakhine State (which I discuss in detail below), or in ways that serve the ambitions of individual authority figures or military affiliates. In an age where the veil of democracy, coupled with the global forces of modernization, limit the military's ability to use blatant brute force, self-surveillance and self-censorship are vital to Tatmadaw control and power.

#### Present-Day Tatmadaw Control Maneuvers

The ethnic group called the Karen (also known as Kayin) has a long history of dealing with the military's nefarious actions in pursuit of its ambitious objectives. Engaged in what turned out to be the longest civil war in modern history, the Karen Independence Organization, and its military wing the Karen Independence Army, has fought the Tatmadaw in an effort to gain autonomy for a Karen State once promised by the British. Amid the violence, many Karen civilians have suffered immensely, primarily at the hands of the central military. Following the 2015 National Ceasefire Agreement, fighting between the KIA and the Tatmadaw subsided almost entirely. Despite the tentative end of civil war, however, the Tatmadaw turned to less visible forms of domination and control shrouded in a veil of local economic and infrastructure

development schemes mirroring those used in Rakhine State. This left Karen civilians and KIA members in perpetual economic, social, and political despair. The Tatmadaw's behavior in Karen State shows that what is happening in Rakhine State with regard to accusations of genocide is *not* simply a phenomenon of underlying historical social grievances between Buddhist Burmans and Muslim Rohingya.

Analogous to the military and State commercial endeavors in Rakhine State and other border areas of Burma, Karen State is also home to important Special Economic Zones (SEZs). After remaining in economic isolation for more than five decades, these SEZs are seen as a way to attract foreign investment (East Asia Pacific, 2019). An example can be seen in the trading town of Myawaddy. Called the Shwe Kokko Project, this construction site is quickly becoming the Chinatown of Karen State since the developers, who are Chinese investors, have extensive plans for the region with rumors of a potential megacity (Han, 2019). The region is controlled by the BGF, which has major implications for the Tatmadaw, and thus has become a good example of the dichotomy between the NLD government and the military institution. Han said:

They [Chinese investors and their partners in the BGF] were told that the state government [the NLD] could not approve the project because it involved an investment of more than US\$5 million and were advised to apply to the Myanmar Investment Commission.

Despite having no permission from the government, work got underway in 2017, according to a BGF representative. On February 14, 2017, Myanmar Yatai International Holding Group registered with the Directorate of Investment and Company Administration and the same month reportedly signed a partnership agreement with Chit Thu [a leading BGF colonel] that was facilitated by the Beijing-based China Federation of Overseas Chinese Entrepreneurs. (para. 8 & 9)

Illustrating the magnitude of military control in border regions such as Karen State, this example shows the blatant way in which the Tatmadaw and powerful

individuals ignore government (NLD) directives when economic ambitions are under consideration. The company overseeing the growth of lucrative businesses in Karen State is the Chit Linn Myaing Co Ltd which itself is owned by Karen BGF.

The shady workings of the Tatmadaw in present-day Burma do not stop with Karen State. In northern Shan State, through which the Chinese pipeline passes, Kokang and Ta'ang armed ethnic groups have claimed that the military is currently violating the terms of its NCA (Weng, 2019). Leading Tatmadaw commanders in the region insist that any military operations are routine and necessary to maintaining control of the region. As a TNLA spokesperson explained in an article published by *The Irrawaddy*, the Tatmadaw announced a nationwide ceasefire in order to create the appearance that the national ideology had shifted toward democracy but “the war-time situation on the ground has not changed at all” (Weng, 2019, para. 5).

## Chapter VII

### Case Study: The Crisis in Rakhine State

The present-day crisis in Rakhine is complex and ongoing, with new developments occurring almost daily. What has remained consistent, however, is the sheer power with which the military continues to carry out clearance operations in order to establish SEZs. The SEZs serve the primary purpose of enabling cross-border trade and transportation with India and China. Like other regions of the country, Rakhine State is no exception when it comes to the military's relentless drive to expand economically.

When reading this Rakhine State case study, it is important to keep in mind that the violence being carried out by Tatmadaw is a stark reminder of its autonomy, power, and continued impunity. There is a long history of military involvement in Rakhine State and multiple examples of Rohingya diasporas as a result of violent operations undertaken by the military. However, for purposes of this thesis, the focus will remain on the state of present-day affairs so as to highlight the ways in which the military continues to maintain nearly total control and autonomy.

