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Military rule in Myanmar and implications for current reforms

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Re-thinking Myanmar's Political Regime:
Military rule in Myanmar and implications for current reforms

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Introduction

Since first coming to direct political power in 1958, Myanmar's military (*Tatmadaw*) has dominated the country's politics and controlled the state apparatus.[2] Despite a series of challenges to its rule, the *Tatmadaw* has been able to constantly reinvent itself and, ultimately, to reassert its dominance over Burmese society. Cycles of popular protests, economic and political crises, and dissatisfaction with military rule failed to overthrow or undermined the military's organizational coherence. The most tangible outcome of the 1988 public protest movement and its suppression was the collapse of Ne Win's Burmese Socialist Program Party (BSPP). For it was those events that permitted the *Tatmadaw* to return Myanmar to direct military rule under the ostensible leadership of the State Law and Order Council (SLORC), later renamed as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The SLORC/SPDC regime effectively crushed protests, arrested opposition leaders, and began a process of rebuilding the military to become the most competent and formidable institution in the country with uncontested control over the state apparatus (ICG 2001: 24; ICG 2011; Kyaw 2009: 272). Given its dominance, it is thus puzzling that the SPDC self-elected to dissolve itself and allow the formation of a nominally-civilian

[1] The author would like to thank comments from Amy Barrow, Jonathan London, Jonathan Symons, Robert Taylor, Mark Thompson and Bradley Williams. All errors, oversimplifications and views are my own.
[2] The *Tatmadaw* first came into political power in 1958 after then Prime Minister U Nu was forced to 'invite' General Ne Win to form a caretaker government that lasted for 18 months until 1960.

government in 2011. By 2012, this new government has declared its intention to liberalize Myanmar and has introduced a series of dramatic changes that permit expanded pluralism, economic freedoms, and freedom of the press.[3]

This paper examines the historical development of the *Tatmadaw* as an organizational actor since its rise to power in 1962. It seeks to understand and clarify the significance of recent reforms in which the *Tatmadaw* appears to have ceded powers. In so doing, two prominent approaches to regime change are considered in turn. First, the game theoretic model that focuses on the personalities of reformers and challengers in explaining why authoritarian regimes reform. While such frameworks offer helpful insights in the dynamics of political change, they nevertheless fall short in explaining why changes are taking place at an institutional/regime-level. This paper will thus focus on a chronological path-dependent approach that traces the organizational evolution of the *Tatmadaw* and identifies how it sought to strategically reposition itself vis-à-vis society. By adopting regime typologies introduced in the works of Linz and Stepan (1996), this paper will argue that current developments should be seen as a diminished form of authoritarianism. The conclusion discusses the present situation and its implications for the country's trajectory of political development.

The paper's main claim is that the ongoing dramatic reforms introduced since mid-2011 should not be understood simply as an exit strategy by the military to retreat from national politics. On the contrary, this paper suggests that ceding dominance is in fact an evolving strategy by the *Tatmadaw* to continue consolidating its organizational powers and to institutionalize its influence over government, though without the responsibility for the direct administration of the state. The *Tatmadaw* no longer governs directly and reforms have increased political competitiveness on the national stage.[4] Be that as it may,

[3] President Thein Sein's government has released hundreds of political prisoners, relaxed media control, introduced new labor rights, and more importantly amended the party registration law which allowed the country's largest oppositional party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) to compete in the recent April 1st 2012 by-elections, where it won the majority of seats.

[4] Oppositional leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) is currently the largest oppositional party after sweeping the April 1st 2012 by-elections. Though this is clearly a significant symbolic victory for the NLD, the NLD seats represent a tiny fraction of the total number of seats at both the national and regional/local levels of Myanmar's legislatures.

the *Tatmadaw* has designed various mechanisms to safeguard its interests. It has done so through the creation of what Linz and Stepan referred to as "reserve domains" (1996: 67). Hence, while there is no doubt that major changes in Myanmar are underway, it is premature to assume this entails a fundamental realignment of political power, let alone a transition to consolidated democracy.

Game theoretic perspectives on Myanmar's transition

Much of the popular reports on current liberalization efforts in Myanmar have explained recent changes by essentially adopting a classical game theory model. Many Myanmar watchers and popular press for example have examined current political transition as a strategic game between regime softliners/reformers versus hardliners with a particular focus on the elite actors (Callahan 2012, Fuller 2012, Jagan 2012, Kyaw 2012, Tin 2012). For example Kyaw Yin Hlaing explains that in the absence of intervention from the retired Than Shwe, some officials within the new government have emerged labeling themselves as liberals while calling for further liberalization of the country's political economy (Kyaw 2012: 209). Similarly, Callahan (2012: 122) argues that despite having hand-picked his successors, Than Shwe have now "lost the ability to control the [reform] process from behind the scenes." She credited this as a long-held "pent-up pressure" from Than Shwe's subordinates that are now well placed to "push the envelope" and essentially curb the "once-boundless policy-making powers" of the *Tatmadaw*.

