

# The persistence of military domination in Myanmar

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### How can the persistence of military domination in Myanmar be explained?

#### Introduction

Myanmar's post-colonial era is characterised by the domination of the military as the key actor in the state's politics over the 62-year period since British rule ended. A comparatively brief 'parliamentary period' (1948 – 1962) aside – when the ruling coalition was riven by factionalism, and internecine conflict plagued the nascent state – military domination has persisted under various guises through to the present day, to the extent that the *Tatmadaw* ('military') is synonymous with the state [1] and that Myanmar's system of rule can be described as 'praetorian', in that "military officers are the major...political actors by virtue of their actual or threatened use of force".[2] Democratic elections have only once resulted in the installation of a civilian-led government in Myanmar. Indeed, the country offers a counter-argument to the "conventional wisdom among political scientists that 'military rule is the shortest form of authoritarian regime in the developing world'". [3]

This paper will account for the reasons for the persistence of the Tatmadaw's chokehold on rule in Myanmar, rejecting the assumption that it is manifested purely through the 'top-down' explanation of "sheer force and terror"[4] meted out by the junta, or indeed by the threat of it. Rather, it is asserted that while repression is endemic, military regime longevity can be attributed to the twin factors of 'culture' and the continuing 'strength' of the Tatmadaw relative to other actors in Myanmar's politics, without which it would not be in a hegemonic political position.

Culture, a seemingly controversial topic in accounting for the actions of particularly the military and also the subservience of the population, receives "little systematic attention".[5] Indeed, when discourse is directed towards a cultural explanation for military rule by those who question the viability of 'democracy's' panaceatic capabilities for Myanmar, the label of 'apologist' for the military junta is all too readily applied.[6]

I argue that *there is* a culturally relativistic, anthropological basis which helps explain both, 'from above', the persistence of military rule and, 'from below', the relative paucity of mass, organised resistance *relative* to the levels of hardship and repression engendered by such chronic, inept rule.[7] Moreover, Western normative assumptions eagerly applied on a universalist basis ignore both the historically formed fear of 'anarchy' over 'tyranny'[8] in Myanmar and the plurality of conceptions of legitimacy[9] among Myanmar's population. As is clear in the majority of academic literature on Myanmar (often with no in-the-field, quantitative research base), the hugely ethnically and linguistically diverse population[10] of the country is all too readily reduced to the status of 'the people',[11] supposedly unified in political aspiration and in a single shared conception of political legitimacy – 'democracy'. This runs parallel to the establishment of a good/evil discursive paradigm both in academic and wider media and public discourse. 'Good' is manifested in 'democracy', as expressed, minimally, and solely, through the quantifiable popular plebiscite – it is the purported *sine qua non* of governmental legitimacy for Myanmar; any countervailing view to 'democracy' as a typology of best fit, or indeed any questioning of the depth of democracy's suitability is consequently in support of Tatmadaw rule, and thus 'evil'. It will be argued that, in fact, such a dichotomy serves only to harden the regime's recalcitrance in bowing to pressure for change exerted from outside Myanmar, and, contrary to assertions, masks the reality that there is no democracy movement threatening the persistence of military rule.

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In terms of regime 'strength', it will be shown that contrary to assertions, the Tatmadaw is and has always been the most 'organised' institution in the country,[12] and, critically, remains far "stronger than any of its foes" and "more unified now [2009] than ever before". [13] A historical institutionalist approach is necessary to explain this: historical antecedents and the continuing ethos and organisational tactics of the Tatmadaw that spur this situation will be covered in brief, as well as the changes brought about by the end of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). Critically, the strength of the military regime is not matched by its factionally riven political competitors, including the National League for Democracy (NLD), resulting in a uni-polar domination of the political sphere.

Key factors which serve to continue enhancing the regime's strength, and correspondingly hinder the likely emergence of a sufficiently 'strong' and similarly unified competitor will also be analysed. Among these are the sanctions policies levied by Western governments; the post-1988 modernisation and expansion of the Tatmadaw; the ability of the regime to continue to gain revenue from trade with foreign countries; and the entrenched patronage networks which characterise Myanmar's state-society relations, resulting in a symbiotic relationship between business and the regime, and business support 'for state spectacles' – itself a rejoinder to the argument that 'the people' desire democracy.

## A Question of 'Culture'?

As with the Greek goddess Panacea, endowed with the gift of healing all through her restorative poultice, so 'democracy' has become the 'panacea', the cure-all, to the manifold problems that beset Myanmar. Thus we are entreated to such assertions as this proffered by Silverstein: "Military rule has convinced *even the most sceptical* that a *true democracy* is the *only way* domestic *peace, freedom* and personal *safety* can be restored." [14] However, neither how this will become so, nor what constitutes a 'true democracy' is clearly elucidated.