The first of the two major SEZs in Rakhine State is known as the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project ("Kaladan Project"). The US\$484 million plan connects the Kolkata seaport to the port of Sittwe in Rakhine State. Completion of this project will open the region to the east, potentially turning Burma into a hub of international economic activity. While the fine details of this project and its impact on local and regional areas is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to note that this project

highlights the strategic importance of Rakhine State; the social and political implications are abundant.

Most crucial is the fact that this development project appears to be a driving force behind claims of genocide being carried out in northern Rakhine against the Rohingya population. While it is not the purpose of this thesis to argue whether there is or is not genocidal intent behind the Tatmadaw's actions, it must be noted that there does appear to be a significant correlation between important locations of the Kaladan Project and areas where there have reportedly been massacres, forced evictions, and other gross human rights violations.

As seen in Figure 1, the project route in Rakhine begins in Sittwe and cuts through the middle of the northeastern portion of the state, which is home to nearly all of Burma's Rohingya population. The three townships most impacted by the military's clearance operations are Buthidaung, Rathedaung and Maungdaw. Satellite images show visual evidence of the destruction of entire villages along the Kaladan Project corridor. The site is also extremely close to the massacre at Inn Din (refer to Appendix 1) and other regions known for grave human rights abuses committed by the Tatmadaw and its partner entities. These actions support the assertion that the military has not actually changed the way it operates or its overall ideology. Much like the *modus operandi* of previous military regimes, the Tatmadaw continues to function in ways that support its overall survival and the economic ambitions of its highest ranking generals with little or no regard for the sanctity of human life.

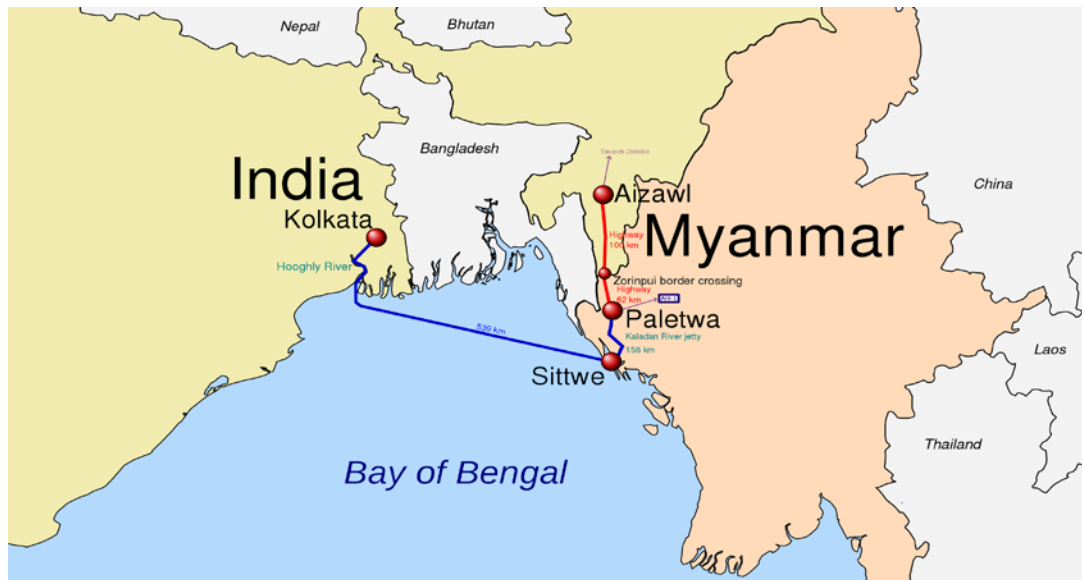


Figure 1: Map of Kaladan Project route.

Source: Wikipedia.

The second development project that impacts Rakhine State and exacerbates the fragile social conditions of the region, involves the gas and oil pipeline project traversing the country. Sponsored by Chinese investment conglomerates and business partners of the Tatmadaw, this project is set to connect the Shwe Gas field, off the coast of Rakhine, to Yunnan province in China. Dubbed the Kyaukpyu Special Economic Zone, plans have been in place since 2007 when the project was approved by China's National Development and Reform Commission. The pipeline project also impacts the Kachin and Shan States in northern Burma as well as central Rakhine, and has significantly contributed to the violence being perpetrated on the Muslim and Rakhine Buddhist communities. The fact that Buddhists are also being targeted further adds to the claim that the Tatmadaw's primary motive in the Rakhine crisis has less to do with racist sentiment and more to do with economic and political ambitions.