Under this model, game theorists argue that democratization is possible for authoritarian regimes when moderates from both the ruling elites and the opposition compromise and work together in other to prevent backlashes from their respective hardliners (Przeworski 1992: 105-53; Linz and Stepan 1996: 61). Additionally, according to Linz and Stepan (1996: 65), military authoritarian regimes that are hierarchical in nature are among the most likely regime types to allow this type of transitional path towards democratization, as the "military as institution" views the cost of maintaining the "military as government"

as too high, thus would eventually compromise and allow liberalizing reforms as an exit strategy for the "military as institution."[5]

Though the hardliner versus moderate argument certainly gives a plausible explanation of how a regime can democratize, it nevertheless falls short of articulating why a consolidated military regime, which is in a position of strength both as an institution and as government, would choose to liberalize. It is certainly important to understand the role of elite "reformers" such as President Thein Sein and Lower House Speaker Shwe Mann and how they have coordinated for a push for liberalization of Myanmar's political economy, yet it is also vital to note that they were both key members of the preceding SPDC regime and the *Tatmadaw*, and neither individual previously demonstrated that they would push for further political reforms in a post-SPDC state.[6] What then allowed these actors to change the "rules of the game" and thus effectively reposition themselves as liberals in a reforming regime?

As O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986: 21) point out, in authoritarian regimes, "no transition can be forced purely by opponents against a regime which maintains the cohesion, capacity, and disposition to apply repression." Additionally as Huntington (1991: 114) suggests one must examine the "continuum in terms of the relative importance of the governing and opposition groups as the source of democratization."

However, in the case of Myanmar, in the absence of any effective and unified political opposition that could realistically topple and replace the military regime (Mya 1992: 146-59; Kyaw 2008: 128-9), current political reforms are led from the top-down by military elites as part of a "transformation" process (Huntington 1991: 114). Given the non-democratic credentials of the *Tatmadaw*'s long authoritarian rule over Myanmar, current attempts to "transform" the regime should not be understood as an attempt to introduce a

[5] Huntington similarly argues that it is more likely for military regimes to allow transition towards civilian rule as the military has a permanent "institutional role" beyond that of "politics and governorship" (1991: 115).

[6] Prior to becoming the first post-SPDC civilian president, General Thein Sein served as the last prime minister of the SPDC state. He was also known to have defended the crackdown of the 2007 "Saffron Revolution" as domestic affairs and successfully prevented the UN envoy to Myanmar Ibrahim Gambari to brief the members of the East Asia Summit in 2007 (Emmerson 2008: 75).

top-down transition towards a Western-style liberal democracy per se, but rather as a strategy for the military to prolong its continued dominance over the state apparatus, as well as to ensure that the core interests of the military are preserved. [7]

When the *Tatmadaw* first took direct control of the state apparatus in 1962, the Revolutionary Council (1962-1971) under the leadership of General Ne Win attempted to transform Myanmar by purging all forms of pluralism to ensure the primacy of the *Tatmadaw* as the only potent political force responsible for the affairs of the state. At the height of the Ne Win regime, the *Tatmadaw* attempted to regulate all aspects of social life but was unable to achieve absolute domination over its population and was constantly challenged by armed insurgencies on the peripheries suggesting that the regime was at best an "arrested totalitarian" regime. Additionally, the regime elites were disillusioned and lacked commitment to the proclaimed Burmese Way to Socialism ideology (Kyaw 2003: 35).

Subsequently, in order for the *Tatmadaw* to regain control and support for the state, the arrested-totalitarian authoritarian regime began to co-opt traditional non-state actors that had "roots in society before the establishment of the regime" (Linz and Stepan 1996: 44). This led the regime to seek support from the very actors, for example private businesses and monastic organizations, that it had initially aimed to purge, thus modifying the character of the *Tatmadaw* as government. The result was the establishment of the de jure BSPP single-party state apparatus, whereby the party was theoretically leading the *Tatmadaw* (Taylor 2009a: 317). However, the inability of the authoritarian BSPP regime to further correct problems brought about by its grossly mismanaged economy finally led to the collapse of order thus paving way for the re-emergence of an authoritarian military SLORC/SPDC regime which was no longer committed to the socialist vision of its BSPP predecessors.

[7] A comparable case could be made with Pinochet's attempt to prolong military rule when his junta introduced and passed the 1980 constitution that was designed to keep the military in power. However, the election included strict criteria for candidate nomination was held 8 years after the constitution was passed and Pinochet failed to win the majority support he needed to hold on to the presidency. For a more detailed account of the Chilean case, see Linz and Stepan 1996: Chapter 13. However unlike the Chilean case, Myanmar's 2010 elections were largely flawed and unfair, with the pro-government party winning over 80% of the seats in both houses, inclusive of the 25% seats reserved exclusively by military appointment.

