Looking Forward from the Past:
Using Burma's History of Military Rule to Understand Its Future

by

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Abstract

Burma's transition to civilian rule marks a significant development in its history. But while the burden of responsibility for the state now rests in the hands of elected officials, the relevance of the Burmese military, which ruled the state for decades, has not significantly diminished. The ability to understand the military's behaviour, both its reasons for capturing the state and its current commitment to allowing civilian rule, contribute to understanding how it will behave in the future. This paper will sort out the development of the institutional ideology that animates the Burmese military, namely a focus on preserving the territorial unity of the state; and it will identify the opportunity this has afforded military elites to pursue their own goals. From Ne Win to Than Shwe, the Burmese military has served as a powerful political vehicle that has allowed them near despotic control of the state while simultaneously constraining their behaviour. The use of purges and promotions to build internal loyalty and incentivize ambitious officers to heed the commands of leadership was instrumental in preserving solidarity within the military, but it also limited the autonomy of military elites to pursue personal goals. The continued use of such strategies within the military is indicative of the influence military elites continue to have on the behaviour of the Tatmadaw, but the separation of state and military have also tempered the incentives of military leadership to act counter to the interests of government. In order to realize their political ambitions, military leaders must now build partnerships with elected politicians, creating a new restraint on military behaviour. But this cooperative relationship will face future tests, as the desire of the military to remain autonomous will have to be reconciled with the government's natural inclination to increase oversight over the use of force within its territory. Such challenges to the institutional role of the military pose a risk to Burma's future, and the ways in which political and military elites will respond to this is key to whether civilian rule in Burma is here for good or another transitory experiment.
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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my family, whose support and understanding made my studies possible. My parents taught me the value of hard work and perseverance and I owe all that I have achieved and will achieve to the love and effort they put into raising me.
Introduction: Contextualizing Burma

For decades, Burma\(^1\) was discussed in the same hushed tones as North Korea. It was a totalitarian state, occasionally cloaked in a thin veneer of civilian rule, but undoubtedly in the iron grip of its military, the Tatmadaw.\(^2\) Having successfully, and violently, put down pro-democratic protests multiple times, the hold of the military junta on the state appeared absolute, with little sign its leaders were willing to give up power. So when the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the most recent iteration of the military junta, announced and carried out a series of reforms designed for a quick transition into civilian rule, it marked the most significant and promising political development in Burma in half a century. As of now, Burma is once more in the hands of a civilian government, and early reports show a remarkable commitment to reform. Some observers remain pessimistic that the state is capable of implementing the policy reforms it promotes (Turnell, 2012), while others favour a cautiously optimistic view highlighting the invaluable opportunities for increased political dialogue and participation by civil society that the transition has allowed (Pedersen, 2011). Both sides raise strong evidence to keep tempered expectations while remaining hopeful for Burma's future. But an element that has been underplayed in the rush to focus on civilian rule is understanding the behaviour of the military. Historically Burma's most powerful institution, it has not only acquiesced to new government initiatives but appears supportive of it. Despite Burma's new constitution providing it significant institutional security and autonomy while also guaranteeing the military will retain political influence in the new government, it has refrained from exploiting those powers. Given its long history of involvement in the political affairs of Burma, what can explain its relative passivity now? To understand its behaviour, both present and future, one has to look at the Tatmadaw as both an institution and as a

\(^{1}\) The country is officially known as the Union of Myanmar after changing its name in 1989. But for the sake of consistency and clarity, it will be referred to as Burma throughout.

\(^{2}\) Tatmadaw literally translates into "royal force" (Than, 2011, p.13), and is the most common name for the Burmese military. It is also referred to as the Defence Services in contemporary literature.
space within which elites, in this case military leaders, could pursue their interests. The opportunities afforded by participation in the military have incentivized and constrained elite behaviour can offer significant insight into Burma's history of military rule, and can feed into a still nascent literature on what the military can be expected to do in the future. This paper will analyze the evolution of the 
Tatmadaw, focusing on the ways in which its history has helped generate a particular ethos focused on the territorial and national unity of the state. It will additionally examine how this ethos has been conscientiously cultivated and redefined by military elites at critical points, to draw out how incentives for elites help constrain their agency. Appreciating how these incentives have changed with the transition to civilian rule will further deepen one's understanding of the military's support for government initiatives and its willingness to subjugate its needs to that of the civilian government.

What will become evident as the paper navigates through the Tatmadaw's complicated history with the state is that the mechanisms by which the military has remained the most cohesive, and consequently most powerful, institution in the country— namely the strategic use of purges and promotions to reinforce the importance of hierarchy and allow the succession of new generations of officers- have been, and remain, very effective tools. The focus on building internal unity and a sense of purpose has also helped produce an ideology oriented clearly around preserving the territorial unity of the state. The ability of the Tatmadaw to remain united and led by its leadership will weigh as a powerful counterbalance to the natural inclination of civilian governments to increase oversight over military operations. The evolution of a clear set of mandates for the military, oriented primarily around the protection of the territorial unity of the state, pose future concerns as negotiations are worked out with the myriad of ethnic armed groups that currently operate across Burma's territory. As long as the

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3 This paper will often refer to individuals with the agency and influence to affect the behaviour of an institution as elites. While military elites are easily identifiable as senior military officers, political elites encompass a much broader and more ambiguous selection. With the history of Burma featuring long periods of military-as-state, political and military elite can often become synonymous. For the sake of conceptual clarity, 'political elites' will refer to elites operating in their capacity to affect the policy-making and behaviour of the state.
*Tatmadaw* is capable of maintaining its considerable autonomy, it will remain a powerful institution in Burma. The question to consider for the future is whether it will always remain allied with civilian governments or if its long-held values and practices will eventually put it at odds with civilian initiatives.

Looking at the post-colonial histories of other countries in southeast Asia, it is evident in many that the military has had a strong presence in politics. From Thailand to Indonesia to Vietnam, there is no shortage of evidence that the military can be involved in the state. They mark a departure from the Eurocentric idea of the 'professionalism', which sets the standard of a military as an apolitical institution integrated with, and moderated by, civilian political leadership (Robinson, 2001, p.230). Instead, they characterize the notion of a 'new professionalism', which encourages political intervention to preserve the state (Alagappa, 2001, p.43). A mix of a military preoccupied with internal security threats and lack of strong political institutions to counterbalance or constrain it, often leads to the encroachment of the military into civilian affairs (2001, p.47). But even as they share significant similarities, including a focus on internal security and a history of colonial influence by European powers, each country has also taken a different trajectory that can be explained largely by the historical specifics of the particular state.

"Each military is a unique institution, with its own historical memory, and its mindset [and ideology] is shaped by that memory" (Ockey, 2001, p.189). The conditions from which the military is produced, the ways in which it identifies its interests, and the degree to which those interests are sympathetic to civilian governance, help define the relationship between government and the military. While Thailand epitomizes how the institutional identity of the military can define its role in politics, the history of Indonesia's military helps in understanding the behaviour of elites. The leadership of General Suharto, who seized state power in 1968, is what largely defined the military's presence in the political sphere (Crouch, 1991, p.52). While every institution will be transformed by, while also constraining, the elite

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4 In this case, the special relationship it has with the Thai monarchy and the way it identifies one of its core mandate to be the preservation of the monarchy, even at the expense of civilian government, helps inform the ways in which the military responds to political events (Ockey, 2001, p.191).
leadership that operates within it, the case of Indonesia- and Burma- show the impact of leaders who were particularly effective at utilizing the military for their own ends.

This paper will not seek to build a comparative analysis of Burma’s military to that of other states, although such an endeavour would produce valuable insights into both the ubiquity of military interference in the state in the region, as well as the atypical duration of Burma’s military rule and its demonstrated capacity to survive domestic\textsuperscript{5} and international crises. Instead it will focus on the Tatmadaw’s particular history, building a nuanced understanding of its past to add to one’s ability to forecast its future behaviour. Even though the return to civilian rule has transformed the ways in which political elites can influence the state, the military remains a potent force. To understand Burma’s future, one must be able to identify the institutional interests of the military, and the ways in which military elite remain influenced by- and an influence on- the behaviour of the Tatmadaw.

**The Rise of the Tatmadaw (1945-1958)**

To put it mildly, Burma has never truly experienced peace across its territory, even before it gained independence. Mutinies, insurgencies and secessionist movements, all oriented around ethnic cleavages between the majority Bamah\textsuperscript{6} and minority ethnic groups, have kept the state under perpetual threat of war (Hauff, 2007, p.8). The origin of these tensions can be partly traced back to British colonial rule,\textsuperscript{7} which emphasized a divide-and-conquer mentality that saw ethnic minorities placed in key administrative and military positions (Seekins, 2002, p.21). When the Japanese invaded

\textsuperscript{5} For instance, while Indonesia’s military government collapsed under the strain of its economic failure (Selth, 2002, p.42), a similar crisis in Burma did not produce the same results because of the ability of the military to engage in strategic rentierism to fund its operations.

\textsuperscript{6} They are also often referred to as Burmans, but for the sake of clarity, this paper will refer to them as Bamah.

\textsuperscript{7} When Burma was separated from India and made into a discrete colonial entity in 1937, there was not a single ethnic Bamah in the regular army (Steinberg, 2010, p.37). This system of privileging minorities within the governance apparatus of the colony was however at odds with the British focus on developing the infrastructure for a modern state at the ‘centre’ of the territory, an area traditionally populated mostly by the Bamah while leaving the periphery, where the bulk of ethnic minority communities presided, largely undeveloped (Guan, 2007, p.125).
Burma in 1942, the grievances of the Bamah over their treatment under the British led to many joining Japanese forces in pushing the English out (Steinberg, 2010, p.37). The fledgling nationalist movement was militant in nature, given the context within which the resistance emerged, and it was led by soldiers, most notably a man named Aung San. Under his leadership, the Burmese Independence Army, which had initially allied with the Japanese, would transform into the disciplined and stratified Burmese National Army with multiple battalions\(^8\) under its command (Steinberg, 2010, p.37).

The BNA kept minorities in different units from the Bamah, in a belief that it could temporarily resolve ethnic tensions (Steinberg, 1981, p.13). But the segregation only contributed to deepening communal discord within the territory, with some reports revealing the brutal violence BNA units would inflict on minority communities while carrying out anti-insurgency operations (Tucker, 2000, p.38).

The alliance between the BNA and the Japanese would be short-lived, with Aung San shifting allegiances to the British\(^9\) and helping push the Japanese out in 1945 (Steinberg, 2010, p.38). Despite an ostensible return to the status quo of pre-WWII, the years of Japanese occupation had seen a significant decay in infrastructure (Slater, 2010, p.57), and a high level of militarization\(^10\) of the population (Callahan, 2002, p.91). The emergence of local strongmen with personal militias helped facilitate the emergence of a strong illicit economy (2003, p.117), and the combination of these localized and personalized nodes of power with the black market meant power was only nominally held in Rangoon.

To further complicate matters, the dynamics of the war had produced three distinct armed groups who claimed to be the army of the state. One faction represented the old status quo, being a collective that included the British Army and other interests allied to Britain. The other two represented

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\(^8\) One of these battalions was led by a young Ne Win (Steinberg, 2010, p.37). His involvement with the nationalist movement and association with the singular Aung San in those early days would contribute a great deal to legitimating his claim to be a cultural hero. This in turn would contribute to the level of loyalty, and consequently the level of control, he would wield within the Tatmadaw and through it, the state.

\(^9\) The shift in allegiance came about when Aung San began to suspect the Japanese were insincere in their promises to allow Burma to become independent (Thawnghmung, 2011, p.4)

\(^10\) There were tens of thousands of arms in private circulation, as well as multiple armed groups that either served local interests or competing claims to the state (Callahan, 2002, p.91).
competing claims of the future of Burma. The first of these was led by former colonial officers and represented the old-guard of Burma, namely the ethnic minority representatives that had risen to prominence under British rule. The other was a collective of mostly ethnic-Bamah nationalist organizations including the Anti-Fascist Organization and the Patriotic Burmese Forces (PBF), both of whom were led by Aung San (2003, pp.87-8).

These two factions were eventually amalgamated, but the particular histories of each continued to animate internal cleavages, both ethnic and ideological. Because of the way the new army was structured, senior positions remained held mostly by ethnic minorities (Callahan, 2003, p.119). This led to festering resentment among PBF veterans, who began to build armed units outside of the formal chain of command (2003, p.121). With weak internal cohesion and lack of trust amongst military elites, the military was poised to succumb to infighting and ineffectiveness.