Silverstein's assertions are symptomatic of the universalist discourse that has come to envelop Myanmar from without. Namely, that it is unquestionable that 'democracy' – as defined in a minimalist, Schumpeterian sense, predicated on the operating of an electoral struggle through an 'institutional arrangement' [15] – will provide Myanmar with 'legitimacy', both to its own citizens and the international community, and will bring about untold gains in terms of freedom, peace, governance without repression, and economic development.

While it is not the remit of this paper to question whether or not democracy is the most 'legitimate' form of rule for Myanmar, or, indeed, whether it would bring quantitative improvements in terms of 'peace', 'freedom' and 'safety', [16] I argue it is of diagnostic importance to consider the culturally specific mindset of a country long isolated from, and far removed from in terms of shared cultural values, meanings and assumptions, the West; indeed, to extirpate the 'cultural question' from an explanation of contemporary Burmese politics is to undermine a thoroughgoing analysis. As Aung-Thwin observes: "Various cultures have substantive and meaningful differences in terms of beliefs and values, based on equally substantive differences in assumptions regarding perceptions of time, *power, legitimacy*, salvation and ultimate reality." [17] Critically, it can be argued that the dominant thesis of the legitimacy of democracy, at least in part, obfuscates and is diametrically opposed to the subjective world views of both those within the ruling Tatmadaw elite *and* citizens (though, of course, not all) of Myanmar subject to rule by the junta.

From a culturally relativist standpoint, what both members of the ruling elite and the citizenry of Myanmar fear is 'anarchy', in the guise of internecine conflict, over and above 'tyranny' – or indeed 'fascism', as Skidmore suggests [18] – as embodied by the current system of repressive, authoritarian rule. Moreover, this long-held fear of anarchy, rather than an institutionalised militaristic view of the citizenry as battlefield 'enemies' [19], is what motivates repressiveness towards those eschewing democratic governance, and consequently subservience, or a lack of resistance relative to the repression endured, from those subject to military rule.

As Pedersen outlines, the generals leading the Tatmadaw subscribe to a Hobbesian view of anarchic society, predicated on Myanmar's post-independence experiences of ethnic conflict. Indeed, while some may argue such problems are in the past: "The generals believe they exist in undiluted form, only held in check by firm military leadership". [20] Correspondingly, many perceive "democracy as a recipe for political instability." [21] This is the

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subjective platform, merged with Buddhist conceptions of power, upon which the generals self-legitimise the need for strong, military rule. While it may be argued that this is used to mask self-interest in seeking to rule, as Pedersen notes, this perspective is based on a “deeply historical” understanding of the country.

The generals’ “deeply historic” understanding reverberates around the chaotic, internecine conflict that Myanmar was plunged into in the immediate aftermath of independence.[22] When independence came to U Nu’s post-colonial government it faced immediate, formidable challenges: a communist faction launched an “all-out offensive to seize power”, leading to mass mutinies from the police and armed forces. In 1949, a Kayin rebellion broke out in the south east of country, and, “Buoyed by the wholesale defection of Karen [Kayin] units in the fledgling army, the Karen National Union (KNU) began its long bid for an independent Karen state...rebellion swiftly spread to...the Mon, the Karenni, the Pao and the Kachin, while in Arakan...not only Red and White Flag communists but ethnic Rakhine and Mujahid separatists, as well as various militia and dacoit gangs...contributed to a complete breakdown in law and order”. [23] A succession of political and constitutional crises ensued, until, from 1958 – 60, at the request of U Nu, Gen Ne Win led a military caretaker government. By 1962, with separatist insurgency building, Ne Win staged a coup, ushering in military rule – although under the guise of the ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’ under the BSPP – for the first time.

What affect such a legacy of conflict can sear onto the collective memory of a nation as a whole can only be surmised, but its legacy, and the perceived threat it holds against the unity of the state, is foremost in the thinking of military leaders.

As Steinberg notes, the ruling military elite holds, “That the cardinal element of its legitimacy as rulers has been the unity of the country that only the military can guarantee.” [24] Critically, this ‘unity’ – as perceived by those who pursue it – requires a central, strong government.

