Why the Tatmadaw won’t crack in Myanmar

While the world gasps at the Myanmar military's brutal crackdown, there is little hope for a soldier-led mutiny or countercoup

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APRIL 20, 2021

Myanmar troops march in formation in a file photo. Photo: Twitter

CHIANG MAI – A military coup that overthrows a democratically elected government and sparks three months of nationwide protests and strikes. More than 700 people including children as young as five shot and killed as security forces fire into crowds of anti-military demonstrators.

Thousands of people, among them not only politicians, activists and journalists but also some of the nation’s best-known singers, movie stars and celebrities arrested on various trumped-up charges. An economy on its knees with non-performing banks and foreign investors running for the exits.

Such a litany would normally be enough to bring down any coup-installed government through a counter-coup or some other action by a military’s top brass who could see the self-defeatism of trying to cling to power when nearly the entire population is opposed to your takeover and rule.

But not in Myanmar. Instead, the military and its controlled police seem prepared to do whatever it takes to preserve its democracy-suspending power grab.

So far, there have been no signs of substantial cracks or divisions within the security establishment apart from a handful of policemen who have fled to rebel-held territories near the Thai border or across the border into neighboring northeastern India.

But is Myanmar's military truly full of spineless, mindless yes-men, or is there something else that holds the institution together in the face of massive local resistance and rising international condemnation?

The simplistic explanation, put forth mostly by foreign security analysts, is that the Myanmar military, known as the Tatmadaw, is a battle-hardened force that has been fighting against an array of political and ethnic rebels continuously for more than 70 years.

Myanmar's Tatmadaw flexes in an Armed Forces Day parade in Naypyitaw, March 27, 2021. Photo: Agencies

Myanmar's civil wars broke out shortly after independence was achieved from Britain in 1948. Before that, an army founded by independence hero Aung San had fought alongside the Japanese military against the British and then, at the end of World War II, allied themselves with the British and turned against the Japanese.

Consequently, the Tatmadaw sees itself as the true defender of the nation's independence and the only force that can hold the ethnically diverse and politically divided country together.

But that analysis misses the enigma of military power in Myanmar. Although Aung San's daughter and coup-toppled democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi once referred to the Tatmadaw as "my father's army", the military force which fought during World War II had little in common with the army that emerged after independence.

Because of post-war agreements with the British, most of the old fighters were demobilized and turned into a militia known as the People's Volunteer Organization (PVO) which, in turn, resorted to armed struggle against the government because it saw independence as a sham that perpetuated colonial rule.

By then, Aung San had been assassinated and of the legendary "Thirty Comrades" who had followed him to Japan to receive military training before the Japanese invasion of Myanmar in 1942, only three remained in the Tatmadaw in the 1950s, including army chief General Ne Win, who eventually seized power in a 1962 coup, the first absolute military-takeover in Myanmar, then known as Burma.

By the 1950s, Myanmar's civil wars were more or less over, with the rebel Karen National Union (KNU) and Communist Party of Burma (CPB) pushed back into remote areas. Persistent internal political turmoil, though, led to the formation of a caretaker government led by Ne Win, which was in power from 1958 to 1960.

Rather than fighting the rebels, Ne Win and his 4th Burma Rifles spent the latter part of the 1950s building up a power base — and a business empire that in many ways endures today — centered around their regiment.

In 1958, it published a document called "The National Ideology of the Defense Services" which strikingly resembles the *dwifungsi*, or dual function, doctrine of the Indonesian army that stated that the military has both a defense and social-political role.

Former military leader Ne Win. Photo: AFP

Ne Win also established an entity called the Defense Services Institute. (DSI), which soon controlled vital sectors of Myanmar's economy. It had its own retail stores in Yangon and elsewhere it controlled the lucrative importation of coal for the railroads, electric supplies and inland water transport.

DSI even established an external shipping line, the Five Star Line, and took over an English-owned bank and renamed it the Ava Bank. A newspaper, the Guardian, and a publishing house were also controlled by DSI. Meanwhile, the once-tiny Myanmar Army, perhaps as few as 2,000 men in 1949, grew steadily in strength and importance. By the late 1950s, Ne Win had more than 40,000 soldiers under his command.

The army was becoming a state within the state, but few Myanmars, the vast majority of whom had faith in the nation's then democratic system, constitution and rule of law, paid much attention until New Win seized power in 1962.

Significantly, the junta that overthrew a democratically elected government introduced a new economic system called "the Burmese Way to Socialism." But rather than establishing a socialist regime reminiscent of those in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union or China, Ne Win's rendition meant that everything was nationalized and taken over by 23 military-run state corporations.