While the military appeared to be weakening, focus shifted from a military-led to a political solution for independence. The movement was spearheaded by Aung San, who had resigned as head of the armed forces in 1945 to pursue politics (Smith, 1999, pp.198-9). While he was no longer actively in the military, his influence amongst active military personnel was substantial. Indeed, his vision of the military as a decentralized force linked more to the local than central authority was key in the building of autonomous regional commands that would later resist attempts to centralize authority (Callahan, 2002, p.146). But his political endeavours were poised to leave an even greater impact. He supported the creation of a strong one-party socialist system that would allow redistribution of income to the masses, while also proposing a federalist form of government that would recognize ethnic minority rights (Steinberg, 2010, p.42). He had enormous public appeal, and his ability to credibly claim to represent a

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11 The PBF was the renamed successor of the BNA (Callahan, 2003, p.88)
12 In addition to the ethnic cleavages, there was also a tendency by each side to ascribe the other with a particular ideological leaning, which roughly devolved into "rightist" or "leftist" (2003, p.119). The PBF would become known as the "leftists".
13 Indicating his belief in the separation of the military and politics.
wide set of interests, from the military\textsuperscript{14} and society, made him the principle figure in negotiations with the British for independence. Unfortunately, the unique ability of Aung San to reconcile disparate elements of Burmese society and push them into the era of independence would never be fully realized as he was assassinated by a disgruntled politician in July 1947 (Steinberg, 2010, p.42).

Aung San's successor, U Nu, was appointed head of the AFPFL,\textsuperscript{15} the loose coalition of leftist leaning political organizations and local strongmen that had been poised to facilitate the transition out of colonial rule (Than, 2007, p.51). Burma finally gained independence in 1948, with an AFPFL government and a constitution that had been promulgated the year prior. The constitution set out several notable concessions to ethnic minority communities,\textsuperscript{16} including provisions for both the Shan and Kayah to secede after ten years if they so desired (Thawnghmung, 2011, p.5). With the army struggling with internal discord; the reach of the central government largely in name only, while power remained localized in the periphery; and strong signs that minority ethnic communities were still not wholly committed to a united Burma, it is difficult to argue the country was birthed as a strong state.

These centrifugal forces have significant explanatory value in understanding how the pressure to maintain the state would rapidly shift from civilian to military tones within a decade. One critical juncture happened almost simultaneous to independence. The Communist Party of Burma (CPB) launched an armed rebellion which saw a significant portion of the Burmese armed forces desert their posts\textsuperscript{17} (Callahan, 2003, p.114). In 1949, talks between Karen representatives and Prime Minister U Nu broke down, and the Karen National Union (KNU) went underground and launched their own

\textsuperscript{14} He was able to use his influence over the armed forces to make it clear that he was prepared to lead a resumption in war if the British did not grant independence to Burma (Morris, 2008, p.52).
\textsuperscript{15} Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League
\textsuperscript{16} These concessions were the products of intense deliberations during the 1947 Panglong Conference in which the minority representatives agreed to participate within the state in exchange for internal administrative autonomy and distribution of wealth from the state (International Crisis Group, 2011c, p.1). It is of note that one of the biggest ethnic minority communities in the territory, the Karen, did not participate in negotiations and only attended as observers to the Conference (p.1).
\textsuperscript{17} In a span of a year, the Karen and Communist rebellions would see the army shrink from more than 18000 to less than 5000 personnel (Selth, 2002, p.77).
secessionist movement (Seekins, 2002, p.26). This in turn led to a purging of the army of most of its minority personnel, particularly at the top level, with General Ne win taking over as Chief of Staff from General Dun, a Karen (Seekins, 2002, p.27). Once in power, Ne Win appointed ethnic Bamah officers loyal to him to senior positions of the military. Many of these officers were also socialist, helping entrench a particular ideological leaning within military leadership (Than, 1993, p.31). The combination of purges and desertions, which facilitated an ethnic homogenization of the armed forces, with Ne Win’s storied history in the military’s struggle for Burma’s independence, jumpstarted a rapid internal concentration of power within senior leadership.

While the military was quickly reorganizing and overcoming the internal dichotomy that had weakened it before, the civilian government was facing increasingly tough tests to its authority. In addition to the insurgencies launched by domestic groups like the KNU and the CPB, Burma experienced the consequences of another civil war. In 1950, rogue Kuomintang units fleeing China began escaping into Burma (Than, 1993, p.31) and quickly setting up as local warlords in the Shan State, where Rangoon could not dislodge them (Seekins, 2002, p.28). Concerned that the American-financed Kuomintang so close to its borders would lead to China annexing Burma to counter the threat (Callahan, 2001, p.418), U Nu’s government gave significant authority to the military to help keep Burma united and independent.

While the military operated at the behest of the civilian government, it would be appropriate to characterize the relationship between the two institutions as more competitive than cooperative. There was increasing disdain amongst active military officers towards politicians, whom they believed to have sold out the vision of revolutionaries like Aung San to adopt the British style of government (Callahan, 2002, pp.151-2). The belief that politicians had sold out and were following the wrong course for Burma meant the military saw itself as not just protecting Burma from insurgencies, but also protecting Burma from its own government.
The offensives against the Kuomintang had several lasting effects on the military, including helping consolidate control and reinforcing the chain of command (Selth, 2002, p.101). It also introduced military officers to the tasks of local administration, as the civilian government lacked the capacity to govern areas the Kuomintang had become entrenched in (Callahan, 2001, p.413). While the military did not have real success in displodging the Kuomintang or suppressing domestic insurgencies, the introduction of political activities into the mandate of military operations set the foundation for increased involvement by the Tatmadaw in political affairs.

As the Tatmadaw became accustomed to the issues of political administration, the civilian government faced a growing crisis. The nature of politics in Burma emphasized office-seeking behaviour (Seekins, 2002, p.31). The AFPFL itself was a loose coalition of strongmen, civil organizations, and the Burmese Socialist Party (Than, 2007, p.51). The lack of any real ideological cohesion is illustrative of the AFPFL's purpose as an umbrella organization meant to capture power. The absence of a strong ideology, combined with the lack of basic infrastructure or ability to administer peripheral territories meant governance in most areas of Burma was associated with local politics more than what was happening in Rangoon.

This weakness of civilian governance only grew more stark in comparison to the rapid coalescence of the military around Ne Win. While the insurgencies contributed to this, it was mainly the leadership of Ne win that proved instrumental in orienting the military hierarchy around himself instead of a civilian minister. In 1949, he had successfully pushed for the reorganization of the Ministry of Defence to reduce oversight by politicians (Seekins, 2002, p.29), and he worked with regional commanders to ensure they remained loyal to him rather than the civilian government (Callahan, 2001, p.417). He worked to instill an image of professionalism by the Tatmadaw, seeking to instill public

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18 The projection of professionalism was likely more strategic than actually indicative of a cultural change within the military, particularly given the treatment of indigenous civilian populations in areas under martial law by the military (Seekins, 2002, p.34).
confidence in the army (Seekins, 2002, p.33). The military also established the Defence Services Institute (DSI), an independent economic conglomerate, to allow the military to fund operations and take care of its personnel, both active and retired (Than, 1993, p.34), an important tool to ensure continued loyalty. By the early 1950s, the military had emerged as the most unified institution in Burma. More importantly, it had begun to formulate its own ideology, one which diverged from that of the civilian government. By the mid 1950s, a nascent articulation of this internal ideology stressed national unity and the preservation of the state (2002, p.30). The emphasis on protecting the state, as opposed to the government, meant the government could be framed as a potential threat to the army's ultimate mandate.

The notion that the government could be a threat to the state was tested in 1958, when the military grew concerned about political concessions being given by the government to former armed groups (Oo & Min, 2007, p.8). Particularly unpalatable was the idea that former insurgents would be incorporated into the military (Callahan, 2003, pp.185-6). The integration of armed factions that had their own particular histories and internal hierarchies into the Tatmadaw was anathema to the homogenization process that the military had undergone since the late 1940s. This challenge to the military's corporate interests began aligning with the interests and beliefs of the military elites that led it. A Tatmadaw conference in 1958 witnessed senior officers expressing disdain for civilian rule and desiring a technocratic style of governance (South, 2007, p.156). With Ne Win himself expressing apprehension over the increasingly individualistic nature of politics\(^\text{19}\) that was inhibiting effective rule (Steinberg, 2010, p.55), and his own demonstrated interest in power,\(^\text{20}\) the likelihood of the military intervening directly into the political sphere, and doing so successfully, had never been higher.

\(^{19}\) The AFPFL itself had split in the mid-1950s because of internal party discord (Than, 2007, p.51).
\(^{20}\) He had already sat in government briefly in 1949 (Than, 1903, p.32), and had worked deliberately to build up his own authority within the military.
Given these developments, it was unsurprising when Ne Win took temporary control\textsuperscript{21} of the state in 1958. While framed as a consensual move by U Nu, it was instigated by Ne Win and two other senior military leaders.\textsuperscript{22} While the state would return to civilian rule in 1960, this early sign that the military possessed values and interests that undermined its support for civilian rule would portend further involvement by the \textit{Tatmadaw} in politics.

\textbf{The Ne Win Era: Introducing the Military-as-State (1960-1988)}

During the military's initial intervention into the government it displayed relative competency in handling basic administrative affairs and tackling many of the issue areas the civilian government had been incapable of dealing with. Much of its early effectiveness was due to rapid policy-making. With Ne Win as the unquestioned leader, policy was dictated rather than negotiated (Steinberg, 2010, p.55). With the economy being the key concern, particularly rapid inflation and the entrenchment of a large black market which sapped money away from the state (Than, 2007, p.57), the brunt of initial energy was on providing immediate reprieve for citizens. Even though the short life expectancy of the regime precluded long-term projects from being pursued, the production of immediate dividends from policy changes, combined with the military's continued success at containing the insurgencies, bolstered its reputation (2007, p.55).

Despite its success at managing the state, the military withdrew back to its barracks in 1960 and allowed elections for a new civilian government to take place (Seekins, 2002, p.33). Given the disdain military leadership had displayed towards civilian politicians, this appeared to run counter to the interests of the military elite. However, even at this early stage, the military acknowledged \textit{explicit} military rule to be illegitimate (Smith, 1999, p.179). Thus, overt military rule would be an attack on the

\textsuperscript{21} The caretaker government was meant to last six months but lasted over a year longer than was initially intended (Seekins, 2002, p.33).
\textsuperscript{22} While Ne Win was the headliner, Aung Gyi and Maung Maung, two very high-ranking military officers close to Ne Win were also complicit in orchestrating the transfer of power (Fink, 2001, p.27).
credibility and reputation of the Tatmadaw, as it was perceived by the Burmese population. The military's sensitivity to public perception was evident in the populist policies of the caretaker government. Migrant Indian and Chinese workers, who were seen as having taken jobs away from indigenous citizens, were pushed out of the economy wherever possible (Seekins, 2002, p.53). It was clear the military was seeking to justify its claim to have a role in politics.

Once the military withdrew, it did not return to being a passive observer of civilian affairs but directly involved itself in the elections. It supported the "Stable" AFPFL, which was opposing the "Clean" AFPFL led by U Nu (Fink, 2001, p.28). Despite the military's support, U Nu's party won a landslide victory, which some suggest was indicative of the public's resentment of continued military involvement in domestic politics (2001, p.28).

Despite the setback, the military would continue to consolidate itself and gain ideological coherency under Ne Win while the civilian government remained incapable in dealing with the economy or the rebellions (Steinberg, 2010, p.59). Ne Win routinely purged the leadership ranks of anyone he did not feel was completely aligned with his own values and ideas (Callahan, 2003, p.198). He also worked to build stronger links between central command and regional commanders, a difficult task considering the autonomy the latter enjoyed in the field (2003, p.195). A combination of concessions granted by Ne Win and a shared disdain for civilian oversight helped bind regional and central command of the military, effectively allowing the Tatmadaw to exercise a degree of control across the territory that civilian government could not.

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23 By 1960 the National Ideology and the Role of the Defence Services was published, setting out three main goals: restore peace and rule of law; consolidate democracy; establish a socialist economy (Smith, 1999, p.179).

24 One of the more notable purges of this time was Maung Maung, who had helped orchestrate the Caretaker government in 1958 along with Ne Win. Maung was purged because Ne Win grew concerned of his close relationship with the CIA (Callahan, 2003, p.198).

25 Part of these concessions included guaranteeing a level of autonomy amongst regional commanders that allowed them to run "virtual fiefdoms" in parts of the country (Callahan, 2003, p.203).
This would prove instrumental in 1962 when the Tatmadaw’s commitment to the unity of the state would be tested once more. When it came to light that U Nu was negotiating with Shan and Kayah state representatives in Rangoon about potential devolution of political authority\textsuperscript{26} (Callahan, 2003, p.203), Ne Win and the military stepped in and forcibly seized power. The timing of the coup and the ability of Ne Win to activate the wide set of dispersed military units to carry out the coup was a testament to how internally cohesive the military was, and how much civilian and military ideology had diverged over the past decade. Unlike 1958, this coup was overt, with civilian politicians arrested (Steinberg, 1981, p.63), and student protests violently put down (Seekins, 2002, p.59). A new Revolutionary Council was set up,\textsuperscript{27} led by Ne Win. It was a clear statement by military leadership that they no longer believed civilian government, as it had been constituted, was fit to govern the state.