Though the SPDC was able to preserve some sort of peace and stability for nearly two decades, the mass protests of 2007, popularly referred to as the "Saffron Revolution," indicated that the SPDC's rule had not fundamentally led to a sustainable state-societal relationship.[8] The 2007 crackdown of the mainly urban protests saw the return of order and the re-silencing of the regime's critics. However, it also signaled that a re-negotiation of the socio-political order between the state and its society was long overdue. In order to understand this evolutionary development of the shifting attitude between the state and its society, the evolution of the *Tatmadaw* as the state apparatus will be traced including why reforms in the current context came about as a calculated top-down process that was designed to preserve the interest of the *Tatmadaw*.

The *Tatmadaw's* Path to Power

Revolutionary Council as an arrested totalitarian regime

The military's initial entry into government during its first inception as the caretaker government of 1958-1960 was a key factor that determined the long-term stability and unity of the military both as an institution and government during its continued long reign in Myanmar politics. The 18 months tenure of the caretaker government was generally viewed in a positive light as the *Tatmadaw* was seen as competent and effective in challenging the many destabilizing factors that had plagued the country since independence (Holliday 2011: 46, Butwell 1960, Thant 2007: 284-5). The military clearly saw itself as being the most effective governor and protector of the state, having historically evolved from its earlier anti-colonial and anti-Japanese credentials, to becoming active builders of the Myanmar state (Callahan 2003). In other words, the *Tatmadaw* was convinced of its "new professionalism" mentality (Stepan 1973), which saw its obligations to the state as being beyond not only warfare and national defense but also including that of "internal security and national development" (Linz 2000: 207-8).

[8] It is important to note that the original crisis began after the government suddenly suspended fuel subsidy which led to frustrated urbanites to demonstrate publicly in the streets of Yangon (Kyaw 2008: 129).

Additionally, the precedent of "inviting" Army Chief Ne Win to serve as caretaker prime minister suggested that when the military re-entered national politics during the 1962 coup, a hierarchical military regime would be established centered on the leadership of Ne Win as the most senior officer of the *Tatmadaw*. A year before the 1962 coup, Ne Win was able to unify the military command by purging officers deemed overtly political and a potential threat, leading some officers to resign from the military or to be posted to overseas on ambassadorial assignments by Prime Minister U Nu (Butwell 1962: 4-5; Trager 1963: 313; Callahan 2003: 198-202; Win 2008: 1021-2).

A coherent hierarchical military regime thus ensured that both formal and informal mechanisms developed during Ne Win's rule were institutionalized and would maintain the *Tatmadaw* as "a united and cohesive organization free from any threat of internal structure" (Maung 1998: 31; Kyaw 2009; Trager 1963: 325).[9] The hierarchical nature of the *Tatmadaw* regime also meant that Ne Win derived authority not from his persona per se, but rather from the "charisma of office," based on his position as the supreme commander of the army (Taylor 2009a: 368). In other words, institutional interest and the organizational unity of the *Tatmadaw* would be upheld against all obstacles.[10]

The BSPP regime first came into existence with the establishment of the Revolutionary Council after the 1962 coup and was initially dominated by military figures with little co-optation of civilians. The new regime under the leadership of General Ne Win was quick to establish the primacy of the role of the military state over all aspects of society by the elimination of all forms of pluralism. After more than a decade of unstable parliamentary civilian rule, the Revolutionary Council would rule directly by decree, and was adamant that the old elites of the post-independence era would not be included in the *Tatmadaw*'s state-building project.

[9] Despite several internal purges which have included senior members and whole branches of the *Tatmadaw*, the military continues to maintain its institutional unity. For more see Win, Min. "Looking inside the Burmese Military", Asian Survey, Vo. 48, No. 6, Nov.-Dec. 2008, pp. 1018-1037.

[10] This also explains Ne Win's own downfall in 2002, when more than a decade after his retirement, the former dictator died under house arrest and was not afforded a state funeral after a failed coup attempt by members of his family.

According to Linz and Stepan, there are essentially four dimensions to help understand the type of regime being studied (1996: 41-2) – pluralism, ideology, leadership, and mobilization. Based on these four categories, the Revolutionary Council in its early years should be seen as an arrested totalitarian regime which had attempted but failed to have absolute control over its population.