Military coups were not uncommon in Asia at that time, but the difference in Myanmar was that the military seized not only political but also economic power. While the economies of Thailand and Indonesia, for instance, blossomed because the military entered into marriages of convenience with indigenous plutocracies, Ne Win took Myanmar in a completely different direction.

The old business community, which was mainly of Indian and Chinese origin, had their properties and assets seized by the military, driving hundreds of thousands out of Myanmar into India, Southeast Asia or Taiwan.

But if the 1962 coup had been meant to squash what was left of the insurgents, it turned out to be counterproductive. A rebellion broke out among the Kachin in 1961 in areas of northern Shan state. After 1962, it spread to Kachin state and the Kachin Independence Army took over most of the state.

An even smaller rebellion among the Shan, which broke out in 1958, escalated into full-scale war as several bands grouped together to form the Shan State Army in 1964. The Burmese Way to Socialism had, hardly surprisingly, led to economic collapse — and a flourishing black market with neighboring Thailand.

Karen National Union (KNU) soldiers stand guard with their assault weapons at Oo Kray Kee village in Karen State near Thai-Myanmar border on January 30, 2012. Photo: AFP/Pornchai Kittiwongsakul

The KNU, which controlled the border areas, collected taxes on that trade, and was able to buy modern guns from the Thai black market. And, most devastatingly, China decided to give all-out support to the CPB, including modern, sophisticated weaponry of kinds that the old forces in central Myanmar never possessed.

Thus, the new power structure that emerged in Myanmar after 1962 had more to do with preserving an order that hugely privileged the military in an otherwise collapsing society than the fact that officers had seen fierce combat.

That new order had a very narrow base, consisting of men from Ne Win's own regiment, the 4th Burma Rifles. And Ne Win himself was probably the least battle-hardened senior officer in the Tatmadaw as he arguably spent more time gambling at horse races than on the battlefield.

Actually, the country's most battle-hardened officers – among them the popular Brigadier Kyaw Zaw, who was purged in the late 1950s, later joined the CPB and ended his life in exile in China, and General Tin Oo, who fought in several frontier areas and in 1988 became one of the leaders of the then newly-established National League for Democracy (NLD) – did not become killers of civilians.

Rather, it was Ne Win loyalists who opened fire on demonstrating students in 1962, on students and workers in the mid-1970s, and then the massacres in 1988, when thousands of pro-democracy protesters were gunned down in the streets of Yangon and elsewhere.

Ne Win and his men from the 4th Burma Rifles remained in power until after the events of 1988, when somewhat younger officers took over. Ne Win's legacy was finally dismantled in 2002, when he died and his relatives were purged allegedly for plotting against the then-military government. But the system he created lives on today.

The military became the ruling class, which enjoyed privileges denied ordinary citizens. It had its own schools and hospitals and it was rare for someone who did not come from a military family to get a job in the government.

The new army that emerged after 1962 also included a series of Light Infantry Divisions, which became notorious for their brutality when fighting rebels and suppressing civil movements in urban areas, as they did in 1988 and are doing once again in the wake of the February 1 coup.

The Burmese Way to Socialism was abolished after the 1988 uprising, but the military retained an important role in the semi-capitalist system that succeeded it. While Ne Win had his DSI, Myanmar's new military leaders established powerful companies like the Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings and the Myanmar Economic Corporation, which currently have vast holdings across the economy.

Myanmar military chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing has vast economic resources at his disposal. Photo: AFP/Sefa Karacan/Anadolu Agency

As such, the very concept of the 1958 declaration and the 1962 coup has not been abandoned but rather reshaped: the military should have a defense function as well as playing social, political and economic roles.

Whether Suu Kyi and her NLD aimed to roll back those roles and holdings in a second elected term is an open and important question.

Suu Kyi largely refrained from challenging the Tatmadaw's political and economic power in her first term, but the NLD's overwhelming election win last November – which coup-makers claim without evidence was fraudulent – gave her a strong mandate to push for more democratic change.

Top brass leaders also likely feared the risk of retribution for their many crimes. All senior Tatmadaw officers know where the skeletons are buried of past atrocities, both in ethnic minority areas and now also in urban centers home to the middle class.

The current commander-in-chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, is now widely loathed across the population for his regime's ruthless post-coup clampdown. He and his associates know by now that they either maintain power or land in prison — or worse.

But it is a combination of those fears, deeply entrenched economic interests and a dual-function ideology that holds the Tatmadaw so tightly together, not some underlying sense of patriotism or because officers have been hardened through battles in the field.

And that explains why no cracks have or are likely to emerge in the Tatmadaw, despite the brutal, irrational and seemingly self-defeating orders being handed down by officers and carried out by unswervingly obedient foot soldiers.