This paradigm of thought has been a constant in modern Burmese political thought and policy. Aung San expressed this in ‘Blue Print for Burma’, written in Japan in 1940: “We want...a strong state administration...There shall be only one nation, one state, one party, one leader. There shall be no parliamentary opposition, no nonsense of individualism, everyone must submit to sate [sic] which supreme over the individual”. [25] Although Silverstein argues that the ideas expressed in ‘Blue Print for Burma’ were not central to Aung San’s thought, it nonetheless forms a critical part of the canon of Burmese political literature.

As Steinberg argues, in Bamar society, power is, in theory, centralised; under the post-independence, civilian-led government, focus was on the centre, and centralization has indeed been a defining feature of all subsequent governments. The grounding for this can be found in Burmese Buddhist culture: “This tendency is a direct result of the underlying concept that power is finite and personalised in those who have *ana* (authority, power). There is, thus, a reluctance to share it either in terms of institutional authority or in personal relations.” [26] Indeed, *ana* explains the supremacy of leaders past and present in Myanmar: “Whoever possesses *ana* occupies a political position, is allowed to impose a decision on the community and has the right to command regardless of the legitimacy of his power and that of the institutions behind it...*ana* is the power to compel others to obey.” [27]

Democratisation, along with its corollary of a decentralisation of power, thus raises the spectre of anarchy: “Decentralisation in the Burmese context...means social and political anarchy...in Burma...anarchy is feared more than tyranny, a value not shared by modern western society, where instead, fear of tyranny is all consuming.” [28] Indeed, as a commenter on an established Southeast Asian journal writes: “The fear of systemic anarchy has been well established in the minds of many generations of Burmese since the violent chaos of second world war...the long and brutal civil war just adds more to this well established fear.” [29]

However, as Aung-Thwin observes, as an academic paradigm shift has taken place away from cultural relativism and towards the primacy of universality, a “moral and intellectual superiority” is assumed to reside in Western values. Through the lens of this paradigm, democracy, as manifested purely through ‘quantification’, is the only form of legitimacy for ‘the people’, and, “Complicated events are viewed as struggles between the forces of good (western-style democracy and the free market) and the forces of evil (Third World-style everything else)”, when, in reality,

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"Democracy...is not even an issue for most of the people of Burma, most of the time".[30] *In toto*, this universalizing tendency veers sharply away from any notion of cultural relativism in favour of prescribing 'democracy' and as *the de facto* desire of Myanmar's 'people' and the *de jure*, sole expression of 'legitimacy'.

The hyperbole characteristic of this Western-led paradigm is perhaps most clearly elucidated by Silverstein, who confirms that: "*The people...*continue to struggle to free themselves from tyranny and dictatorship." [31] Indeed, Silverstein goes further, prophesying the panaceatic qualities of democracy: "Until democracy is re-established, there will be disunity, warfare and economic decline in Burma," [32] while Kingston maintains that holding elections, "Demonstrates that the military junta understands that democracy confers legitimacy". [33]

This simplistic framing of events and the good/evil paradigm it engenders must be jettisoned to understand Myanmar; [34] indeed, its presence counteracts the intended change it promotes. I argue that it is in part based on a lack of understanding of the Burmese mindset (or an understanding taken from a minimal sample) and Burmese, Theravada, Buddhism, predicated on authors not spending significant time in country, and, notably, never proffering this caveat. Indeed, it is worthy of note that Daw Suu, whose writings and actions are in the vanguard of the democracy movement, has spent much time abroad, indeed marrying a British man; this is not to negate her status as a culturally endowed Burmese, but rather, in the same vein that Silverstein somewhat erroneously and universalistically argues that British rule synthesised two notions of freedom into one [35], to suggest that Daw Suu's exposure to Western strands of thoughts has exposed her much more to currents of Western thought than the 'average' Burmese.

The critique that Callahan levels at those promoting cultural arguments for explaining a lack of change could be reversed to also apply to those proselytising on behalf of democracy: "Most of these cultural explanations have...a serious methodological flaw: Generalisations about national character, culture and personality are based on contacts with a handful of Burmese who communicate in a Western language and whose representativeness of cultural traits surely have to be suspect." [36] Thus, while there is undoubted truth in the assertion that the regime practised and continues to practice a form of "paternal despotism", wherein "its leaders assumed that they, and only they, knew what was best for the country," [37] rarely is there a reciprocity of acknowledgement that clarion calls [38] for political change from outside Myanmar represent much the same tendency.