As seen in Figure 2, the development occurring in Kyaukpyu is dependent on the Shwe Gas and Oil field in the Bay of Bengal off the coast of Sittwe.

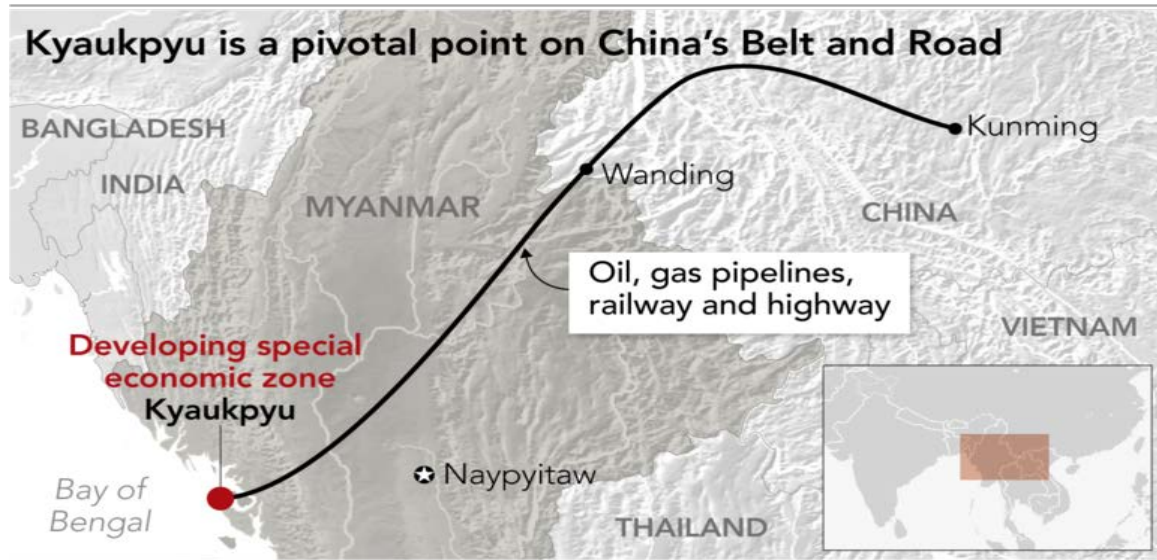


Figure 2: Map of Kyaukpyu Project route.

Source: Nitta, 2018.

Figure 3 depicts the pipeline route, this time showing conflicts that have arisen involving the Tatmadaw and various armed ethnic groups. There are reasons to believe that the recent fighting in Kachin State, and subsequent exodus of Kachin civilians to China, are closely tied to this military project. Such an analysis is outside the range of this thesis. However, it is plausible to suggest that reports of human rights violations coming from Rakhine State are directly connected to the Tatmadaw's on-going projects.