With the new junta marking a permanent role for the military in managing the state, many of the processes which had been employed within the military to build internal cohesion were used to similar ends within the state as well. Civilian positions were filled by military personnel to secure control of government departments, despite their lack of strong political or administrative skills (Seekins, 2002, p.42). The economy was completely nationalized, with the intention of implementing an Eastern European-styled socialist system (Steinberg, 1981, p.113). Any resistance was snuffed out, both externally and internally. The most notable example was the purging of General Aung Gyi in 1963, architect of the DSI, when he protested nationalizing the economy and alienating the business sector (Seekins, 2002, p.62).

Civil society was heavily repressed to avoid any weakening of the junta’s control. University students were dealt with harshly when they protested the regime (Duell, 2011, p.68), with attendance

\textsuperscript{26} Recall that the constitution gave both Shan and Kayah States the right to secede after a ten year period following independence (Thawnghmung, 2011, p.5).

\textsuperscript{27} The Revolutionary Council was made up of officers hailing from the same generation. This is a recurring trend within the military, reflective of the internal practices of promotion which tend to value experience. Instances where younger elites have moved up the hierarchy ‘prematurely’ often create tensions with older officers.
to post-secondary institutions steadily declining after the coup (Seekins, 2002, p.55). The Buddhist Sangha, one of the most symbolically potent institutions in Burma, was kept placated, despite Ne Win never being fully comfortable with it (Slater, 2010, p.272). With close to 90% of the population practicing Buddhism28 (CIA World Factbook, 2012), the military worked explicitly to incorporate Buddhist values into its ideology to help convince soldiers they were fighting for a national cause (Callahan, 2001, pp.420-1). This simultaneously helped consolidate support within the military, and enhanced public perception of the junta. Given how many of the junta leaders were secular (Perry, 2007, p.23), this willingness to embed Buddhist values into Tatmadaw ideology is clear evidence of how cultural symbols and values were incorporated for the explicit purpose of enhancing the unity and commitment within the military.

Even with the military systematically dismantling any opposition, it remained preoccupied with legitimating the its role in politics. The junta moved quickly to build a loyal political base for a socialist-style government through the creation of the Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). Initially a cadre party, it transitioned into a mass party and began admitting civil servants and civilians in addition to military personnel (Steinberg, 1981, p.32). But in spite of its socialist veneer, it was clearly another mechanism designed to secure loyalty to the regime within both the military and civilian population. By providing special access to subsidized commodities, particularly cheap rice (Bandyopadhyay, 1987, p.16), and by having active military personnel stationed at key government and BSPP posts (Pedersen, 2011, p.51), it is evident that the BSPP was not designed for a transition away from military-led rule but rather to build popular support for it. Ne Win resigned from active military duties to become the Chairperson of the party, but this did not mean the link between Ne Win and the Tatmadaw was

28 The importance of Buddhism in Burmese culture is difficult to overstate. U Nu, when he ran for election in 1960, did so by emphasizing his Buddhist piety rather than on issues of law and order like his opponents did. His victory was partly attributable to the support he won by demonstrating his faith (Slater, 2010, p.270).
severed. The constant purges and selective promotion of loyal subordinates meant military leadership remained loyal to him even as he shifted to an ostensibly civilian role.

Callahan notes the transition of the BSPP from a military-centric cadre party to a mass party was part of a larger shift of political power from army high command to the BSPP party secretariat (2001, pp.422-30), one further enhanced by Ne Win's departure from the military. This highlights some realities about the interaction between the military and the state in Burma: both the ways in which the state and military had become highly intertwined, and the tensions that were created when elites migrated from one institution to the other and faced a different set of incentives that influenced their behaviour. Under his rule, Ne Win was very successful at ensuring these shifts of interests amongst elites did not interfere with the corporate interests of the military, a necessary balance given the security of the regime rested on the continued ability of the military to forcibly prevent oppositional forces from toppling it.

It was not solely the fear of being purged that helped maintain the loyalty and cooperation of military and civilian elites. The exclusive access to the economy that was afforded to clients of the state, namely the military, meant officers had access to essential goods and luxuries at depressed prices which they could then sell at exorbitant rates in the black market for profit (Seekins, 2002, p.65). While this encouraged corruption, which siphoned money away from state coffers, it also allowed for a tacit understanding that senior officers could pursue economic interests, or partner with private actors in that pursuit, in exchange for remaining loyal to the regime. It also provided valuable leverage in case there was ever a need to purge a troublesome figure.29 But while these growing patronage networks helped maintain internal loyalty to the regime, it also accelerated the decay of the economy throughout the 1970s and 1980s, creating a significant burden on the rest of the population. As the deterioration of the economy began affecting the quality of life within the military in the late 1970s, it further

29 Such was the case in 1983 when Tin Oo, director of National Intelligence was purged because his wife was accused of black market dealings (Seekins, 2002, p.120).
incentivized officers to pursue profitable enterprises through their jobs, often at the expense of their own duties. Many senior officers used lower-ranking soldiers for labour on economic enterprises like plantations (Fink, 2001, p.146). While this helped placate senior officers, the deterioration of standards within the lower ranks began to erode the strong base upon which the military and the junta had seized power. This combination of economic mismanagement and cresting resentment towards the regime from both outside and within the military would prove instrumental in 1988, when the junta and the Tatmadaw would suffer its greatest crisis of legitimacy since the 1962 coup.


The decay of the economy was partly attributable to the very processes that helped maintain the loyalty of senior military officers. With Ne Win maintaining absolute power, the fear of being purged kept adequate information from flowing upwards towards leadership about the economic crisis in the country, and those that had the leader's ear were often ideologically sympathetic to his vision. This resulted in economic policy under Ne Win being ad hoc and reactive, like the multiple demonetization schemes of the late 1980s. While it was designed to cripple the black market economy (Kurlantzick, 2002, p.136) which rivalled the official economy in size (Than, 2007, p.362), the policies instead robbed people of the little wealth they had (Seekins, 2002, p.124). The 1987 demonetization scheme was the final straw, leaving most of the country destitute, save for senior BSPP and military leaders (Callahan, 2010, p.59).

The debilitating economic insecurity incited protests across the country in 1988, initially targeted at the BSPP (Callahan, 2001, p.414). While these protests were met with violence, it was often

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30 It was voices outside of the junta, like the purged Aung Gyi, who had been most adamant about the need for economic reform (ICG, 2001a, p.20).
31 The 1987 demonetization scheme introduced two new bills, the K45 and K90 kyat notes, a product of Ne Win's noted predilection with numerology and the number nine (McCarthy, 2008, p.301).
through paramilitary outfits\textsuperscript{32} rather than the \textit{Tatmadaw} itself, as military leaders sought to preserve its image as the guardian of the people (Seekins, 2002, p.154). But by August 1988, the situation had spiralled to the point that the military had to step in, at which point popular anger quickly turned on the military as well as the BSPP. This sudden shift to seeing soldiers as a threat to the people was a major blow. Even during the 1962 coup, Ne Win and other senior military leaders had been very conscientious about legitimating the military's control of the state. This depended on the perception that the military was a benevolent guardian of both the people and the territory of Burma, something which quickly came under heat as soldiers began to violently suppress protests in urban areas.

As attempts to placate protestors failed, it was evident that the BSPP was no longer a viable cloak for military control (Maung, 1991, p.166). Military leadership moved quickly to reclaim overt control of the state, replacing the defunct BSPP leadership with the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). To accommodate the creation of SLORC, Ne Win stepped down as head of the BSPP (Steinberg, 2010, p.78), although the coup was carried out with his knowledge and involvement (Hlaing, 2009, p.278). The new junta council was led by General Saw Maung, and included the commanders of all nine military regions and the heads of the navy and air force (Seekins, 2002, p.175). It was both a shift in state regime back to explicit authoritarianism and a generational shift within the military with younger officers promoted into leadership positions. While purges had always provided similar opportunities, this marked the first time that a new set of leaders took over \textit{en masse}. This process of replacement, both at the top and at sub-elite levels, has been a constant feature of the \textit{Tatmadaw}, one used to maintain loyalty and solidarity to the leadership by dangling the carrot of a promotion. Because the purges had left virtually only Ne Win loyalists at the top of the military hierarchy, it guaranteed Ne Win would remain influential even as he ostensibly stepped away from politics.

\textsuperscript{32} While military leadership worked very hard to maintain internal solidarity, it also allowed alliances with many of the paramilitary outfits that operated across the country who had not demobilized following the war. Much of the initial violence against protestors was carried out by the \textit{Lon Htein}, a paramilitary group under command of Sein Lwin, a senior BSPP official (Seekins, 2002, p.160).
SLORC, once it gained power, immediately made it clear that it was a stop-gap until proper elections could be held (Seekins, 2002, p.90). Once again the awareness of the military of how its claim to the state was widely perceived is evident here. But the willingness to entertain a multi-party election did not mean the military was prepared to step away from its powerful role in political affairs. The decision to allow elections was meant to help placate the swelling pro-democratic movement that had sprung up with the 1988 protests, as well as the international community which had reacted vehemently against the violence the regime used against protestors (Seekins, 2002, pp.186-7). SLORC’s strategy was to help facilitate the election of a friendly party into government, thereby guaranteeing the military would continue to have a say in government policy, a similar strategy to the one it had pursued in 1960 after the end of Ne Win’s caretaker government. It heavily endorsed the National Unity Party (NUP), which was comprised mainly of former military personnel and BSPP loyalists (Fink, 2001, p.63). SLORC also set very loose conditions for the registration of parties, to help facilitate having as many parties in the election as possible (2001, p.64). By diluting the election with options for voters, SLORC hedged its bets that either the strategy would enhance the NUP’s chances or, at the very least, diminish the likelihood of another party winning a majority.

SLORC’s main concern was the growing influence of a new figure in Burmese politics: Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. As the daughter of national hero Aung San, she was a natural symbol for the pro-democratic movement. Although she had lived most of her life in Britain, she had been staying in Burma caring for her ailing mother when the protests flared up (Seekins, 2002, p.160). In spite of her prominent lineage, she quickly stood out for her own personal courage and stance against junta rule. The advocacy of Aung San’s daughter against military rule was a major blow to the legitimacy of the Tatmadaw and SLORC, as the military had historically used its own link to Aung San to explain its involvement in politics. Suu Kyi used her growing popularity to help form the National League for Democracy (NLD), a party led

33 At one point in mid-1989, there were over 200 parties registered (Seekins, 2002, p.189), although this was eventually whittled down to 93 (2002, p.223).
by a coalition of political elites that included former senior Tatmadaw officers who had been purged under Ne Win (2002, p.191). As the composition of NLD leaders suggests, the party was of two halves: one dominated by former military personnel and the other by civil society and Burmese intelligentsia (Fink, 2001, p.65). The potency of the NLD was its ability to attract support across the political spectrum, aided substantially by the presence of Suu Kyi.

With the NLD and Suu Kyi rapidly gaining support amongst the people, it was surprising that SLORC carried through with its promise of elections. But international sanctions had weakened the junta as it struggled to finance its operations (Seekins, 2002, pp.186-7), leaving it vulnerable to future protests. It hoped the calling of elections would allow for sanctions to be lifted, so it could again access necessary funds (2002, pp.186-7). The new dynamics of SLORC leadership also had a key role in the push for a more moderate solution to the pro-democratic protests. As mentioned earlier, SLORC reflected a new generation of military officers, headlined by General Saw Maung as chairperson. But with him stood two other significant figures: General Maung Aye and Khin Nyunt. The former was a traditional soldier (Fink, 2001, p.82), but the latter was head of military intelligence and an aberration from the traditional career arc of senior military officers. Nyunt was the youngest member of SLORC (Hlaing, 2009, pp.278-9), and hailed from a non-traditional military background (Selth, 2002, p.56). His close relationships with Ne Win and his family contributed to his status as a rising star (Seekins, 2002, p.280), but the ability of Nyunt to capitalize on the opportunity and become a significant voice within the junta despite his junior position as Secretary-134 (Fink, 2001, p.82) was a testament to his own political prowess. The moderate political views of Nyunt would prove critical in these early years, as he would push for a series of policy changes that reflected a shrewd understanding of international perception and pragmatic assessments of domestic issues. It was Nyunt who announced that elections would be held (Seekins, 2007, p.102), and he was also a strong proponent of reopening dialogue with the international community (Min, 2007,

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34 A primarily administrative position as the name would suggest.
p.1028). While terms like 'moderate' and 'soft-liner' have to be understood as relative descriptors when discussing SLORC leadership, it nevertheless offers an instructive example of how the generational shift that occurred with the introduction of SLORC provided the space for new policy options to be pursued. But, as the country approached elections, it also became clear that the degree to which reform was possible through the junta was limited by the interest of SLORC leaders in retaining a controlling stake in the state. The desire of SLORC leadership to stay in power, coupled with the corporate interests for the military not to withdraw from politics, meant there was really no possibility elections would yield a significant change from the status quo.