One of few academics to have undertaken field research in Myanmar on the issue of 'legitimacy' produced noteworthy data which goes some way to undercutting the purported wholesale support for democracy in Myanmar: "When 50 people were asked how they would define legitimacy, the author received three different answers: (1) a democratically elected government, (2) a government that helps the people to resolve their problems, and (3) a government that leaves them alone...the democratic criterion of judging a government's legitimacy is not *universal* in Myanmar." [39] Indeed, Hlaing also found that: "38 per cent of 300 survey participants conceded that some senior officials were helpful to the public...General Shwe Mann was popular in the Delta area...Major General Thar Aye...was...said to be obliging to the rural community. Major General Maung Maung Swe...was quite popular with people in northern Myanmar." [40] Perhaps even more significant is that from a sample of 45 students questioned, 40, "made it quite clear they would not join political parties", while five said they would consider the matter when it arose; however, "no student answered this question in the affirmative". [41]

## A Question of 'Strength'?

The Machiavellian conundrum of why an 'armed man should obey one who is unarmed' [42] is often applied to situations of military rule; in the case of Tatmadaw rule in Myanmar, contrary to assertions that cracks are appearing in the military government's rule [43], or that the regime is suffering from "fatigue" and "insecurity", [44] Machiavelli's question takes on greater significance as the Tatmadaw is by far the most organised institution in the country and does "not look like an organisation that is teetering on the verge of collapse due to internal power struggles". [45]

While many aspects of the Tatmadaw's current "organisational culture" [46] account for its continuing strength, also important are the historical antecedents which have helped enshrine notions of loyalty and discipline within the Tatmadaw. When combined with recent force modernisation and further geographical expansion, it can be asserted

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that the military government is in a *stronger position* now than that of the BSPP at any time during its rule.

The Burmese military tradition has its origins in the Imperial Japanese Army's (IJA) military ethos and structures, themselves a symbiosis of Prussian and indigenous *bushido* ('way of the warrior') values. During the 1930s anti-colonial struggle in Myanmar, Aung San left the country in search of military assistance from the Chinese. Intercepted by the Japanese, Aung San and his fellow *Thakin* ('heroes') received military training from the IJA, in Hainan. The impact of this is still clear today: the training regime – and consequent actualisation of military discipline and values in the politico-military structure – in the Tatmadaw features wartime Japanese elements of “highly centralized control, rigid discipline, unquestioning obedience, and strong respect for senior-junior relations”, so much so that officers refer to the structure as British “with a Japanese heart”.<sup>[47]</sup>

As noted by Hlaing, when the military ascended to power in 1962 the public was disappointed with prevailing political and economic conditions, and both foreign and indigenous business communities “welcomed the coup enthusiastically and with great expectations”.<sup>[48]</sup> The Tatmadaw believed it was the only institution capable of solving the ethnic conflict threatening to overwhelm the state; as in Brazil in the 1960's, the military played, “A key role in interpreting and dealing with domestic political problems owing to its greater technical and professional skills in handling internal security issues...the weaker the civilian government's own legitimacy and ability to supervise a 'peaceful' process of development, the greater the tendency...for the new professionals to assume control of the government”.<sup>[49]</sup> Thus the military became politicised, and politics militarised.

Under BSPP rule, the military expanded its geographical reach. After the fall of the BSPP, as Selth notes, the Tatmadaw transformed, with a rapid force modernisation and expansion accompanied by new military commands, economic enterprises, military universities, a Tatmadaw Museum and an even greater expansion of its reach in the country.<sup>[50]</sup> Indeed, since 1988, “There has not even been a distinction between the state, the government and the armed forces, which have all been conflated”.<sup>[51]</sup>

However, the roots of the modern organisational culture of the Tatmadaw have their antecedents in BSPP rule. Following the leaking of a coup plot to U Nu in 1961 and the subsequent dismissal of a group of senior officers, Ne Win was left as the most powerful figure in the organisation. Upon the accession to power of the BSPP, the 'Big Number One' had arbitrary power over the party-state and the Tatmadaw in its entirety; the result was that to avoid dismissal, officials “carried out their duties with the single aim of seeking the chairman's approval”.<sup>[52]</sup> Moreover, officials learned that a “non-threatening posture” was crucial to remaining in post. As one former official explains: “If we fought with one another, we would be viewed as trouble makers.”<sup>[53]</sup> To ensure that this was prevented, a tradition of officers operating in discrete domains became the standard mode of operation.

Indeed, that there has never been a major split in the Tatmadaw, which endured while other military regimes fell during the 'Third Wave of Democracy', is reflective of two key features of organisational culture: that senior officials' differences – and the prospect of an officer challenging a more senior officer – are negated by their separation into discrete domains of operation (when this “golden tradition” is broken, senior officials stop it<sup>[54]</sup>); and that the Tatmadaw “takes good care of its own members”, with those who do not rock the boat looked after in retirement, being able to draw pensions from each job they have held, have access to state-controlled resources and invest in military-owned enterprises.<sup>[55]</sup> By contrast, those who are dismissed face interrogation, ostracization, a total loss of status, and having their and their extended family's property and enterprises seized.