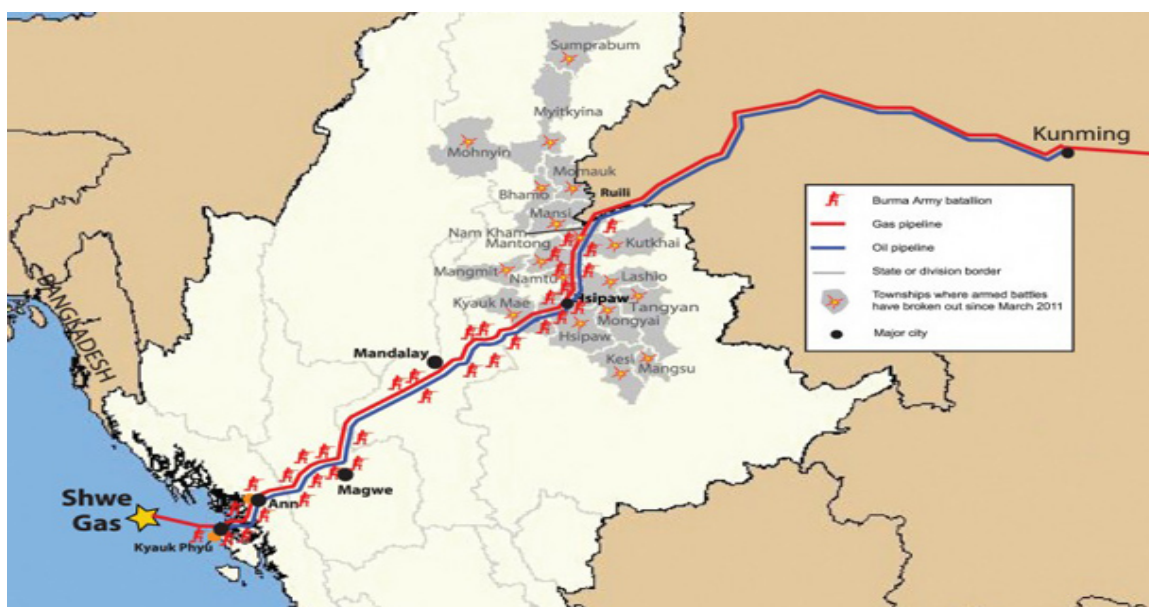


Figure 3: Map of Kyaukpyu Project route, including ethnic fighting linked to pipeline development.

Source: EATLAS, 2019.

Amnesty International has reported that not only are military clearance operations driven by a need to secure specific portions of land for economic infrastructure development, there is an additional motive to be considered. The report by Amnesty International, titled *Remaking Rakhine State* (2018) includes:

... satellite imagery and interviews to point to a rapid increase in military infrastructure and other construction since the start of the year that researchers say amounts to a “land grab.” “The new evidence and the rebuilding that Amnesty has documented . . . shows that the Myanmar authorities [Tatmadaw] are building over the top of the very places the Rohingya need to return to,” Tirana Hassan, Amnesty’s crisis response director, told AFP . . . The rights group says structures for security forces, helipads, and even roads have been built in and around torched Rohingya properties. (Amnesty International Report, 2018)

The Tatmadaw is using economic development—supposedly for the benefit of the general public—as a pretext to expand its control in Rakhine State and other regions where stability is fragile. The clearance operations open the region to the military, dampen possible public resistance, and create physical conditions conducive to easier Tatmadaw and security mobilization should the need arise for large-scale military operations or a re-taking of governmental power by the military.

The Tatmadaw must generate public support for itself in order to uphold its less-obvious control strategies. To do this, the military has taken advantage of and manipulated the public desire for a national identity. In a nation comprised of over 135 ethnic groups, uniformity has always been an elusive issue for those in positions of dominance. In the build up to and aftermath of the democratization process, the military garnered public support by moulding the collective consciousness surrounding the idea of a Burman-Burmese identity at the expense of the Rohingya Muslim population. The military actively participated in exacerbating the myth of the ‘threat of Muslim invasion’ in order to amass acceptance and approval from the civilian population for clearance operations in Rakhine. While brute force is more difficult for commanders to carry out without international scrutiny, when the military does follow through with violent acts they serve as a stark reminder that the Tatmadaw still wields unrelenting strength and power.

As the result of actions taken by military-dominated government ministries, alternate forms of information are still extremely limited even in major metropolis regions such as Rangoon and Mandalay. In some areas access to any news source is nearly nonexistent or heavily controlled by the State. The propaganda produced by the

Tatmadaw and Tatmadaw-backed entities is intended to portray to civilians carefully constructed “facts” about national history, identity, and the nation’s political climate. As Skidmore (2004) notes, the military deliberately creates “gray spaces of confusion in which complicity may begin” (p. 71). She offers an example of how the military’s manipulation of collective memory and its careful construction of national identity and culture provides a new point of view from which to examine the current climate in Rakhine state. Referring to propaganda promoted by the Tatmadaw in the years following the Four Eights uprising, Skidmore (2004) cites an informant who explains:

What the government was doing was to make people vacillate, to be indecisive about the influence of foreign culture that was entering Burma. When the government opened up the country in 1996, foreigners came in who were not very neat, who did not dress or act in ways that were culturally appropriate. The government propaganda attacked this, especially with regard to the influence on young Burmese girls and women and the way that they dress. I thought this was a good thing, because Rangoon girls were beginning to act in a wanton manner, and as a young man, I thought this was a good thing for the government to do, because I thought foreign culture might destroy the country. (p. 71)

Although this passage refers to the 1996 “hit and run” demonstrations, it is an example of the ways in which the military has a long history of successfully shaping the public’s perception of foreign entities in a manner that is specifically geared toward the fulfillment of institutional needs and desires. When comparing the use of propaganda during the aforementioned time period with that of the present day Tatmadaw, it is possible to see that the institution has remained the same in terms of its behavior and the functioning of the governmental facets it still controls.