First, in establishing the absolute authority of the military on the political front, the Revolutionary Council was especially ruthless in ensuring that opposition and criticism to its rule, especially in the urban centers would be silenced (Boudreau 2004: *passim*). This is best symbolized by the regime's brutal response to anti-coup students, which led to the killing of demonstrators and to the destruction of the iconic Rangoon University Student Union building[11] (Silverstein and Wohl 1964: 50; Mya 1992: 5-8; Thant 2007: 292-3). Ne Win's response set the tone for the entire duration of the BSPP state against its opposition, and, according to Boudreau, the crackdown on student protests and the destruction of the Student Union building highlighted precisely the type of "mobilizing politics" that were despised by the military (2004:39). By 1964, the National Security Act abolished all political parties (Mya 1992: 22; Kyaw 2007: 155). In place of the multiparty system of the early post-colonial period, the Revolutionary Council created the Burma Socialist Program Party, which would remain the *de facto*, and later the only *de jure* political party in the country until 1988. The BSPP was subordinate to the Revolutionary Council, and until 1971, full membership of the party was limited to members of the Revolutionary Council.[12] During the 1960s, the party's membership was relatively exclusive, mostly comprised of members from the army and workers in the newly nationalized industries (Taylor 2009a: 319).

Second, to legitimize the rule of the Revolutionary Council, the military state introduced its vision of Myanmar by formally adopting an eclectic ideology, the *Burmese Way to*

[11] The Rangoon University Student Union building was the site of mass anti-colonial demonstrations, where many of the anti-colonial leaders began their political careers as students.
[12] The Revolutionary Council was composed of twenty army officers that led the 1962 coup; though full membership was limited to the top commanders of the military, candidate memberships were offered to all members of the military as well as civil servants and workers from the nationalized industries (Taylor 2009a: 319).

Socialism, as the guiding principles for the policies of the state. In practical terms, the socialist-Buddhist hybrid ideology meant the elimination of all legal forms of private capital and businesses. By late 1962, just months after coming into power, the Ne Win regime nationalized all banks, and most of the country's major business enterprises (Mya 1964: 1189-90; Silverstein 1963: 716-22; Taylor 2009a: 296-7; Thant 2007: 293; Kyaw 2003: 6-14). By 1964, all private businesses, including small retailers would be nationalized "without any discrimination" (Shwe 1989: 55).

Third, the Revolutionary Council was a hierarchical military regime with the leadership centered on the supreme commander Ne Win. Early internal challenges towards Ne Win's authority were thoroughly eliminated, and by the end of Ne Win's rule, his ultimate authority as the head of the Myanmar regime was essentially unquestioned. Throughout the era of the Revolutionary Council/BSPP rule, advancement within the Myanmar state and military was not necessarily based on the seniority and meritocracy of the individual, but rather on patronage connections, especially to those considered close to Ne Win (Kyaw 2009, Win 2008).

Fourth, the Revolutionary Council was resolute in controlling the private life of Burmese citizens. The autarkic regime issued a series of orders prohibiting popular but perceived "immoral" activities ranging from horse racing and gambling, to beauty contests, singing, dancing, and music competitions, and even on occasion football matches were banned (Trager 1963: 321; Taylor 2009: 297; Thant 2007: 293-4; Boudreau 2004: 86). The Revolutionary Council went as far as to attack traditional animist *nat* beliefs (Smith 1965: 295). Additionally, though the regime manipulated Buddhist symbols and philosophy in justifying its ideology, it nevertheless was hostile to the Buddha Sasana Council (*sangha*). The military regime overturned U Nu's pro-Buddhist policies and removed Buddhism as the state religion, (Smith 1965: 282; Taylor 2009a: 297).[13] According to Smith (1965: 306), the Revolutionary Council in its early years would be the only government in Myanmar's long history that did not enjoy support from any significant Buddhist

[13] Just months before launching the coup, Prime Minister U Nu pushed through constitutional amendments officially adopting Buddhism as the state religion of Myanmar.

organizations, and was in fact actively hostile to the long-held prestige and potential political power of the *sangha*.

Aside from attacking the pre-coup societal structure, the Revolutionary Council attempted to make "citizens" out of the people while limiting autonomous space for the population to organize against the wishes of the state. The state took over the direct control of universities and expelled foreign scholarship programs such as the American Ford and Asia Foundations and Fulbright scholarships (Taylor 2009: 297-8; Holliday 2010: 50; Thant 2007: 290-292). The 1963 Private Schools Registration Act forced all schools in the country to use textbooks prescribed by the government (Smith 1965: 295). Private schools were soon nationalized, foreign managed libraries were shut, and the popular press faced tightened control and censorship (Holliday 2010: 50; Maung 2011: 66; Smith 1965: 295).[14]

In short, the increasingly autarkic regime was able to "seal Burmese culture from outside influences and to focus public attention on state-sanctioned cultural activities" (Taylor 2009a: 298).[15] In other words, the Revolutionary Council purged the societal structure of "old" Myanmar, and sought to remove any form of pre-coup pluralism. However, by the end of the 1960s, it became evident that the extreme nationalization of Myanmar's economy would be unsustainable (Kyaw 2003). Despite the Revolutionary Council's initial attempts to gain absolute control over society, pre-coup societal groups remained resilient and survived even during the most repressive period of its early rule (Kyaw 2004: 392; Kyaw 2007: 155-6).