While the organisational culture dissipated somewhat into a 'multi-polarity' from 1988 to the mid-90s,<sup>[56]</sup> under the hegemonic rule of Than Shwe, it was re-enshrined. Indeed, amidst the monks-led protest of 2007, Tatmadaw unity was clear, with one officer remarking: “I am a devout Buddhist. I always pay my respects to monks...I am also a soldier...If I were ordered by my superiors to hang myself, I would do it.”<sup>[57]</sup>

By contrast, the chief, if not only, viable competitor to the military junta, the NLD, has weakened since 1990. However, this is not solely a product of repression, rather a combination of “repression, neutralization and cooptation strategies”,<sup>[58]</sup> combined with internal disagreements, indecisiveness, and the party being left in the hands of “incapable caretakers”<sup>[59]</sup> in the absence of Daw Suu.

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Critically, the origins of the NLD lend the party to factionalism. The party was founded as a political front composed of three groups: the “intelligentsia group”, led by Daw Suu, a group led by ex-Brigadier-General Aung Gyi, and the “ex-commander group”, led by ex-General Tin Oo. Aung Gyi’s group was voted out of the party after appealing for the expulsion of some members accused of being communists, after which, as Hlaing notes, “many people...assumed that Suu Kyi was in control of the party and that there were no major divisions”.<sup>[60]</sup>

However, the two groups at the centre of the NLD have endorsed divergent strategies: while the more influential intelligentsia group advocated a confrontational approach in the early 1990s, manifested through civil disobedience, the ex-commander group desired a non-confrontational approach. Indeed, “There has always been this tension within the NLD”, which has led to clashes between the two groups.<sup>[61]</sup> This was compounded in the aftermath of the 1990 elections, when the junta arrested party leaders, forced those released to sign agreements that they would not enter politics, and, through intelligence officers, used offers of assistance to coopt other members.<sup>[62]</sup> As Aung-Thwin notes, potential supporters of democracy have received economic benefit in recent years that may lead them to not want to “upset the status quo”.<sup>[63]</sup>

The repeated and ongoing detention of Daw Suu has doubtless had severe repercussions for the NLD. Not only is she a figurehead for the party – and the sole figure with recognised *awzi* – but, in her absence, leadership of the party has been indecisive. However, contrary to the hagiography that surrounds the near-deified Daw Suu in the West, blame for some of the factionalism within the NLD and problems in dialogue with fellow minority political groups can be attributed to Daw Suu herself. Based on interviews with former NLD members, she is variously described as “hard-headed”, “confrontational”, and not wont to show – as is culturally the norm in Myanmar – respect to her elders (or minority ethnic groups), leading some to consider her “too Westernised”,<sup>[64]</sup> and creating a divide between the youth and veteran sides of the party. None the less, it seems that Daw Suu remains one of the main reasons that evaporating support for the NLD is yet to totally wither away: based on interviews conducted in 2007, while the party’s popularity has declined “significantly” since 2000, those who still support the party do so out of respect for Daw Suu and due to a lack of a viable alternative.<sup>[65]</sup>

A key pillar of Western policy towards Myanmar designed to promote the prospect of democratisation, yet which only serve to further entrench military rule are sanctions. In the early 1990s, sanctions were seen as lacking efficacy in Myanmar; however, with Daw Suu’s release and call for sanctions combined with the effective lobbying activities of exiled Myanmar activists in the West, after 1995 both the EU and America included sanctions as part of the package for promoting political change.<sup>[66]</sup> In 1997, America imposed a ban on all new investments in Myanmar, to be followed in 2003 by a blanket import ban, freezing the assets of individuals and the restricting of financial services with the country. The EU meanwhile levies targeted sanctions at junta members and their associates.

Sanctions, however, are failing on two levels. First, they impact most on the general population, rather than the Tatmadaw elite, and, second, due to a mis-appreciation of the cultural mindset of the generals, rather than international condemnation promoting the prospect of political change from within, it serves only to heighten the “bunker mentality”<sup>[67]</sup> of the military elite.