While the 1990 election itself was relatively free (Smith, 1999, p.412), it was clear in the lead-up that SLORC had a specific outcome in mind. In addition to key opposition figures, including Suu Kyi, being jailed prior to the elections (1999, p.412), the military also launched an extensive eviction campaign in urban areas targeted to disrupt areas seen as strongholds for opposition parties (Maung, 1991, p.265). The degree to which the election itself were left untampered reflected the confidence of SLORC that its pre-election tactics had been sufficient to disrupt the NLD and solidify the victory of the NUP. So when the NLD won over 80% of the seats it contested (Than, 2006, p.184), it was a shocking revelation to SLORC that underlined how much it had underestimated the power of the pro-democratic movement. To further illustrate how truly detached the junta had become, the NLD also won convincingly in constituencies that housed large numbers of Tatmadaw personnel and families, including sweeping every seat in Rangoon (Fink, 2001, p.69). The NUP was thoroughly trounced, winning a scant 10 seats while the NLD won 392 (2001, p.69). The declaration that even soldiers and their families had voted for a party which sought a greater partition between the state and the military reflected the widespread disillusionment, both amongst civilians and within the lower ranks of the military, over continued military rule.

35 As noted earlier, the military had identified early on in Burma's post-independence history that it needed to remain involved in the state in order to secure its own ability to protect the territorial unity of Burma.
Given this damning evidence of the internal decay of the Tatmadaw and the widespread rejection of SLORC by voters, it is unsurprising that the junta reneged on its promise to allow a return to civilian rule. It declared that no government could be elected without a new constitution, and that the elections were merely a means of selecting a constituent assembly to draft such a document (Than, 2007, p.342). This National Convention would not be created until 1993 (Seekins, 2002, p.183), a notable delay attributable to the junta seeking to rebuild the internal cohesion of the military and securing its own survival.

The first prong of the strategy of this strategy was for SLORC to secure revenue. It lacked sufficient capital after most of the international community withdrew financial aid in 1988 following the violence against protestors. To counter sanctions, SLORC strategically liberalized the economy, allowing foreign companies access to its markets in exchange for pre-contract bonuses and fees (Selth, 2002, p.139). It also entered into trade agreements with Thailand which allowed cross-border logging by Thai companies (Seekins, 2002, p.252). The unilateral abrogation of these agreements in 1993 (2002, p.253), indicate the strategic purposes behind the contracts. Part of the need for more revenue was due to SLORC increasing salaries for civil servants and military personnel (Fink, 2001, p.9), a clear sign that SLORC leadership recognized the importance of securing the loyalty of a wider selectorate, beyond the senior military and state elites who had been prioritized under Ne Win.

The military also set out to ensure its economic security. In 1990, the Myanmar Economic Holdings Corporation (MEHC) was established, creating a massive conglomerate that would eventually own dozens of firms in various sectors (Steinberg, 2010, p.163). 40% was owned by the state through the Ministry of Defence, while the rest of ownership was spread out amongst individuals and groups associated with the military (Seekins, 2002, p.249). The selective liberalization of the economy, with key sectors being given to private interests linked to the military, reflected the regime's interest in securing funds for itself rather than securing strong overall growth for the Burmese people.
While SLORC grew more economically stable, it also underwent a significant and unexpected leadership shift in 1992. Saw Maung, despite being a staunch Ne Win loyalist, was seen as a soft leader (Hlaing, 2009, p.287). When he began to behave erratically, he was replaced as head of SLORC by General Than Shwe (Smith, 2001, p.35). Maung had largely served as a figurehead, meant to preserve internal unity within senior ranks (Hlaing, 2009, p.279), but his successor, Shwe, would become known for much more aggressive leadership as he sought to bind the SLORC and military hierarchy around himself. But unlike Ne Win, Shwe was not the uncontested leader of SLORC. Two other military elites wielded substantial influence within the junta - The aforementioned Khin Nyunt and Maung Aye, heads of intelligence and the army respectively (Fink, 2001, p.82). The ability of these individuals to command the loyalty of subordinates meant simply purging one would have a debilitating effect on the overall internal cohesion of the military. Given the instability of the times, any outward signs of infighting would weaken SLORC's ability to credibly threaten force to deter protests. Consequently, with the rise of Than Shwe, the dynamics of SLORC would reflect an uneasy partnership\textsuperscript{36} between these three leaders, providing temporary stability but with the future remaining uncertain.

Despite the internal tensions within the junta, SLORC aggressively pursued the second prong of its strategy to consolidate control. The Tatmadaw began a massive expansion of its forces after the 1988 protests. Part of this was to help increase opportunities for upwards mobility within the ranks for prospective officer candidates, to help ensure their loyalty remained to the military (Than, 2011, p.29). While this produced a glut of officers who had to compete with one another for promotions (Callahan, 2010, p.62), this meant every officer was under pressure to prove they were more loyal than their cohorts. The expansion of the military was also meant to pre-emptively stop a repeat of 1988, when protests had flared up rapidly across the country (Selth, 2002, p.33). In addition to expansion, the

\textsuperscript{36} The characterization of the partnership as 'uneasy' is reflective of the tension between the political views of the leaders. While Khin Nyunt emerged as a moderate voice in the junta, Maung Aye remained a very blunt hardliner (ICG, 2000, p.5).
military also began modernizing, to instill greater confidence in its soldiers (Selth, 2002, p.37). With the complicity of the military in the violence of 1988 having led to widespread disillusionment over the true role of the military in society, the Tatmadaw could no longer depend on the nationalist values it had historically used to indoctrinate the lower ranks (Taylor, 2001, p.9). To compensate, the military began to expand recruitment to build strength in numbers, while also modernizing to ensure it could maximize its capabilities. By the time expansion began to slow down in the late 1990s, the military had more than doubled in size to over 400,000 (Steinberg, 2010, pp.101-2).

In addition to an expansion of traditional military forces, the intelligence service was also greatly augmented (Selth, 2002, p.113). This was used to ensure both internal cohesion within the military by weeding out potential dissidents, and to monitor civil society and prevent discontent from cascading into protests. The increase in power for both the military and intelligence branches also helped act as a check on power at the elite level, as the leaders of the respective branches, Maung Aye and Khin Nyunt, had to work together to ensure SLORC’s survival.

The delicate balancing between these senior SLORC elites would have a transformative effect on the ongoing insurgencies in Burma. Maung Aye, being a career soldier, had been a steady proponent of a military solution to the conflicts (Fink, 2001, p.94). But Nyunt, with his preoccupation with seeing international sanctions lifted (Pedersen, 2011, p.57), and his belief that breaking up and buying off individual groups would be more practical than pursuing total victory against multiple armed groups (Fink, 2001, p.94), advocated the use of ceasefire agreements. The tipping point was the breakup of the Communist Party of Burma, which had been at war with the Burmese state since independence. The combination of infighting (Oo & Min [O&M], 2007, p.15) and the withdrawal of Chinese support for the CPB had led to the splintering of the CPB into multiple ethnically-oriented armed groups that relied on cross-border trade and narcotics to finance their operations (Seekins, 2002, p.234). With the Tatmadaw rapidly expanding, it had the clear upper hand in negotiations. It leveraged this into encouraging armed
groups to sign ceasefire agreements (CFAs) that gave groups the autonomy to pursue private economic interests without having to disarm or negotiate terms of surrender (South, 2007, p.164). The lack of any call for disarmament also indicated the short time horizons negotiators had in mind when the accords were signed. The CFAs were designed to remove a potential threat to SLORC, with Nyunt concerned that the ethnic groups could potentially have allied with pro-democratic groups in urban centres to work against the regime (O&M, 2007, p.13).

The aggressive expansion of the military and signing of CFAs with armed groups would continue throughout the 1990s, but the dynamics that would carry SLORC through the decade were set early on. It was clear that the regime was working to secure its own survival, and that it operated with the expectation of an eventual transition, as both the 1990 elections and the terms of the CFA indicated. But what was equally evident was that SLORC was only willing to see a transition on its own terms. The creation of the National Convention would prove insightful into understanding exactly what those terms would be.

**SLORC to SPDC: the Creation of a New Status Quo for Elites (1994-2003)**

One of the ways the military traditionally legitimized its involvement in politics was by pointing to internal security threats threatening the unity of Burma. With ceasefire agreements helping reduce the number of active conflicts the military was engaged in, it began to emphasize potential external threats, often pointing to the international condemnation of the junta following the 1988 protests. But whether Burma, or the junta, were truly at threat from external actors is debatable. While the west had almost universally condemned the junta, the regime still retained cordial relations with countries within the region. Japan had briefly stopped aid to Burma following 1988 (Seekins, 2007, p.94), but normalized relations within a year and remained its largest aid donor (2007, 124). Japanese companies were instrumental in providing key sources of revenue to SLORC, allowing it to survive the initial wave of sanctions (2007, p.116). Thailand was the first to recognize SLORC as a legitimate government (Seekins,
2002, p.252). Even China, which had historically supported the insurgent Communist Party of Burma, had shifted from undermining to engaging the Burmese state (ICG, 2008a, p.8).

The spectre of external threats were used to help reinforce the siege-mentality the military had long used to legitimate its political involvement. Despite the generational shift within the Tatmadaw, the insular nature of junta rule, preoccupied with diminishing reliance on others, carried over from Ne Win. Even the liberalization SLORC initiated once in power was designed mainly to increase rents for the regime rather than to develop the economy.\(^{37}\) SLORC capitalized on Burma’s abundance of natural resources, which in turn allowed the expansion of military capacity to help pacify urban and rural areas, further facilitating the extraction of resources. Wary of losing the loyalty of its soldiers, SLORC needed to support military personnel and their dependents, meaning it needed to provide for millions beyond just serving soldiers (Steinberg, 2010, p.101). This cycle of military expansion requiring rents requiring more soldiers helped SLORC rapidly consolidate its control of territory, even as the rush to increase recruitment led to weakening standards on who was recruited.\(^{38}\)

In addition to more focus on keeping its soldiers loyal, SLORC also began a concentrated effort to build a political base within the larger population. The 1990 elections had demonstrated the junta had no traction amongst civilians, and if there were ever to be another election, SLORC needed assurances it could secure a favourable outcome. To this end, it created the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a mass organization purporting to represent civil society but which was heavily intertwined with the junta\(^{39}\) (Fink, 2001, p.95). Both military personnel and civil servants

\(^{37}\) Than (2007) discusses the oscillation of the military regime in its economic reform policies. While early on it did seem vested in allowing liberalization, it also did some backsliding in the late 1990s as licenses were revoked, restrictions were placed on export/import/foreign exchange and there were increases in state industrial projects (p.255). This likely was tied to concerns within the military regime that it needed to consolidate control.

\(^{38}\) Phil Thornton (2011) writes a fascinating piece for the Bangkok Post with interviews from Burmese soldiers who had deserted their posts. It is clear from the interviews that the massive expansion of the military meant quantity was prioritized over quality. The slipping in military standards for recruits had a consequence on the effectiveness of military operations and the worsening of interactions between civilians and the military.

\(^{39}\) SLORC leader, Than Shwe, even sat simultaneously as the leader of the junta and the USDA (Seekins, 2009, p.170).
were highly 'encouraged' to join the USDA, with membership often seen as a prerequisite promotions (Thawnghmung, 2011, pp.24-5). In addition to providing privileged access to important services, the USDA was also used to intimidate pro-democratic groups like the NLD, making it appear as if opposition to the movement originated from the people rather than the junta (Fink, 2001, p.95).

The intimidation of political activists, most notably Suu Kyi, who spent most of the 1990s under house arrest, and the regular clamping down on public gatherings by pro-democratic groups drew into question SLORC's sincerity when it vowed to allow an eventual transition to democracy. It often targeted the leadership of prominent political groups like the NLD (Duell, 2011, pp.51-2), and it came down even harder on student activists. When university students protested in December 1996, SLORC arrested protestors and shut down almost all higher education institutions as a pre-emptive measure (Guyot, 1998, p.194). The ruthless suppression of open dissidence polarized the society, with most generally acquiescing to military rule because of a lack of an obvious alternative (Fink, 2001, p.101). Those that remained actively opposed to SLORC were either routinely arrested or forced out of urban areas and into the periphery of the country where they built partnerships with ethnic rebels (Seekins, 2002, p.226).