[14] The Revolutionary Council was quick to decree a Printers and Publishers Registration Act which forced all newspapers and magazines to renew their registration certificates annually, eventually forcing many private media to be shut or alternatively became agents of the state's propaganda.

[15] This period was certainly the most xenophobic and isolationist phase of the Ne Win regime. International tourism virtually disappeared as the government allowed only 24-hour visas. The large Indian business classes also left *en masse* after facing a state-led attack on the capitalist class and general communal/urban riots targeting first the South Asian, and later the Chinese communities (Holliday 2011: 49-52).

Civilianization of the Revolutionary Council

The economic failures of the 1960s nationalization policy would soon force the Ne Win regime to refrain from its earlier totalitarian tendencies and begin to co-opt and tolerate non-state forces to ensure the survival of the regime, which also effectively led to the further "decay" of the regime's socialist vision. Senior members of the regime that were most committed to the original socialist ideals were retired or purged, thus "leaving the party in the hands of officials who did not have any concrete ideological belief" (Kyaw 2003: 35).

By 1971, the Revolutionary Council began to civilianize itself, in order to create a façade as a means of differentiating between its dual role as the *Tatmadaw* government and the *Tatmadaw* institution. The twenty senior officers of the Revolutionary Council retired from their positions in the military, and became civilian officials of the BSPP state (Charney 2009: 135). As part of the regime's civilianization, the party, which had previously been an elite, insular cadre party, was expanded to a mass party, which went as far as officially stipulating the BSPP as the *de jure* and only party in Myanmar in the 1974 constitution. Thus instead of the Revolutionary Council, under General Ne Win, leading the party, as was the norm following the coup, theoretically at least, the BSPP was to lead the state under the leadership of Chairman Ne Win (Taylor 2009a: 317).
Additionally, after years of disastrous economic mismanagement, the BSPP held its first ever party congress in 1971 where the party recognized the need to gradually re-encourage the growth of the private sector, and thus approved the liberalization of its economy with the goal of creating an industrialized socialist state (Steinberg 1982: 165; Taylor 2009a: 344-5). However, facing a lack of technical and financial know-how, the state was forced to "turn inwards and restructure the relationship of the state with the institutions of civil society" (Taylor 2009a: 302; Kyaw 2003).

The civilianized BSPP state thus adopted more typical authoritarian measures in which political opposition continued to be suppressed, but the regime began to allow and tolerate limited social and economic pluralism. A case in point is the BSPP regime's

active effort to renew its ties with the Buddhist Sangha that it had earlier been hostile towards. By the early 1980s, the BSPP regime sought to "achieve a closer relationship between the state and the *sangha* than at any time since independence" (Taylor 2001: 8; Shwe 1989: 66).[16] Additionally, not unlike other authoritarian regimes, the BSPP created several ruling party-affiliated organizations that were corporatist in nature, and were theoretically representative of different sectoral interests, but were in reality, designed to serve the interest of the state (Kyaw 2007: 155-6).

By 1981, after a decade of reforming the BSPP into a mass-based political party, for the first time peasants became the largest bloc in the BSPP membership (Taylor 2009a: 319). At the height of the BSPP's membership expansion, there were more than two million members (Taylor 2009a: 319; Shwe 1989: 95). People from different sectors of the nation joined the BSPP, including pre-coup political figures and their associates, career civil service servants, opportunists and job seekers (*Ibid*). Despite the BSPP regime's attempt to manufacture support for its continued rule, mismanagement of the state's economy and the abandonment of its broken ideology would pave the way to the eventual collapse of the BSPP regime.

Continued economic failure and the collapse of the BSPP regime

By the end of the BSPP regime, it became evident that the BSPP regime remained politically repressive, but in order to maintain the stability of its regime, had to tolerate and in fact become dependent on the very segment of the population it had aimed to purge, that of the illegal black market business community (Kyaw 2003: 14). Kyaw Yin Hlaing estimates that by the late 1970s, "more than 90% of the population had to rely on the *hmaung-kho* [illegal trade] sector for about 80% of their basic needs" (*Ibid*: 24). Further, the regime began to gradually back away from its earlier isolationist policies by allowing a limited opening up of its economy. In order to reduce its budget deficit, the regime actively sought foreign aid and assistance from international organizations such as

[16] Ne Win, for example, began reviving the tradition of state leaders patronizing Buddhist organizations and paying their respect to senior monks. Ne Win was also known to have been the main patron to the building of the Wizaya Pagoda in Rangoon/Yangon (Keown 2003: 167).

the World Bank, the IMF, and the Asia Development Bank, as well as invited "foreign investment in some offshore oil exploration and mining" (Mya 1991: 193, Kyaw 2003: 23; Holliday 2011: 52).