Pedersen calculates that, across all industries, some 375,000 jobs were lost after the 2003 American import ban, severely affecting the livelihoods of many families living in poverty in a country where there are few alternative income streams.<sup>[68]</sup> Meanwhile, the military elite, buttressed by ongoing deals with China, India and Thailand which have seen foreign exchange reserves climb to \$2 billion (a 20-fold increase from 1987) and projected future investments of \$14 billion<sup>[69]</sup>, have lost no more than a few hundred thousand dollars,<sup>[70]</sup> strengthening their position relative to their opposition and the citizenry. As Pedersen observes: “Western governments are demanding that the military government commits the political equivalent of a collective suicide to avoid what amounts to little more than a slap on the wrist.”<sup>[71]</sup>

However, the view towards sanctions may be changing. Based on a series of interviews, Kingston posits that: “Advocates are now beginning to question the value and impact of sanctions: few believe that sanctions will cause the junta to fall...instead of resulting in desired regime reforms...[sanctions] have left many Burmese worse off.”<sup>[72]</sup> But he goes on to demonstrate a profound misunderstanding of the mindset of the Tatmadaw by simplistically

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arguing that, “In their favour, sanctions *do* send an unambiguous message that the SPDC does not measure up to international norms, values and expectations. They stigmatise the junta and exert pressure without which there would never be any change at all.”[73]

In fact, it is the very stigmatisation of the junta that *enhances* the likelihood of recalcitrance on the part of the junta. Tatmadaw leaders view Western pressure as the renewed vestiges of colonialism; when combined with clarion calls for human rights and democracy, as has been seen to be levied against other countries in the world with similar resource abundance, the response from a government of military officers is predictable: military rulers “React to international diplomatic and economic pressure like they would an invading army...they are not inclined to negotiate with the enemy...under no circumstances will they allow themselves to give in to external pressure”. [74] Indeed, while Pedersen, a critic of sanctions in general, argues that a positive aspect is the sustenance given to overseas pro-democracy groups[75]; however, this only adds to the pressure for sanctions, international stigmatisation of the regime and its further isolation and entrenchment.

Thus, as sanctions amount to little more than a pecuniary “slap on the wrist” for the generals, yet result in economic paucity for the population in general, and, moreover, strengthen the position of the regime relative to that population, not only do they fail to serve their intended purpose, but they promote the regime’s longevity. As Thant argues: “In almost every way, this policy of isolating one of the most isolated countries in the world...is both counter-productive and dangerous.”[76]

As Hlaing notes, scholars such as Fink and Linter reproduce Burmese state-society relations as a zero-sum game, wherein any gain in strength for the state necessitates a loss of power for society *as a whole*; these studies – much to their detriment – thus, “fail to explain the complexity of the state’s relations with those segments of the Burmese population not actively opposed to the state, such as the business community”. [77]

Indeed, as a key factor in the strength and thus persistence of the regime – and a rebuttal to arguments that ‘the people’ desire democracy – the Burmese business community is indispensable. Business people contributed some 80 per cent of funding needed for the many state legitimating activities between 1988 and 1998. Without this support, the legitimating activities would not have been carried out,[78] also representing something of a rejoinder to Skidmore’s claims about the “subjectification of the Burmese body”[79] through the enforced participation of the “Burmese people” by the state; although there is little doubt that participation is often enforced, it is “Burmese people” who donate – albeit to maintain patronage networks – to enable the activities. And, as Rozenberg notes, renovation of pagodas, “Has made an impact on the population and conferred upon “the generals” an aura of power...in the Burmese’s opinion it is part and parcel of a necessary process of buddhizing the environment favouring spiritual practice”. [80]

Symbiotic networks between the military and business reach back into the BSPP era. Ultimately, it was the BSPP’s attempt to emasculate *hmaung-kho* (illegal trade) networks through demonitization that brought about its collapse, as the networks indirectly provided work for many trades and provided the populous with essential goods that through the lack of distribution capacity, mis-allocation of products and lack of incentivization for rice producers, the state was not providing.[81] Indeed, this explanation somewhat debunks assertions that the Four Eights movement was predicated on democracy rather than economic hardship, a corrective to comments such as this by Silverstein: “The military rulers sought to stamp out freedom, and in the peaceful revolution of 1988, the people sought to reclaim it.” [82]

After the establishment of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), previously illegal networks were legalised, but, “In reality...the bedrock of state-business relations continued to be the patron-client networks...the state and the business community were found to have relied on each other to operate”. [83] Consequently, although small and medium-sized businesses without patronage links attended assemblies outside Daw Suu’s house, “Although they criticised the junta in private, most major business people tried to distance themselves from the activities of the opposition groups”. [84] And although businesses contributed to the NLD in 1989 and 1990, as Hlaing argues, “to secure a position with a popular political organisation”, [85] when it became clear there would be no transfer of power, they distanced themselves from the group. Thus it is apparent that business acts expediently in

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Myanmar; while the junta remains in power, it seems business will continue to be enmeshed within patronage networks, thus aiding continued military domination in the country.