With SLORC becoming more financially and politically secure, it created the National Convention in 1993 to produce a new constitution. Showing its typical emphasis on securing its own goals at the expense of public opinion, SLORC appointed 85% of the delegates unilaterally (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2008, p.17). This was designed to ensure the future constitution would guarantee a significant political role for the military (Win & Min, 1998, p.102). The NLD participated briefly in the

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40 The USDA provided access to social services and material benefits to its members, such as employment in government or in companies owned by the state (Turnell, 2011, p.82).
41 She was briefly released in 1995 in an apparent attempt by SLORC to mend relations with Japan, which had been pushing for her release (Fink, 2001, p.86). Otherwise, she remained under house arrest from 1989-1995 and again after 1997 (Human Rights Watch, 2008, p.5).
42 SLORC had stated 1990 elections was meant to form a constituent assembly, so its disregard of the election results in creating the National Convention add further weight to the argument SLORC had been caught off-guard by election results and used the lack of a constitution as a pretext not to honour the NLD's victory.
Convention, but condemned it as a blatant attempt to deny the NLD from having any real political influence. It left the process quickly, along with the Shan National League for Democracy,\footnote{The SNLD was the second largest vote-getter in the 1990 elections (Pedersen, 2011, p.53).} feeling they were only helping add legitimacy to proceedings (Pedersen, 2011, p.53). With the only two democratic parties no longer participating, the Convention was eventually suspended in 1996, five months after the NLD exited (HRW, 2008, p.5). The degree to which one could qualify the suspension of the Convention as disruptive to SLORC is questionable given the unrelenting buildup of the regime's capacity to forcibly maintain power. But the suspension did damage SLORC's reputation domestically and internationally as more began to doubt the junta had any real commitment to ever giving up power.

As noted earlier, there was a strong relationship between economic growth in Burma and the strength of the junta. By 1992-3, formal military expenditure took up 43.8% of the state budget (Hauff, 2007, p.25), a sizeable share requiring significant amounts of capital. To facilitate this, SLORC engaged in rent-seeking and also used its monopoly over the economy to make lucrative investments through State Economic Enterprises (SEEs). The emphasis on securing finances through rents further weakened the relationship between SLORC and the population, as ongoing insurgencies in the periphery and the general level of destitution made taxation inadequate. Rents from gas exports alone brought in more revenue than domestic taxation (Turnell, 2011, p.85).

In addition to more revenue flowing directly into SLORC coffers, the military regime was also stabilizing around a new status quo. While Ne Win's rule was characterized by a single rigid hierarchy, SLORC represented multiple loyalty hierarchies headed by different SLORC leaders, namely Than Shwe, Maung Aye, and Khin Nyunt, working together for a common goal. In addition to the traditional emphasis on loyalty, there was also greater tolerance for military elites pursuing private interests, so long as such pursuits did not hurt the stability of the regime. By the mid-1990s, some senior officers appointed to government agencies ran the departments as their own private enterprises (Hlaing, 2009,
p.279). Regional commanders, particularly in ceasefire areas, gained enormous political and economic powers through their autonomy (Min, 2008, p.1021). This led to increased involvement by military personnel in the narcotics trade that boomed in the periphery.\textsuperscript{44} Even the central government was accused of helping launder money from narcotics trading, as it secured another source of revenue\textsuperscript{45} for the junta (Kurlantzick, 2002, p.140). The involvement in narcotics reflected a larger trend of military elites using their privileged access to the economy to enter into partnerships with private actors. Khun Sa, a major drug baron who also had major investments in real estate and infrastructure, ran a chain of hotels in a partnership with high-ranking Burmese military officers (Myint, 2000, p.47). The combination of increased toleration and opportunity for private economic pursuits unsurprisingly led to a significant expansion in patron-client relations linking the military regime to the black market and private actors. But it also increased incentives for officers to continue to participate within the military regime, helping maintain internal solidarity. Looking at the timing of the suspension of the National Convention in light of the increasing internal stability and financial security, the mid-1990s marked the point when SLORC had become institutionally secure to the point that long-term control of the state was feasible.

The trade-off to this new status quo was a massive rise in corruption. SLORC walked a delicate line between tolerating private economic pursuits of senior military officers and seeking to mollify the general population and lower ranks of the military as much as possible. But as these interests of SLORC, as an institution, began to diverge from the incentives that individual military elites faced, corruption became an increasing problem. By the mid-1990s, it had grown to the point that soldiers were barely getting paid as officers routinely took money from their paycheques (Thornton, 2011), and corruption at key Ministries like Trade and Agriculture was causing unrest amongst the population and drawing

\textsuperscript{44} The United States estimated that opium exports from Burma in 1996 equalled all of its legal exports (Mying, 2000, p.45).
\textsuperscript{45} The strategic use of the narcotics trade by SLORC was clear, as it would shift partnerships between different drug lords depending on who the American DEA was targeting, so it could continue to profit while denying complicity (Brown, 1999, p.248).
money away from SLORC coffers (Fink, 2001, p.94). To correct this, the senior leadership of SLORC instigated a massive purge in 1997 which included 14 senior SLORC leaders being excised from the junta (Guyot, 1998, pp.194-5). The purge left Than Shwe, Maung Aye, and Khin Nyunt unaffected, an indication of how those three had come to represent the core of junta leadership (Seekins, 2002, p.284).

In combination with the purge, SLORC rebranded itself as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). This was a significant development, particularly in light of the suspension of the National Convention the year prior. It was a clear declaration that the junta planned to stay in power for a longer term. Even the name change emphasized this shift from away from a temporary body, as it now called attention to peace and development rather than the restoration of law and order.

As had been the case when SLORC came into power, the new SPDC marked another iteration of elite replacement within the leadership ranks of the regime. The new nineteen-man council reflected a younger generation of officers,\(^\text{46}\) drawing from serving regional commanders and chiefs of the armed forces (Smith, 2001, p.22). The purge, as it had historically been employed, allowed for the selective promotion of younger officers based on their loyalty to the remaining leaders (Fink, 2001, p.94). By constantly providing a means of upward mobility for ambitious officers, it reinforced the value of loyalty to superiors while also allowing the military to continue to renew itself rather than risk becoming stagnant. The purges had also targeted officers deemed to be 'softliners' who favoured reform and engagement with the West (Callahan, 2010, p.63), signalling an unwillingness to relinquish power amidst growing confidence that long-term rule was possible.

Part of this confidence was due to increased regional stability, as the junta found itself protected from international pressure because of partnerships with countries like Thailand and China, from whom they purchased hundreds of millions of dollars of military equipment (Hauff, 2007, p.18). A difference in approach between the west and ASEAN also shielded Burma, as the former focused on

\(^\text{46}\) On average, new SPDC leaders were 10-20 years younger than Than Shwe and Maung Aye (Guyot, 1998, pp.194-5).
opprobrium and sanctions while the latter sought engagement. The financial impact of increased sanctions in 1997 were also offset by new orders from central command for regional commanders to provide for their troops' food and other needs locally (ICG, 2004b, p.9). This simultaneously gave license to commanders to pursue economic activities with private benefits while relieving central command of a heavy financial burden. While the purges had focused on weeding out corruption, it was clear the junta still relied on a quid pro quo relationship with regional commanders that offered them considerable autonomy as long as they remained loyal to central command. The policy of routinely rotating commanders between regions also ensured that a commander did not build up enough of a local power base to become too independent (The Burma Fund, 2002). The SPDC also cut spending on social services to the bone, with the budget allocation falling below 1% for the 1999/2000 financial year (Hauff, 2007, p.25). The decline in social spending, in addition to forcing more citizens to join the USDA to access the social services that were available, indicated the junta's decreasing need to placate civilian demands.

Despite sanctions taking a higher toll on the population, the SPDC remained secure in power through the combination of the military's coercive strength and the ability of junta leadership to minimize the impact of internal factionalism. Despite acquiescing to international demands for dialogue in the early 2000s,47 SLORC made no real effort during this period to even lay out a rudimentary map for a future transition. This balance survived until 2002 when two important events broke the détente and provided the first significant opportunity for a change in the status quo. The first was the arrest of Ne Win in 2002 under orders from Than Shwe (Hlaing, 2010, p.40). It was the mark of Shwe's strategic purging and promoting that he had been able to minimize Ne Win's influence within the junta (Min, 2008, p.1028), and it was a clear indication that Shwe was emerging as its undisputed leader. Shortly after came an even bigger development, as a crisis involving Military Intelligence, which Khin Nyunt headed, saw Nyunt lose significant influence within the SPDC. Because the SPDC was dependent on a

47 The SPDC and NLD held secret confidence-building talks over two years starting in autumn 2000 after pressure from UN envoys and the UN Security Council (Kurlantzick, 2002, p.138).
stable hierarchy, it was expected that senior officers could reign in deviant behaviour from subordinates. With allegations of corruption and irresponsible behaviour by intelligence agents, the burden was on Nyunt to deal with the issues and maintain stable relations between the different components of the military. The rising tension between the general army and military intelligence was an unacceptable situation, one that could potentially threaten the military's unity (Hlaing, 2009, p.280). With Than Shwe having already situated his own loyalist to be deputy of intelligence, it was clear that Nyunt's considerable influence was being challenged (2009, p.281). It is telling that even as the junta leadership sorted out the crisis, they made clear efforts to project an external image of stability. Despite his dwindling support within the SPDC, Nyunt was kept as the official head of military intelligence. He was also appointed as Prime Minister in 2003 (Than, 2006, p.184), an ostensible promotion which instead signalled his rapid fall from the top of the junta. As Prime Minister he had little influence within the military and served a nominally civilian role. With Nyunt marginalized, Than Shwe emerged as the undisputed leader of the SPDC, and Maung Aye sitting as the strong second.

**Initial Preparations for Transition (2003-2007)**

Despite Nyunt's declining status, his new position as Prime Minister placed him in a visible spot to push for new reforms. Wasting little time, he announced the Seven-Step Roadmap to Democracy in August 2003 (ICG, 2008a, p.21). It was the first solid sign of a plan for a post-junta Burma, and it reflected the progressive views of Nyunt while also underlining the interest of the military to remain involved in the political affairs of the state. The roadmap stressed a transition to a "disciplined democratic system", a clear qualification on civilian governance that would see the military involved as a moderator and a guarantor of stability (HRW, 2008, p.19). The first step in the roadmap was the resumption of the National Convention, which was convened within a year of the announcement to work on the new constitution (ICG, 2008a, p.21).
The rapid progress towards a transition plan was a jarring shift from the trajectory the SPDC had been on prior to 2003. The catalyst for the change in mindset occurred in May 2003 when a motorcade that Aung San Suu Kyi was travelling in was attacked (ICG, 2004a, p.2). The use of force against an immensely popular figure was the product of the consolidation of loyalty the junta had been undertaking as Shwe worked to secure his status as leader. By promoting hardliner military commanders loyal to him, Shwe empowered officers who favoured coercion over dialogue and compromise (2004a, p.7). Even if the order for the motorcade attack did not originate from the senior leadership of the junta, it was still a consequence of this internal consolidation process. The attack immediately drew international condemnation, particularly from the United States which stepped up sanctions and visa bans (2004a, p.3). Even ASEAN took a rare confrontational stance, demanding a return to dialogue with pro-democratic groups (Than, 2006, p.184). With pressure from all sides, it is clear the roadmap was an attempt to forestall future sanctions. Nyunt's appointment as Prime Minister, being the most visible moderate linked to the junta leadership, was also likely linked to addressing international concerns.

In spite of resuming in a significantly different context, the National Convention remained indicative of the junta's preoccupation with dictating the terms of Burma's future. With the NLD and ethnic political parties boycotting the process, there were few non-junta appointed delegates involved, with the exception of ceasefire group leaders (Oo & Min, 2007, p.51). But even these ethnic representatives found themselves marginalized, as every proposal involving devolution of administrative powers was summarily dismissed (2007, p.53). The constitution being drafted was following a specific template designed to guarantee the institutional interests of the military and securing its political involvement in the state.

Despite being the figurehead for the ongoing transition plan, Nyunt's tenure as Prime Minister would be short-lived. The final blow came when intelligence and army personnel clashed near the Chinese border in late 2004 (Hlaing, 2009, p.281). The incident led to the intelligence branch being
completely absorbed and made subordinate to the army (2009, p.282). With his base of power in the military completely wiped out, Nyunt found himself with little leverage and was dismissed and placed under house arrest (Jagan, 2011, p.223). He was replaced as Prime Minister by a Shwe loyalist named Soe Win, reflecting Shwe's desire to maintain absolute control within the SPDC (Hlaing, 2009, p.282). Win's appointment was notable as he had stated in early 2003 that the military would never negotiate with Suu Kyi or share power with the NLD, indicating a potential reversion from the reform agenda Nyunt had pushed (ICG, 2004a, p.7). The harsh treatment of Nyunt, who was sentenced to 40 years of house arrest was a clear message that Shwe's leadership was now uncontested (Hlaing, 2009, p.282).