Rampant toleration of the illegal black market trade was so prevalent, that it was well known for state agents from all levels of the regime to develop various degrees of patron-client relations with "prominent" black market traders. These illegal traders actively supported the activities of the state, including sponsoring the costs of state activities such as ceremonies and public events, as well as local public construction projects such as new schools and hospital buildings (Kyaw 2003: 45-9).

The collapse of the BSPP regime was inevitable when the BSPP regime attempted to completely divorce itself from the black market traders in the 1987 demonetization policy. Hundreds of thousands of people's savings were wiped out, and this effectively ended the "lame leviathan" that had supported the BSPP state apparatus (*Ibid*: 43). The chaos that came about from pent-up economic frustrations combined with general unrest and protests by student protests in 1988 finally led to the resignation of Ne Win from the state and the party and to several months of anarchy and disorder when civil servants, including the police and some low-ranking members of the military joined the nation-wide strikes and demonstrations against the BSPP state.

In his brief tenure as the last BSPP Chairman, Dr. Maung Maung, a longtime civilian collaborator of the BSPP regime began to introduce quick reforms in an attempt to protect the BSPP state apparatus (Taylor 2009a: 405). According to Robert Taylor, Maung Maung declared that the party organizing committees in the army would be disbanded, and army members could resign from the BSPP, as all civil servants had to do after 1988.[17] Maung Maung's overtures were ignored by the mobilized protestors, finally

[17] Personal correspondence with the author.

setting the stage for the *Tatmadaw* to launch an internal coup which led to the dismantling of the BSPP regime, and the return of direct, authoritarian military rule.[18]

By the end of the BSPP regime, the military clearly held ultimate power over the state, and had a dominant role in decisions of the state. However, its years of continued adherence to the official socialist autarchic economy while tolerating a rampant black market economy led the military to re-calculate its relationship vis-à-vis societal forces. This ultimately led to the conclusion that the *Tatmadaw* ought to return to the forefront of the governance of Myanmar and purge remnants of the BSPP socialist ideology. Subsequently, the new SLORC/SPDC regime that replaced the BSPP in 1988 further removed ideological objections to the reality of the close relationship formed between the state and private capital, and thus became outright supportive of re-legitimizing the business communities.

Repositioning the *Tatmadaw*

The *Tatmadaw* clearly saw itself as being the most competent, or at least the most suitable actor in governing the state following the failures of the BSPP government. Having learned the painful lessons of its failed efforts to transform society through its single-party structure the SLORC/SPDC regime became more pragmatic and quickly dismantled and purged the remnants of the BSPP structure, including removal of the failed socialist ideology and policy (Taylor 2009: 384-403). This also included the reinvention of the civil bureaucracy as many civil servants were involved during the mass protests of 1988. As a result, the *Tatmadaw* took over all of the traditional roles of civil service "including the initiation, co-ordination, and implementation of policies in almost all areas of government" (Mutebi 2005: 153). The *Tatmadaw* thus became the direct administrators of the state and in the process marginalized the role of the civilian bureaucracy.

[18] Many have argued that Maung Maung's attempt to de-politicize the military was merely a pretext for the military to stage an internal coup against the BSPP state (Shwe 1989: xi).

With the BSPP state apparatus dismantled, the SLORC/SPDC regime allowed the "revival of both officially sponsored and privately organized clubs, societies, foundations, and other civic organisations" (Taylor 2009a: 445; Kyaw 2007: 143-71). More importantly, the *Tatmadaw* was able to sign a series of ceasefires with various ethnic rebel groups during this period, effectively establishing the longest temporary "peace" across the country since its independence (Taylor 2009a: 433-45; Kramer 2007).[19]

Within Myanmar proper, limited pluralism in society was allowed only to the extent that it did not challenge the authority of the state or the military, nor was civil society allowed to engage in political affairs (Taylor 2009a: 445). Though the SPDC state, on the one hand, remained authoritarian in character and repressive in nature, the regime appeared, on the other hand, to have re-calculated its relationship with different segments of Burmese society. Thus with the end of the single-party authoritarian state corporatism of the BSPP era, this re-calculation likely led to the initial and visible re-emergence of non-state associations and groups in the public arena. Many pre-coup societal groups such as associations, professional, civil, and informal groups, in fact, survived the earlier Revolutionary Council/BSPP purges. According to Kyaw (2004; 2007: 143-71), secondary associations have roots traceable all the way back to colonial times and continue to hold a certain degree of visibility and influence even during the most repressive periods.[20] Though the regime tolerated this re-emergence of socio-economic pluralism, it nevertheless attempted to incorporate societal forces through the introduction of new government organized non-governmental organizations (GNGO), which further blurred the line between state and societal actors in Myanmar. The most important of these GNGOS was the United Solidarity and Development Association

[19] This was only possible after various ethnic armed groups that were formerly part of the Burmese Communist Party rebelled against the mostly ethnic Bamar and Chinese-influenced leadership, forming new autonomous ethnic militia groups (Lintner 1990). Many of these groups then signed ceasefire agreements with the government in exchange for economic concessions.