## Conclusion

In explaining the persistence of military rule in Myanmar in place of an uprising that would supplant the regime with a democracy, or hybridised democratic system, a two-sided explanation is required which accounts for how both the Tatmadaw, 'from above', can maintain its position, and why mass movements 'from below' have failed to supplant it.

Clearly, the Tatmadaw's ability to survive is somewhat unique in a world where military regimes often have little longevity. Its strength has no single explanation; rather, it is a complex of operational and organisational aspects of the Tatmadaw combined with the disunity of the most viable opposition, and its ability to maintain a position of relative financial strength through, ironically, sanctions, continuing trade, and the support of the business class. A historical institutionalist approach is necessary to understanding Tatmadaw unity, manifested through its unique historical antecedents and organisational culture, in part accounted for by the unique situation that gave rise to one leader presiding atop the politico-military structure.

Cultural factors, though often ignored, aid in explaining both the strength of the junta and the lack of a number of significant mass 'democracy' movements that threaten its rule; both contributing to the persistence of military rule. While the military uses the fear of 'anarchy' above 'tyranny' and Buddhist notions of power to legitimise rule, these same cultural factors are also applicable to segments of the population who subscribe to the same beliefs. Conceptions of legitimacy are undoubtedly multi-faceted in Myanmar and not necessarily in line with the quantification school of thought prevalent in the West. Indeed, the universalising discourse that envelopes the country from without serves only to further entrench the 'bunker mentality' of the generals.

Economic factors seem more prescient than any urge for 'democracy' in determining whether the persistence of military rule will continue: economic factors precipitated the Saya San rebellion; economic hardship, rather than the *prima facie* explanation of a popular drive for freedom[86], was key to the emergence of the Four Eights movement; economic hardships were a key motivator for the monks-led protests in 2007; a lack of economic development continues to inhibit the growth of a 'middle class'. However, contra their intended purpose, it seems sanctions are causing yet more hardship, giving rise to the contradictory situation that hardship intended for the regime, yet focused on the populace, may trigger another uprising.

In place of this, as cultural factors and military strength are unlikely to wane, the persistence of military rule will continue; thus continued military rule can convince even the most optimistic that the path to the abrogation of militarised politics and a politicised military remains far from clear.

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[1] Ganesan p.18

[2] Nordlinger p.2

[3] Hlaing 2009 p.272

[4] e.g. Alagappa p.xvi, alongside numerous Western media reports

[5] Pedersen 2008 p.79

[6] For instance see Matthews 2008 p.428, who readily labels Morten Pedersen as, "on balance", an apologist for the regime. The seriousness of this allegation is, however, not backed up by equally weighty evidence in this review of Pedersen's work; indeed, Pedersen is critical of the junta.

[7] While it is appreciated that there is clearly much opposition to Tatmadaw rule, mass, organised resistance in this case refers to mass mobilisation of the populous, as witnessed in the Four Eight's movement or the monk-led protests of 2007.

[8] Aung-Thwin 2001 p.497

[9] Hlaing 2004 p.253

[10] The Myanmar government, based on British census data, recognises 135 ethnic groups along with eight 'major national ethnic races'. More than 100 languages have been identified in the country.

[11] For example, see Silverstein 1996; 1998, Kingston 2008, Human Rights Watch 2007. Such discourse ignores not only the diversity of Myanmar, but the 'third' key actor besides the Tatmadaw and the NLD, ethnic minorities.

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[12] Hlaing 2005 p.232

[13] Hlaing 2009 p.271

[14] Silverstein 1998 Italics added

[15] Schumpeter p.269

[16] Neither does the author maintain such dogmatic faith in any one political ideology that would presuppose such a claim

[17] Aung-Thwin p.487 Italics added

[18] Skidmore 2004 suggests there is a fear that the regime will move from 'incipient fascism' to full fascism. It is worthy of note that Skidmore's book is replete with factual errors e.g. that Thamanya monastery is in Southern Mon State; that Daw Suu was released from house arrest in 1996; that comedian Par Par Lay died in jail.

[19] As Callahan 2003 argues

[20] Pedersen 2009 p.114

[21] Ibid

[22] Indeed, it should be noted, as Hlaing 2007 p.239 points out, that the democratically elected leader U Nu's selection of Buddhism as the state religion played a large part in ensuing ethnic conflict.