The SLORC/SPDC strategies used over a decade before democratization serve as the foundation for the future of its continuing hold on power. Skidmore’s informer describes the civic influence of the military regime during the 1990s, and the civilian

population's constructed view of foreigners, sounding eerily similar to the way the Rohingya are viewed today. The manufactured threat put forward by the Tatmadaw, that Rohingya Muslims threaten Burmese culture and sovereignty, was cultivated in the same way the 1996 threat of foreign infiltration was. The SLORC/SPDC regime—like the Tatmadaw today—convinced the Burmese population that foreign entities (i.e., present-day Rohingya) posed the ultimate threat, thus enabling it to procure the support necessary for its continued hold on power.

## Chapter VIII

### Conclusion

The Tatmadaw has a long history of continued manipulation of the Burmese population in order to maintain its dominance and control over all sectors of the country's functioning. The clever use of legal guidelines, including Burma's current Constitution, has allowed the military to remain legally in control despite Tatmadaw assertions that recent years have brought a transition from totalitarianism to democracy.

However, it is clear from this in-depth analysis of the current political and social climate in Burma that the primary force behind many of the military's operations in recent years has been economic ambition leading to personal benefit. While it is clear that the military has maximized its opportunity to use religion and ethnicity to garner support from the Burmese public, the economic longevity of the Tatmadaw and financial security of top generals are viewed as critically important. Religion and ethnicity have long been political categories used by those in power to reach political or economic goals, and Burma is no exception. In casting Buddhism—and to a certain extent the Bamar/Burman race—as the rightful owners of the country, the military created a situation in which it was able to actively violate the human rights of those living in various border regions with little or no domestic backlash. This has enabled the perpetuation of military control a relatively easy feat.

On the international level, the military has also avoided much scrutiny—except in recent years relative to the Rakhine state crisis. By implementing the bare minimum in

the way of democratic reforms, the military was largely able to control its image within the international community and escape many of the economic and political consequences it suffered earlier when it openly controlled the country via the SLORC/SPDC regimes.

The current situation in Burma is critical and ongoing, with new developments happening every day. Implications for international relations are prolific. If the country is able to steadily decrease the influence of the military and implement true democratic reforms, its location could make the country into a potential international trade hub, and a gateway from the West to Asian and Southeast Asian countries, including China. However, if the military remains as powerful and domineering as it is today, it is not difficult to picture the country backsliding into full-blown military rule once again.

## Appendix

### The Inn Din Massacre near the Kaladan Project

The images depicted below highlight the Inn Din Massacre as reported by Reuters investigative journalists Wa Lone, Kyaw Soe Oo, Simon Lewis and Antoni Slodkowski (2018). In a series entitled “Myanmar Burning,” the authors expose critical evidence of genocide and human rights violations in Rakhine State against ethnic Rohingya Muslims.

Named the Inn Din Massacre, the incident involved the slaughter of ten Rohingya men and subsequent attempts to cover the evidence by burying their bodies in a shallow, mass grave. It is important to note that the location of the mass grave is in a region that was strategically reconfigured by the military in one of its many clearance operations associated with the Kaladan (and Kyaukpyu) development projects. While this is a single incident it serves as an example of the way in which the Tatmadaw’s economic ambitions outweigh the most basic human rights.

Satellite Image 1 below depicts the destruction of a known Rohingya neighborhood in Inn Din (right) while the largely Buddhist neighborhood (left) is left untouched. Evidence can be seen of new military structures being constructed over the formerly Rohingya land, supporting the assertion that, despite the undertone of racial tensions, there is imminent military motive behind the clearance operations in Rakhine state.



Image 1: Inn Din - Report of the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar. (OHCHR, 2018)

Image 2 depicts the exact location of the mass grave in relation to the Inn Din clearance operation. As previously mentioned, this incident offers insight into the actual functioning of the local Tatmadaw. While Burma may appear from the outside to be well on its way to democratization, at the ground level things still remain much the same as they were under the SLORC/SPDC regime.



Image 2: Inn Din mass grave location

Source: Lone, Oo, Lewis & Slodkowski, 2018.

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