[20] Field research conducted in 2003-2004 by Heidel (2006) appears to support Kyaw's argument. Tracing through archival work along with surveying and interviewing national NGOs in Myanmar, Heidel suggests that civil society have always been alive in modern Myanmar (Heidel 2006: 60). According to Heidel, Myanmar has in fact seen more, not less active NGOs and community based organizations (CBOs) since 1990, and that the range and scope of services provided by these various non-state actors are in fact expanding and strengthening (*Ibid*).

(USDA), which claimed to have more than 20 million members and was to help serve as a link between the military state and the population (Taylor 2009a: 446).[21]

The pragmatic turn to seek the alliance of these old societal groups was designed, however, to ensure that the *Tatmadaw* maintained the primacy of the military as government, and as permanent fixture in Myanmar politics. By the 1990s, according to Burmese historian Thant Myint-U, Myanmar was no longer just a military regime "sitting on top of an otherwise civilian state…the military was the state" (2007: 340).[22] In order to do this, the *Tatmadaw* actively rebuilt its organizational capacity by reserving a high proportion of the national budget for the expansion of the military personnel, as well as the upgrading of military hardware (Selth 2009: 281-6).[23] Under the SPDC regime, the total number of military personnel nearly doubled in size from 200,000 in 1988 to approximately 350,000 by 2011 (Holliday 2011: 72; Selth 2009: 281-6).

In order to finance the state, as well as to maintain the loyalty of the military officers, the SLORC/SPDC regime actively sought to revive capitalism by forming a new class of rent-seekers that enriched both the various military officers, as well as their civilian business partners (Mya 1992; Charney 2009: 196; Turnell et al 2009: 635; Maung 2009: 163-90).[24] According to Holliday, in the early years of the SLORC rule, "chaotic entrepreneurship on the part of senior officials and military commanders was common…Ministries might get involved in almost any business, and frequently did" (2011: 68). The regime also encouraged foreign investments, and even attempted to attract international tourism by declaring 1996 as the infamous "Year of Tourism" (*The*

[21] The USDA was dissolved and re-invented as the United Solidarity and Development Party in 2010, and is now the ruling party of Myanmar.
[22] The *Tatmadaw* could be considered the state within the state, as the military had their own social welfare institutions such as hospitals and schools , and it was often critical that access to social welfare, and occasionally even to basic goods required connections and networks to members of the military (Holliday 2011: 73).
[23] Myanmar's defense budget is greater than that of its health and education combined (Turnell et al 2009: 635; Taylor 2009a: 457).
[24] Out of 182 countries surveyed, Transparency International ranked Myanmar as the third most corrupt country in the world in its *2011 Corruption Perceptions Index*.

Nation 1996; Holliday 2011: 68).[25] Overall, however, the SLORC/SPDC regime remained largely incompetent in articulating a coherent economic policy, and thus much of the "economic growth" was dependent on resource extraction, infrastructure development and, according to some of the regime's critics, at least in its early years, the illegal drug production and trafficking trade [26] (Lintner 1999: 411-22; Holliday 2011: 68; Turnell et al 2009).[27] Furthermore, the United States-led sanctions during this period also contributed to the dire conditions of the underdeveloped state.

By 2009 Australian economist Sean Turnell gave a damning verdict:

> Burma's state is almost wholly predatory, and is not so much parasitic of its host as all-consuming. If in other countries ruling regimes behave occasionally as racketeers in skimming a "cut" from prosperous business, then Burma's is more like a looter—destroying what it can neither create nor understand (Turnell et al. 2009: 636-7).

In addition to the economic failures of the SLORC/SPDC regime, the *Tatmadaw* was also unable to enjoy political legitimacy in the eyes of the United States and its Western-centric allies, as well as to a large majority of the Myanmar populace. Undeniably, Aung San Suu Kyi is seen as the leader of the pro-democracy movement in Myanmar, and is often perceived as the legitimate and moral figure of Myanmar politics. Her enormous support is best demonstrated by the large amount of both domestic and international media coverage during her first-ever overseas visits since released from house arrest in 2012. When Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the NLD participates in elections, it has

[25] The flopped campaign which had aimed to attract a million visitors to the country was successful challenged by open boycott campaigns by activist circles outside of the country, supported by Aung San Suu Kyi.