[23] Smith 1991 p.27 – 28

[24] Steinberg p.114

[25] Aung San, cited in Silverstein 1996 p.219

[26] Steinberg 2007 p.118

[27] Rozenberg p.25 It is important to note, the second notion of power is *awza*, 'influence', free from authority and the imposition of power. As Rozenberg notes, while Aung San had both *ana* and *awza*, Daw Suu has *awza*; her ostracization from politics prevents her having *ana*.

[28] Aung-Thwin p.124

[29] New Mandala. Comment made by Hla Oo. It is important to note that this sentence finishes: "The Burmese army knows it very well and they are still exploiting it ruthlessly to lengthen their brutal hold on Burma." This is not representative of an 'apologist' for the regime.

[30] Aung-Thwin p.128

[31] Silverstein 1998 p.69 Italics added.

[32] Ibid

[33] Kingston p.40

[34] It should be noted that Aung-Thwin's intention is not to argue against democracy *per se*, but the 'democracy

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‘jihad’ which is waged against Myanmar – see New Mandala interview: “Because I may not want American style democracy imposed on Burma doesn’t mean I must necessarily want the status quo”. This is also based on personal correspondence with Michael Aung-Thwin.

[35] To maintain that there existed one, pre-colonial mode of Buddhist thought obfuscates ethnic minority beliefs; to maintain that there was a later, wholesale, symbiosis between this and British notions of freedom, ironically expressed under the yoke of colonial rule, further clouds this thesis.

[36] Callahan 2003 p.6 This has been simplistically re-asserted by Kingston 2008 p.16

[37] Fink p.15

[38] The American Council on Foreign Relations uses this precise word in its ‘appeal’ for ‘change’. See Falco 2003, back cover.

[39] Hlaing 2005 p.253 *Italics added*

[40] Hlaing 2005 p.253

[41] *Ibid* p.250

[42] Machiavelli Chpt XIV

[43] e.g. Callahan p.427

[44] Matthews 1997 p.16

[45] Hlaing 2005 p.239

[46] Hlaing 2009

[47] Myoe p.205

[48] Hlaing 2003 p.8 Although enthusiasm was predicated on the belief that the Tatmadaw would ‘return to the barracks’.

[49] Stepan p.51

[50] Also see Fink p.95

[51] Selth 2002

[52] Hlaing 2009 p.276

[53] *Ibid* p.277

[54] As in the case of Khin Nyunt, who refused to discipline officers who had encroached into others’ domains in an incident in Muse, in 2004. Hlaing 2009 p.280 – 281

[55] Hlaing 2009 p.280 – 284

[56] *Ibid* p.279

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[57] Ibid p.283 From a speech given by a Tatmadaw officer to local businessmen. Kingston 2006 p.16 simplistically, again, and with no evidential base, asserts that the protests 'must' have sowed dissension.

[58] Hlaing 2004 p.240

[59] Ibid p.244

[60] Hlaing 2007 p.365 'Many people' includes biographers Justin Wintle and Barbara Victor.

[61] Hlaing 2005 p.241

[62] Ibid p.239 – 240

[63] Aung-Thwin p.501

[64] Hlaing 2007 p.364 – 367 It should be noted that the interviewees are members of the ex-commanders group.

[65] Ibid p.368

[66] Taylor 2007 p.466 – 467

[67] Pedersen p.222

[68] Pedersen p.234 It should be noted that reliable economic data is notoriously difficult to obtain for Myanmar.

[69] Kingston p.31

[70] Pedersen p.225

[71] Ibid.

[72] Kingston p.29

[73] Ibid. p.30. Italics not added.

[74] Pedersen p.222

[75] Ibid p.219

[76] Thant p.344

[77] Hlaing 2007a p.214 – 215

[78] Hlaing 2007a p.221

[79] Skidmore p.108 – 112 demonstrates the mis-application of Eurocentric theory to Myanmar

[80] Rozenberg p.25

[81] Hlaing 2003

[82] Silverstein 1996 p.224, italics added. As Aung-Thwin p.124 notes from information he received from a journalist "who is also a most vociferous critic of the Burma government": "Even student leaders during the riots of 1988, who

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carried signs that read “democracy” (written phonetically in Burmese), had to look in the dictionary to find out what the word meant.”

[83] Hlaing 2007a p.219

[84] Ibid p.224

[85] Ibid

[86] As Aung-Thwin notes, those striving for democracy may be best termed ‘rice democrats’, in reference to the ‘rice Christians’ who converted due to economic need.

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