The National Convention kept going, even after the purging of Nyunt, offering a clue to the SPDC's motivations. It was undoubtedly responding to international pressure, particularly now that ASEAN was no longer willing to shield it from criticism. But it is also likely that SPDC leadership realized they could not hold power so overtly for much longer. Understanding Shwe's move to consolidate control within the junta becomes more logical in this light. The delicate balancing that had defined the internal dynamics of the SPDC in the 1990s would have been severely tested during a transition to civilian rule, particularly since the ideological leanings of Nyunt was far more moderate than the other two senior leaders and he had displayed significant political ambition. By removing Nyunt from politics, the transition could be carried out along terms dictated by Shwe without fear of instability and infighting.

The National Convention also presented an opportunity for the regime to ensure a situation like the 1990 elections could not be easily replicated. By working to constitutionally secure the Tatmadaw's interests, even an NLD election would not be able to easily dislodge the military from the political sphere. This being said, the Convention represented only the initial steps to a transition, and there was little indication the drafting of a constitutional text would be quickly followed by elections and a return
to civilian rule. Whether the SPDC would have continued its rapid implementation of a transition plan voluntarily is a theoretical question as the events of 2007 would force its hand.

The Saffron Revolution⁴⁸ marked the biggest series of protests against military rule in Burma since 1988. There were remarkable parallels between the two, with the primary trigger again being an abrupt change in economic conditions. This time, it was the withdrawal of subsidies that had kept prices of basic commodities affordable to the public (Steinberg, 2008, p.52). Rapid inflation saw transportation and food prices hit the roof (Duell, 2011, p.54), and set off a series of protests over economic policies. The initial demonstrations were led by the "88 Generation", a prominent activist group with public appeal comprised mainly of students who had protests in 1988 (2011, p.52). After the SPDC arrested many of the initial activists, leadership came from an unprecedented source: Buddhist monks. Traditionally the Buddhist Sangha had been apolitical (ICG, 2010a, p.7), and the military used this passivity to suggest a tacit acquiescence to its control of the state. Post-1988, the military had increasingly used Buddhist rhetoric and symbols as a way of building its legitimacy amongst a wide swath of the population (McCarthy, 210, p.565). Consequently, when monks began to join the protests, it was a devastating blow to the military’s image. There was a notable generational distinction evident between politically active and passive monks, with the former tending to be much younger (Steinberg, 2008, p.54). Again, this political activism of youth stands in strong parallel to 1988, when it was students who took up the call against the military. Similar generational frictions even manifested in the NLD, with the Youth Wing exiting the party in 2007 after NLD leadership failed to take a strong stance supporting the protests (Callahan, 2009, p.60). As protests continued, more and more people joined until hundreds of protests involving hundreds of thousands of people raged across the country (Duell, 2011, p.55).

Despite remarkable similarities between 1988 and 2007, it was quickly clear the SPDC was much stronger than the old BSPP leadership had been in the face of the protests. After initially allowing

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⁴⁸ The Saffron Revolution took place from August 19 to October 31, 2007 (Duell, 2011, p.54).
protestors to carry on unmolested, the regime cracked down in late September (ICG, 2008a, p.2). The scope of the crackdown was perversely impressive, with intelligence officers using photographs and videos to systematically detain anyone they believed to have participated in the protests (2008a, p.3). The message was clear: nobody could protest in anonymity, and nobody would be exempt from retribution. Even the monks were targeted, with monasteries being smashed and monks arrested and beaten (2008a, p.3). The violence against the Sangha irrevocably severing any perception of a link between the Sangha and the SPDC. The violence against the monks also generated immense anger from the Burmese people, but the show of force by the military effectively quelled demonstrations before they could turn violent (2008a, p.5). However, despite addressing the short-term threat, it was clear the SPDC had made a grave blunder in using open violence against protestors and monks. In addition to domestic resentment, the violence drew condemnation from the international community. ASEAN was particularly notable for issuing a united and forceful criticism of the crackdown, particularly considering the friendly relations Burma maintained with many individual members (HRW, 2008, p.52). Even China began pushing for restraint and reform from the junta (ICG, 2008a, p.8).

The junta initially responded by becoming more insular, limiting its interactions with the outside world (ICG, 2008b, p.10). It was difficult to state the protests had yielded any real change. But a fundamental shift in perception had occurred, as the SPDC stood with the military but remained ostracized from every element of civil society save for those it had itself created. It could retain power but only through force, and without the support of the Sangha, the continued loyalty of soldiers to the SPDC became questionable. So when the National Convention finished the draft constitutional text in September 2007, it provided a new course of action (ICG, 2008a, p.21). Before the end of the year, the SPDC announced elections would be held, although it remained coy on exact timing (McCarthy, 2008, p.312). But it was clear the timeline had been accelerated, with Than Shwe making it a top priority that the constitution be promulgated (Seekins, 2009, p.170). International developments, like the election of
Barack Obama to the American presidency also marked an important shift as it provided an opportunity for friendlier relations with the leader of the west (Johnston, 2010). Easing of sanctions would create a windfall of revenue, both to the state and to the various elites, within and outside of the state, who stood to gain privately from their own privileged access to the economy.

The Referendum for a New Constitution (2008)

Following the conclusion of the National Convention, the SPDC announced a referendum would be held in 2008 to help ratify the new constitution. The limited scope given to the people to vote on the constitution illustrated the commitment of the junta to seeing it promulgated. First the SPDC decreed the draft constitution could not be criticized (Steinberg, 2008, p.52), and then it limited the availability of the text so that most voters did not even have an opportunity to understand what it was they were voting for (Steinberg, 2010, p.144). The referendum was scheduled for May 2008, creating another tangible point on the transition timeline, but before it could be held, one of the worst natural disasters in Burma’s history struck the country.

Cyclone Nargis hit Burma on May 2, 2008, eight days before the referendum was scheduled to be held (Seekins, 2009, p.169). The storm left massive physical damage with hundreds of thousands of people dead or injured (ICG, 2008b, pp.1-2). The initial response from the government was inexcusably slow, with little leadership from senior generals (2008b, p.4). This led to an ad hoc response by various state departments, and it also created an accountability vacuum which allowed local authorities in many areas to hoard goods for themselves while substituting inferior products (2008b, p.3). The willingness and ability of local authorities to engage in profiteering amidst a crisis was an indicting reflection on the level of institutional decay that had set in. With the junta still stinging from international criticism after the Saffron Revolution, it put a priority on securing itself first (2008b, p.10), and focused on the referendum even as thousands were dying. The lack of strong technocratic expertise or an efficient
bureaucracy to mitigate this lack of responsiveness further exacerbated the crisis, as there was simply not enough knowledge or capacity to deal with the situation on all levels of government.

The regime would eventually come around, and it accelerated humanitarian assistance. In contrast to the junta's typical emphasis on self-sufficiency and remaining insulated from the outside world, the humanitarian programs for Nargis had heavy international involvement, aided in no small part by strong pressure from ASEAN for the SPDC to allow foreign assistance into the country (ICG, 2008b, p.22). But even as an unprecedented relief effort unfolded, it was clear the SPDC remained fixated on pushing the constitution through. The referendum was held as scheduled on May 10th, with voting delayed until May 24th in fourty-seven townships that had been hardest hit townships from the storm (Seekins, 2009, p.169). To further underline the importance of the referendum, the SPDC pulled soldiers away from disaster relief to oversee voting (2009, p.169). Much of the rush was due to increasing pressure from the international community to let aid workers into the country. By holding the referendum as scheduled, the SPDC sought to prevent foreign observers from reporting on the voting process. Given the results of the referendum, it appears clear the SPDC was worried about reports of irregularities. Despite the ongoing crisis, the constitution passed with 92% voting in favour (ICG, 2008b, p.1), a skeptical result, especially in light of many voters claiming their votes had been submitted without their consent or knowledge (Steinberg, 2010, p.144).

The newly promulgated constitution set out a complex system balancing military and civilian interests. In addition to guaranteeing the right of the Tatmadaw to "independently administer and adjudicate all affairs of the armed forces" (Article 20(b)), the constitution also entrenched the right for the military to "participate in the National political leadership role of the State" (Article 6(f)). The

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49 The influence of military ideology is clear when the constitution articulates the central mandate of the Tatmadaw (Than 2011, p.17), namely the duty of the military "for safeguarding the non-disintegration of the Union, the non-disintegration of National solidarity and the perpetuation of sovereignty" (Article 20(e)).

50 All clauses obtained from the English translation of the 2008 Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar unless otherwise specified.
Military can also control all security-related ministries and committees (Pedersen, 2011, p.54). Other clauses help institutionalize particular loyalty mechanisms\(^{51}\) that the Tatmadaw historically used in recruiting and retaining soldiers. In short the provisions set out a broad mandate for the military to fulfill, and the autonomy and security to prevent significant civilian interference. Simultaneously, the constitution guarantees a the military's presence in the political sphere, including guaranteeing a quarter of all seats in legislative bodies at federal and regional levels,\(^{52}\) appointed at the discretion of the Commander in Chief of the military (Than, 2011, p.24). This condition, taken with the constitutional amendment formula, which requires a 75%+1 vote for an amendment to pass, ensures no amendment harming military interests can pass. And because it is the Commander in Chief who appoints military representatives, the head of the Tatmadaw has both the means and the incentive to ensure military representatives continue to vote as a bloc on important issues. The Commander also has the power to appoint ministers and deputy ministers for Defence, Home Affairs and Border Areas (Than, 2011, p.25), again providing a defense to stop civilian oversight from encroaching on military affairs.

Despite the significant powers protected for the military, the constitution does not make the relationship between the Tatmadaw and the civilian government completely asymmetrical. The military, through its legislative representation, has a strong input on who makes up the executive branch, serving as one of three electoral colleges that sponsors and votes on candidates (Holliday, 2010, p.58). Stipulations in the constitution that mandate a presidential candidate have extensive familiarity with the military (Article 59(d)) further ensure that appointments to the Presidency will have an appreciation of military interests. The President also has a significant input on who is appointed the Commander in Chief of the armed forces (Article 342), although this is done through consultation with

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\(^{51}\) For instance, Article 32 ensures the state has the responsibility to care for the families of fallen military personnel and to help ensure that injured ex-soldiers are given free vocational training and a decent living.  
\(^{52}\) Articles 109 and 141
the National Defence and Security Council, a powerful body with at least eight seats appointed by the Tatmadaw.

The multiple checks placed on civilian power can be construed as an attempt to maintain a status quo. And in many regards, this is certainly the case. The constitution is blatant about protecting the traditional interests of the military, and preventing any serious circumscription of the military's ability to fulfill its mandate of protecting the country. There is also potential for exploitation of the military's power, wherein it could take over administrative duties during times of crises (Articles 413 and 417). But as a whole, the constitution clearly strives to defend the military from being marginalized in the political sphere. The requirement that the military have 25% of representation in legislative bodies cannot allow it to stop legislation unilaterally. But it is enough to ensure future governments would not be able to pass a major constitutional amendment without the consent of the military. The mechanisms for appointing the Commander in Chief and the President also allow for partnerships at the executive level between the military and civilian government, since both leaders have an influence on the political success of the other.

This in turn highlights the importance of distinguishing between how the constitution protects the corporate interests of the military and how it affects the interests of elites, both civilian and in the military. The requirements set out for Presidential candidacy create significant opportunity for military elites with political aspirations. But in order to fulfill those personal ambitions, there is an incentive for these military elites to work with government. This raises questions of what would happen if the corporate interests of the military begin to diverge significantly from the policy-making of the civilian government, or if military elites dissatisfied with the role of the Tatmadaw in politics begin to act as

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53 The NDSC is composed of the President, VP-1, VP-2, Speaker of the Pyithu Hluttaw (lower house), Speaker of the Amyotha Hluttaw (upper house), Commander-in-Chief, Deputy CiC, Ministers of Defence, Foreign Affairs, Home Affairs and Border Affairs (Article 201 of the Constitution).

54 Assuming that the Tatmadaw can ensure its representatives will vote as a bloc on important initiatives, a likely scenario given military representatives are chosen by the Commander in Chief.
spoilers. Such future concerns explain some of the conditions within the constitution which allow the military to seize control of the state once more. But overall, the constitution clearly sets out to create a sustainable partnership between the military and civilian governments, by protecting institutional interests and creating channels within which elites from both sides can realize their personal goals while working within the system.

**Transition to Civilian Rule: New Incentives for Old Elite (2009-Present)**

The rapid steps taken towards transitioning to civilian rule were met with general positivity by the international community, with the U.S. announcing in early 2009 that it would begin normalizing relations as long as the SPDC maintained momentum in the transition process (Rieffel & Gilpin, 2010). But it was quickly clear that even while the junta was prepared to allow a transition to civilian rule, it was not going to allow a repeat of the 1990 elections. In May 2009, it arrested Aung San Suu Kyi once again, this time on charges that she had violated the terms of her house arrest (Seekins, 2010, pp.195-6), a move clearly intended to remove her influence from the electoral landscape. With Suu Kyi under house arrest, there was a dearth of charismatic leadership for parties that represented the pro-democratic movement (Pedersen, 2011, p.56). It also converted the USDA into the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), creating a formidable party that further indicated the SPDC's strategy of securing its desired outcome in the short-term. The direct affiliation between the USDP and the junta gave the party an immense advantage, with government officials often canvassing for the USDP across the country through a combination of propaganda, threats and vote buying (2011, p.55). Unlike 1990, when the junta found itself losing legitimacy because it was opposing a democratic movement, the USDP represented a move to capture the label of a democratic party, even as its leadership remained deeply linked to the junta. The National Unity Party, which had been the junta-endorsed party in 1990, also remained operational, giving the military old guard a significant advantage in the elections. With 25% of legislative seats already guaranteed to the military, the seats won by the USDP and the NUP...
would further secure that the new civilian government could not act against the interests of the Tatmadaw or SPDC leaders.