[26] Other Myanmar scholars disagrees with this assessment, arguing that the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) never made this claim, and that there is no evidence of state revenue being generated from illicit drugs, instead the drug trade were conducted by individual officers rather than the state.

[27] However, just as the SLORC/SPDC regime was opening up Myanmar after decades of self-imposed isolation, continued mismanagement of the economy was further challenged by the U.S.-led Western sanctions and international boycott movements which ironically now enforced a Western isolation of the SLORC/SPDC regime just as it was opening up its economy to the international market (Charney 2009: 196; Taylor 2009a: 453-63; Holliday 2011: 67-72).

repeatedly won landslide victories. Her influence on Myanmar politics cannot be understated, in fact according to Steinberg, "[n]o living foreigner has shaped contemporary United States policy toward a single country more than Aung San Suu Kyi" (2010: 36).

Two critical events, the "Saffron Revolution" and Cyclone Nargis further undermined the credibility of the SPDC regime to continue the rule of the military junta. Though neither crises were critical enough to lead to the collapse of the SPDC state, it nevertheless likely contributed to the regime's decision to speed up its long proclaimed "seven stages" disciplined democracy roadmap, therefore negotiating for a calculated transition that would ensure changes are taking place in the way determined by the continued interest and permanent role of the *Tatmadaw* in any future Myanmar state.

Post-SPDC Myanmar and implications for current developments

By the end of the SPDC years, Myanmar had evolved from its earlier arrested totalitarian tendencies during the initial years of the Revolutionary Council, to an authoritarian semi-corporatist military regime that allowed the incremental growth of non-state and non-political groups in the public arena. The military regime appeared to have a strong capacity to maintain the primacy of the *Tatmadaw* in Myanmar politics, as well as the state's domination over all other contenders, including to an extent, that of the ongoing ethnic armed militia groups. However, though the SPDC regime successfully subordinated and suppressed dissent and political opposition to its rule, it was nevertheless unable to hold the infrastructural power described by Mann (1984) in commanding and mobilizing its society into becoming a productive transformative force.

After more than two decades of the return of direct military rule, it appears that the *Tatmadaw* is once again attempting to re-civilianize itself by creating a new constitution that was passed in a referendum in 2008 and by holding a flawed election in 2010 where core members of the *Tatmadaw* retired in order to re-invent themselves as civilian

politicians under the façade of a nominally civilian government.[28] Myanmar's 2008 constitution includes deliberate institutional designs favoring the *Tatmadaw*'s dominant role in national politics such as the reservation of 25% of all seats in both houses of the parliament[29] and the creation of the National and Security Defense Council which also allows special powers for the military to directly take over the government during "national emergencies."

It is thus in this context that the new Thein Sein regime is once again seeking to further re-write and re-establish state-societal relations, as the government publicly initiates a series of reforms that are relaxing the state's control over society, as well as the possible beginnings of incremental development towards further political liberalization in Myanmar.[30] By re-examining how Myanmar's regime have constantly shifted towards a new "pact" with its restive society, it appears that Myanmar will likely morph into what Linz (2000: 34) refers to as a diminished authoritarian regime at best in the coming years, perhaps in a similar fashion to that of contemporary "democratic" Thailand.[31]

[28] There were already signs that the SPDC had plans to civilianize itself from at least 2006 when Thein Sein, then the secretary-1 of the SPDC announced administrative reforms to civilianize bureaucrats below the district level (Callahan 2007: 7).

[29] This reservation of seats for military personnel also includes regional and state legislatures. Other institutional design biases include the clause that certain top ministerial positions, including the office of the presidency, must be given to those that have military experiences. Also see Taylor 2009b: 220 and Ministry of Information 2008.

[30] Other authoritarian regimes have taken the same type of moderate socio-political reforms when challenged with prolonged socio-political crisis. As Grindle (1996) demonstrated in her case studies of Mexico and Kenya, during the 1980s economic and political crises, both regimes responded to increasing mass protests and civil unrest by moderately re-designing their political system. This reformation process which was initiated from the very top of the regimes' hierarchy attempted to re-consolidate support from their political base as well as to re-negotiate relations with their respective society and political economy. The intentions behind the reforms however, were meant to prolong and ensure the survival of their respective regimes, and not necessarily to push for democratization, or pluralism of the political economy.

[31] The comparison here is limited to the extent of the military's influence in national politics in both states. Contemporary Thai politics have long been dominated by the influence of the military through regular intervention in the governance of the state, and the military-bureaucratic-royalist alliance that has long dominated Thai politics and government. For more on the discussion of the quality of Thailand's "democracy" see Federico 2011 and McCargo 2005.

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