In addition to the regime working to secure its post-transition influence on policy-making, the military also began in earnest to address a fundamental incompatibility between the constitution and the reality of Burma, namely Article 338: "all the armed forces in the Union shall be under the command of the Defence Services". Because the ceasefire agreements had allowed ethnic groups to remain armed, this meant several armed groups operated in Burma outside the authority of the Tatmadaw, some of whom had significant resources at their disposal. The rush to secure a settlement prior to the transition was likely aided by concern that any post-transition settlement talks would see the incorporation of armed units into the Tatmadaw on terms the military would not find palatable. This draws back to the Ne Win era, when political dialogue seeking to incorporate insurgent groups into the military was met with stiff resistance because of the dangers incorporation would pose to the existing hierarchy and internal cohesion.

The initial tactic of the military was to issue deadlines to CFA groups, indicating they transform into border guard forces (BGF) controlled and paid for by the Tatmadaw (Hlaing, 2010, p.47). This clumsy approach was effective on smaller groups, like the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, who had little recourse but to accept the ultimatum (2010, p.47). Stronger groups, like those operating in the Kokang region of the Shan State, rejected the demand immediately. The lack of trust between the military and ethnic armed groups was a major barrier to peaceful integration, particularly given the disillusionment with the military regime amongst many ethnic groups following their marginalization during the constitution drafting process.
After its initial strategy failed, the Tatmadaw launched an offensive on the Kokang region in mid-2009, creating a massive migration of refugees into the bordering Yunnan province of China (ICG, 2010b, p.1). The crisis was enough to compel China into pressuring the SPDC to focus on settlements rather than a military victory (2010b, p.1), a significant development considering China was one of the few countries that had influence on the regime. The combination of pressure from China, coupled with the ineffectiveness of the ultimatums in yielding results (Williams, 2011, p.1209), led to an eventual shift to seeking negotiated settlements, although much of it was left until after the transition into civilian rule.

The SPDC announced that elections would be held in 2010, indicating another firm date in the transition plan. What remained unclear was how the old network of political elites located within the military and the state, and the affiliated patronage relationships with private economic actors, would change with the elections. There was no doubt a new civilian government would force a significant reformation, particularly as the junta era had seen many elites operating as members of both the military and the state, something that would not occur under civilian rule. It was also clear that 2010 would mark, as had been the case in 1988 and 1997, a major phase of elite replacement within the Tatmadaw. Many of the incumbent leadership would have to decide whether to continue within the military, resign and pursue a civilian political career, or simply retire. With many well into their 70s, a younger generation was clearly being prepared to take over leadership of the Tatmadaw (Callahan, 2010, p.62). There was also the issue of how patronage networks would translate into the civilian era. Many of the partnerships that had formed between military elites and private investors were products of state control over the economy. With many of these elites exiting or losing the same level of access to the economy, this would undoubtedly have an adverse effect. The solution was announced in 2009

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55 It chose Kokang because of the relatively small size of the armed group, its internal divisions, and its reputation in the narcotics trade (Seekins, 2010, p.201). This is further indicative of how conscientious the Tatmadaw is of optics, particularly with regards to international observers and how they may interpret violent campaigns by the military in Burma.
when the SPDC launched the first of several waves of privatization\textsuperscript{56} (ICG, 2010a, p.8). Justified as a way of coming into line with IMF recommendations, it was clear from the lack of transparency and accountability that the sales were being rigged to go to particular bidders\textsuperscript{57} (2010a, p.8). In addition to regime cronies snapping up assets at lucrative prices, the Tatmadaw also moved to take control of parts of the private sector. The Myanmar Economic Holdings Company\textsuperscript{58} had businesses transferred directly into its ownership from government ministries,\textsuperscript{59} indicating a pre-emptive means of mitigating the greatest leverage a civilian government can wield against the military: its budget. By limiting its economic vulnerability, the Tatmadaw ensured it could remain autonomous.

With many of the lucrative relationships that had incentivized military elites during the junta era now secured in the private sphere, an opportunity for senior military leadership to exit presented itself. In April 2010, Thein Sein, who had been the acting Prime Minister, along with twenty other ministers and deputies resigned from the armed forces to join the USDP as it transitioned into a formal party (ICG, 2010a, p.10). This marked the first step in preparing for the dissolution of the SPDC. The military also began preparing for a generational shift, with top remaining SPDC leadership\textsuperscript{60} resigning from active military duty in August 2010 (Doherty, 2010). With Than Shwe stepping aside, he was replaced by Min Aung Hlaing as the army chief (Allchin, 2011). This selection, along with the head of military intelligence, Major General Soe Shein, who would be appointed later, were telling choices as both are seen to be extremely loyal to Shwe (DVP, 2011). Hlaing’s rise to power is particularly illustrative of the interplay of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{56} The scope was staggering, with assets from ports to the state-run airline to much of the energy sector being put up for auction (ICG, 2010a, p.8).
\item \textsuperscript{57} For instance, the state monopoly on the importation, pricing, and distribution of gasoline and diesel was sold to Tay Za, a close associate of Than Shwe and other senior generals, and to Aung Thet Mann, son of Shwe Mann, the number-3 general in the junta (The Irrawaddy, 2010b). Majority ownership of the state airline, Myanmar Airways International, was bought by a private bank owned by Aung Ko Win, close associate of number-2 general, Maung Aye (Din, 2011).
\item \textsuperscript{58} As mentioned earlier, the MEHC is an economic conglomerate owned by the military that was created shortly after the seizure of the state by SLORC.
\item \textsuperscript{59} This included assets ranging from gold and gem mining to a chain of department stores to ocean vessels (Wine, 2010).
\item \textsuperscript{60} This included Than Shwe, Maung Aye, Thura Shwe Mann, and Myint Oo, the top-four generals in the junta.
\end{itemize}
loyalty and hierarchy in the military. His promotion meant he bypassed Lt. General Myint Aung, a senior graduate from the Defence Services Academy, in the line of succession (Moe, 2011a). Because it violated the hierarchy of ascendancy, this created a source of tension. In order to correct it, Myint Aung was offered a civilian position as the Defence Minister\(^{61}\) which he turned down (Moe, 2011a), because it was seen as subordinate to the Commander in Chief (Allchin, 2011). Myint Aung was put under house arrest shortly after turning down the position (Allchin, 2011). When Hlaing was officially appointed as head of the military, he quickly shuffled the top ranks and sacked several high-ranking officers to consolidate his control and minimize potential factionalism (ICG, 2011b, p.14). This string of events serve as strong indications of how the tactics used to reinforce internal solidarity and enhance security of senior leadership, namely strategic purging, maintaining a strict hierarchy, and ensuring the loyalty of subordinates, remain in active use.

The decision by Shwe to bypass the established hierarchy and promote Hlaing was motivated by concerns of loyalty. While many senior SPDC leaders were resigning to run for the elections, it was unlikely that Than Shwe or Maung Aye, two of the oldest members of the junta, would continue a political career. And even though the constitution provided amnesty for individuals who had carried out junta orders (ICG, 2009, p.8), the ignominious end of Ne Win’s life under house arrest by order of Than Shwe undoubtedly weighed heavily in the mind of the senior general. With a civilian government coming in, Shwe’s appointment of a new Tatmadaw chief would be the last without the participation of civilian actors. By securing his preferred selection before the elections, Shwe could guarantee at least short-term security for himself. At the time, it was unclear whether Than Shwe had a desire to continue to be politically active, with some believing Shwe’s push for the constitution and elections were his “exit strategy” (Seekins, 2009, p.170),\(^{62}\) while others pointed to evidence like the 2010 Myanmar Reserve

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\(^{61}\) Recall that the Constitution set out the right for the military to appoint that position.

\(^{62}\) The quote is attributed to political analyst Aung Naing Oo
Forces Act, a piece of legislation which had been gazetted but not enacted, as proof that Shwe was preparing to stay in power. In hindsight, these measures appear to have been put in place for defensive purposes to prevent a repeat of the 1990 elections and to allow senior junta elites to protect their interests and themselves. The promotion of Shwe loyalists to key military positions, and the explicit announcements that the SPDC would be dissolved after the election lend considerable weight to this.

Ultimately, these precautions proved unnecessary as the November 2010 elections earned a massive victory for parties seen as sympathetic to the Tatmadaw and the SPDC. The USDP won more than 80% of available seats, with the bulk of the rest going to the NUP (Turnell, 2011, p.139). The NLD had not even bothered to contest the elections because a 2010 law had required the party to expel Aung San Suu Kyi before it could register (Hlaing, 2010, p.34). Instead of acquiescing, the NLD disbanded as a legal political party to protest the elections (Rieffel, 2010, p.8). The harassment of Suu Kyi by the SPDC and the very overt attempts to exclude her from any significant political office clearly indicated how threatening the regime found her to be, and how little they trusted their chances of securing a majority if she had participated in the elections. The victory of the USDP, aided by some voting irregularities, meant the second-largest bloc in legislature was the group of unelected representatives of the military. Former general Thein Sein was elected as President, and his two Vice-Presidents were General Tin Aung Myint Oo and Dr. Sai Mauk Kham (Turnell, 2011, p.139). The fact that Dr. Kham was convinced to run as a USDP candidate despite having strong connections to the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (ICG, 2011a, p.4), shows the desire of the USDP to build good will amongst ethnic minority voters. In addition to Sein and Oo, other former SPDC leaders appeared throughout the new

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63 The Myanmar Reserve Forces Act would have allowed retired members to be placed in the reserved forces for five years, within which time they could be recalled (ICG, 2011a, p.8). Theoretically, Shwe could have been recalled to take over as the chief commander of the Tatmadaw within a five year window if the law had been enacted.

64 While elections were largely free of violence, there was almost undoubtedly vote-fraud and intimidation. One of the biggest issues was over 'advance votes', which should have only involved small numbers but ended up accounting for six million ballots or 10% of the total votes cast (ICG Asia Briefing, No.118, 2011, p.2).

65 The SNDP was the highest vote-getter amongst ethnic parties, winning more seats than the NUP in the 2010 elections (DVP, 2010).
government, headlined by the election of Shwe Mann, formerly the third-ranking general in the SPDC, as the speaker of the lower house (2011a, p.3).

The SPDC remained active for a period following the elections, claiming it was to help ensure a stable transition. But the lessons learned from 1990 were quite evident. It maintained the pretext for staying in power if there was an unpalatable outcome to the election. The SPDC had not committed to dissolving itself immediately after the elections, even going so far as to allocate a portion of the 2011-12 budget for the council (Moe, 2011b). This again appears to have been a precautionary measure, as Shwe officially dissolved the SPDC in March 2011 as the new civilian government led by the USDP was sworn in (BBC News, 2011a).

While the constitution could be analyzed ad nauseum to try and decipher the particular relationships it sets out between the military and civilian government, it still cannot offer a proper understanding of how latent power structures have been transformed, as the new set of politicians created through the electoral process have to be more responsive to a wider selectorate than the junta ever had to cater to. While Burma’s new government is a mix of old and new political elites, the incentives facing all of them are starkly different from the incentives that political elites faced during military rule.

Thein Sein has emerged as a progressive-minded head of state, focusing on three key issue areas: economic reform, accountability in national politics, and improving Burma’s human rights record (ICG, 2011b, p.1); and on improving relations with political opposition, ethnic minorities and the international community (2011b, p.2).

With respect to political opposition, the first positive development was repealing the law which prevented Aung San Suu Kyi from running in elections (BBC News, 2012a). This allowed her to stand in runoff elections with the NLD in April 2011, where they won 43 out of a possible 45 seats (ICG, 2012a, p.1). Although it sits as a minority party, it still won enough seats to form the official opposition (2012a,
p.1). What is perhaps more important is that the USDP only won one seat in the runoff, and that one did not even have an NLD candidate running against it (2012a, p.8). Suu Kyi remains immensely popular with the people, as her own landslide victory indicated (2012a, p.8), but the questions still abound about her future in politics. The constitutional requirements for presidency are literally meant to keep her out of the office,⁶⁶ and it would be much harder to amend than the law which forbid her from running for a seat in legislature. Her advanced age is also a concern, as she will be approaching 70 by the time of the next elections (BBC News, 2012a), and there is a dearth of charismatic or recognizable figures to succeed her as the symbol of democracy in Burma.

But despite these long-term concerns, it is clearly evident that the NLD enjoys massive appeal among voters. While it currently sits as a minority party, it stands a strong chance of winning a majority barring any future restrictions, which appear unlikely given the warming relations between Thein Sein's government and Suu Kyi (Lintner, 2012). But the degree to which the NLD's success at dominating the legislature will translate into influence at the executive level remains in question. The constitution sets out clear requirements that neither the President nor the Vice-Presidents can have active roles in their party during their term in office (Article 64). While this would appear counterintuitive given the USDP's current dominance in the legislature, the text was clearly written with a longer time horizon in mind, one with an eye towards the possibility of parties like the NLD grabbing dominant shares of the seats. By stipulating that serving heads of state cannot actively participate in their party, it weakens the link between the leader and party and enhances the relationship between the head of state and other actors, like the military.

That is not to suggest the legislature by itself cannot become a potent vehicle for policy. Shwe Mann, speaker of the lower house, has emerged as a powerful political figure who has quickly built up a

⁶⁶ Many of these criteria are quite transparent efforts to ensure Aung San Suu Kyi can never run for the Presidency, including Article 59(f) “shall he himself, one of the parents, the spouse, one of the legitimate children or their spouses not owe allegiance to a foreign power”. This would have made Suu Kyi ineligible given she was formerly married to a British citizen and her children are also British citizens.
strong civilian support base. He has ensured the lower house would be more than a rubberstamp for a
strong executive and instead a legitimate check on executive power as well as an institution with
genuine agency in terms of policy making (ICG, 2011b, p.12). Given his demonstrable political
ambitions, it is unsurprising that he is seen to be vying for a presidential candidacy in the 2015 elections
(ICG, 2012a, p.10). Given the dominance of the NLD in the runoffs, Shwe Mann's own seat remains
insecure regardless of how much influence he has within the house. With Sein unlikely to run in the next
elections due to his advanced age (2012a, p.10), the timing is right for Mann to make his mark now.

Shwe Mann presents an illustrative case on how the incentives influencing the behaviour of
political elites has changed from junta to civilian rule. Instead of having to work to appease and win the
good graces of senior military leadership, political elites have to be able to credible demonstrate to their
constituents that they can provide the goods and services the population needs. With so much pressure
for reform in Burma, on so many fronts, this has incentivized political elites to spearhead reform
initiatives and dampened the ability of hardliners to act as spoilers (ICG, 2011b, p.1). Take the second
prong of Sein's reform initiative for example: reconciliation with ethnic minority communities. The
government has aggressively pursued negotiated settlements with armed ethnic groups, with efforts
led by two delegations: one appointed by legislature and the other appointed by the President. The first
group is led by two ex-SPDC hardliners, Thein Zaw and Aung Thaung, closely affiliated with Shwe Mann
(ICG, 2012a, p.5) but not with Thein Sein (ICG, 2011c, p.21). The willingness of known hardliners to
participate in a solution that would have been characterized as moderate to soft under the SPDC shows
the powerful pull that electoral responsibilities has on raising the personal political cost of acting as a

67 There have been concerns the desire to settle with ethnic armed groups is not motivated as much by an interest
in ethnic reconciliation as it is to help secure territory in order to continue aggressive development projects,
mostly involving energy production and extraction (ICG, 2011c, p.9). The outsourcing of some ceasefire talks to
commercial elements have also seen the involvement of recognized 'cronies', like Ngwe Soe, director of the Dawei
Princess Company (Kapi, 2012), further increasing concerns economics is what is driving the desire to settle
conflicts. For the state, because the central government has exclusive jurisdiction to tax resources, there is an
additional incentive to secure the territory and create another revenue stream (ICG, 2011c, p.14).
spoiler. The competition between the legislature and the executive to take the lead on dealing with ethnic minority grievances through similar means is testament to this.

The initial dividends of negotiations with ethnic armed groups are promising, with almost all major groups having signed ceasefire agreements with the government.68 The qualification here is that the signing of ceasefires is only a stepping-stone to a more permanent resolution, and there is still a significant amount of progress needed for groups to disarm and reintegrate into the formal political process. The political and economic dividends (see footnote 67) that peace could bring will ensure there is constant pressure on the state to achieve settlements, but there has to be similar commitments on the other side. Currently there appears to be a willingness to continue political dialogue, even amongst powerful groups like the United Wa State Army, which has operated in virtual autonomy for decades.69

Part of this goodwill has to do with warm relations between the military and the civilian government. Despite the military having considerable autonomy with regards to security, the current military leadership has endorsed Sein's reform agenda and has allowed the civilian government to take the lead. When Sein ordered the Tatmadaw only use force in self-defence in ongoing campaigns against the Kachin Independence Army, these orders were not only accepted by Commander in Chief Hlaing but also relayed to regional commanders publicly (ICG, 2012a, p.8). Part of this is attributable to Hlaing's view that the military is a distinct institution but one that has to be responsive to the needs and demands of the state (2012a, p.8). But the willingness to support government initiatives, and build up goodwill amongst both voters and current leaders, is also linked with the political aspirations of senior military leadership. Since one can no longer automatically leverage a senior position in the Tatmadaw into influence in the state, military elites with political ambitions need to demonstrate characteristics

68 The notable exception is the Kachin Independence Army, which remains actively fighting the state at the time of writing (Weng, 2012b).
69 The UWSA agreed to an initial peace agreement in September 2011, essentially marking a recommitment to the CFA signed with SLORC (ICG, 2011c, p.21). The commitment to future dialogue is an important step, but given the lucrative terms of the CFA the UWSA had signed earlier, it may have been a largely symbolic move to reaffirm it since the ethnic group benefited considerably from it as is.
palatable to the voting public while also winning political capital with incumbent elites in government. With Sein preparing to step down in the next elections, and Hlaing up for mandatory retirement from the military in 2016, the 2015 elections would mark an excellent opportunity for him to pursue a bid for President (ICG, 2011b, p.14). With Hlaing’s current capacity to appoint a quarter of all legislative seats, and the particular way in which the Presidential candidates are voted upon, he stands a strong chance of a successful bid.

The personal incentives for elites like Hlaing or Shwe Mann offer an insight into the political prospects of Burma. It is clear that while hierarchy remains emphasized within the military-guaranteeing it will remain a cogent and powerful institutional force in Burma- the importance of hierarchy in influencing and constraining the behaviour of elite in government has lost much of its explanatory value. Rather, the ability of political elites to move up in station will be tied to their ability to produce tangible results for their constituents, again helping explain the almost universal support for reform within the current government despite the presence of many traditional hardliners. While this is a positive development, it draws into attention the reality that there is a massive chasm between what the government aspires to do and what it is actually capable of doing in a short span of time. One of the main prongs of the reform agenda is the economy, and the government may simply lack the capacity implement policy. The massive privatization that was carried out shortly before the dissolution of the SPDC has created an effective oligarchy of super-rich private actors with strong connections to former and current political elite (Turnell, 2011, p.85). Limited infrastructure and stagnant development also

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70 Recall that the process involves three electoral colleges, one representing the upper house, another representing the lower house, and the third representing the military (Pedersen, 2011, p.58).
71 For instance, the state employs an outdated tax system and has a weak capacity in tax collection, draining significant potential revenue that could come from income, sales, and business taxes (ICG, 2012b, pp.3-4). The consequences of this weak ability to tax and how it will affect the influence voters have on the government, as compared to foreign interests, will be significant.
72 Even though there have been increased efforts made to break up the exclusive fraternity that dominated the economy during military rule (ICG, 2012b, p.6), the degree to which economic assets have been concentrated into an exclusive group will hinder such attempts. There have been some significant breakthroughs, including the resignation of Vice President Tin Aung Myint Oo, who was seen as being particularly close to business elites. With
means the government’s effective reach across its territory will remain circumscribed in the short-term. There is also increasing discontent amongst local communities who feel the rush to secure foreign investment, particularly from China and India, is making the government more concerned with placating foreign interests than addressing local issues. Continued insecurity in the border regions, in spite of ceasefire negotiations, also poses a potential dilemma to the unity of the country.

Given the obstacles the civilian government faces, the support of the Tatmadaw is a significant boon. A positive development easing short term tensions is the sudden influx of capital into the state due to the lifting of sanctions and the creation of new economic agreements. While the historical tendency to devote a massive share of the budget to the military will have to be adjusted as new concerns are prioritized by the state, more available funds helps ameliorate the fact that the budget share for the military will decrease. For example, even as the military budget dipped from 23.6% to 14.4% of government spending, the military enjoyed an absolute increase in funding by 57% for the 2011-2012 fiscal year (McCarten, 2012). The power of the Commander in Chief to access 'Special Funds', a black budget designated for tasks of protecting national sovereignty and the Constitution, effectively give the military unlimited resources for extraordinary events (Moe, 2011b). But the long-term commitment of the military to work with civilian initiatives is not guaranteed by any means. The combination of the economic autonomy the military possesses, along with the constitutional provisions that protect its interests, mean a leadership shift could lead to a more volatile relationship between the military and the state in the future. Currently, there is a tacit understanding between the military and the executive that the latter will not interfere with the military’s autonomy and the former will refrain

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73 Indian and Chinese investors, both from the state and private sector, have rapidly increased their holdings within Burma, leading to concerns that the majority of returns from continued economic development will not be enjoyed by the domestic population in Burma (ICG, 2010a, p.9).

74 For instance, the territory controlled by the United Wa State Army arguably has stronger connections with China than it does with Burma, including using primarily Chinese currency and even being allowed to have their children enroll in Chinese high schools (ICG, 2011c, p.21).
from interfering in political and administrative issues (ICG, 2011b, p.14). But if an administration is voted in that seeks to cast more civilian oversight over the military, it could create tension with conservative elements within the military that want to see the status quo preserved. More immediately, the natural inclination of a civilian government to have control over its territory will create a clash with how the military traditionally maintained its internal stability and operational capacity, namely the autonomy granted to regional commanders. With the same scope no longer possible under civilian rule, the space for personal profiteering by regional commanders or other officers is severely limited, drawing into question how this will work itself out. While the carrot of a promotion will help dissuade many from excessive abuse of power, the lack of adequate oversight by the government will always create the temptation for profiteering. The need to reform the internal command structure of the military to make it compatible with a civilian government has yet to be addressed, and the question is whether this will test the military's historical prioritization of maintaining a strict hierarchy. This balancing of adequate internal oversight within the Tatmadaw with resisting civilian pressure to maintain independent oversight will be a pressure point on military-state relations moving forward.

Conclusion

The future of Burma appears brighter now than it has in decades. But the path forward is fraught with pitfalls, not least of which is how the Tatmadaw will react long-term to a more autonomous civilian government. The current system creates sufficient incentives for elites within the military to cooperate with civilian leadership, and the constitutional protections of military autonomy prevent civilian governments from unilaterally marginalizing the military's role in the state. But the delicate issues the civilian government will have to confront, not least of which is the question of autonomy versus unity for ethnic minority communities within Burma, will test civil-military relations. Successive elections with be instructive in helping further define the military's new role in the state, particularly if the NLD wins a majority as is expected now. But the enduring tenacity with which military leadership
enforces internal solidarity ensures that the Tatmadaw will remain an internally cohesive body with strong leadership that allows it to act rapidly and effectively. It remains ready to catch the state if civilian leadership were to fail in finding acceptable solutions to the myriad of problems facing the state: from ongoing ethnic discord to economic stagnation to corruption. The ways in which military and civilian leadership identify compatible solutions to these problems will have a strong influence on whether the Tatmadaw remains a partner to state initiatives or re-emerges as a competitor.

For Future Research
There are innumerable groups other than the military that will have a significant say in the future of Burma. The prospects of democratic parties moving forward, with many facing organizational and institutional deficiencies, will have significant consequences. Even the NLD lacks a strong ideological cohesion, instead being bound tightly around the charisma of Aung San Suu Kyi. The failure of civilian government in 1962 was linked to the inability of parties to form cogent policies. Once the momentum for reform begins to slow down, this test of the capacity of government to pass policy regularly and effectively will come to the forefront. How it performs will have long-term consequences on both civil-military relations and the well-being of the Burmese people. The regional component, particularly the influence of ASEAN, China and India, also needs further research to highlight how the interests of neighbouring states will influence a still nascent civilian regime in Burma. Finally, the ongoing problems involving Burma's ethnic minorities, from the Karen to the Rohingya, poses Burma's greatest challenge. Many armed groups remain embedded in large narcotics networks that are immensely profitable and which will be difficult to disengage from. Understanding the political and economic ambitions of these groups will be key to understanding how Burma's government must balance the call by ethnic minorities for more autonomy with its own natural inclination to finally consolidate control over all of its territory. These issues, and many more, have to be examined in greater depth to fully appreciate the obstacles still facing Burma's push to become a strong state.
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