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Cracks in the Firmament of Burma's Military Government: from unity through coercion to buying support

DAVID C WILLIAMS

ABSTRACT Despite holding recent elections, Burma's military government does not intend to relinquish power; its new constitution guarantees the army the right to do whatever it wants. Democracy will therefore not come to Burma through legal, peaceful, incremental steps. Instead, democracy will come to Burma outside the legal process, because the basis for the regime's power has changed, becoming markedly weaker. When it first seized power in 1961, the military was united and therefore able to rule through coercion alone. In the past several decades, by contrast, the generals have increasingly sought to purchase support by giving income and resource streams to key players. But if people support the regime only because it pays them, they will stop doing so when it stops paying. In recent years the regime has alienated many traditional supporters by taking away the income and resource streams on which they had come to rely. As these groups become alienated from the top generals, they may turn to each other to forge new deals, and ultimately some may try to enlist the people as political allies. Burma therefore fits the most common pattern for democratisation: it will come through elite defections rather than popular insurrection.

The Burmese military government has kept firm control of the country for decades, but two developments in 2010 have caused many to wonder how long its tenure will continue. Specifically, the junta allowed elections to national and regional legislatures in November,¹ and soon thereafter it released Aung San Suu Kyi, the symbolic and spiritual leader of Burma's democracy movement, from house arrest.² On superficial inspection, these events might suggest that Burma has taken the first steps towards genuine democratisation. Although the path may be long, in this view, it is only a matter of time before processes already in train push the junta to the margin of Burmese political life.

Such an impression is misleading. Under the new constitution, which was essentially authored by the junta itself, the military will remain in control and

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has the power to send the civilian government home. In addition, constitutional amendments will in practice require the consent of the military itself, so even if the civilian politicians—almost all of whom were hand-picked by the junta—wanted to reduce the military's role, they couldn't.³ In short, the junta clearly does not intend to relinquish the reins, and the normal operation of Burma's new legal and electoral processes will not bring meaningful democracy. Any vision of a peaceful, incremental transition within the extant legal framework is mistaken.

Nevertheless, it is more likely now than in recent years that a transition may occur outside of normal legal processes, because the basis of the junta's power has become less stable over the decades. In comparison with other military regimes, the Tatmadaw's reign has proved remarkably durable for two reasons. First, until recently, the military itself stayed unified because of its perception that the country was genuinely in danger. The Tatmadaw seized power during an extremely complicated civil war: ethnic insurgents sought to detach portions of the country; leftist insurgents sought to overturn the elected government; and when Kuomintang (KMT) elements retreated into Burma, a low-level proxy war between China and the US seemed to be in the offing. In the face of this chaos, the military developed and inculcated an ideology focused on the importance of internal unity to stave off the disintegration of the country.⁴

Second, the military chose therefore initially to rule purely through coercion, rather than through building a coalition with political and civil society groups. These groups were themselves disunited and thus unable to push for inclusion. In addition, in the early years the bulk of the population did not strongly object to the military takeover because it was not then as brutal as it would become. To some extent the junta could even portray itself as the protector of the Burman majority population against the ethnic insurgents.⁵ As a result, the leading generals held a virtual monopoly of power; there were no other significant players.

In recent decades, however, the situation has changed. On the one hand, the threat level has gone down: the KMT and the communist insurgency are no more, and the ethnic armies have been seriously weakened. As a result, military unity suffered, and the leading generals started to struggle with each other for control. On the other hand, as the regime's conduct became more brutal and arbitrary, more of the population became alienated and, as the strength of the ethnic forces diminished, so did the threat. Finally, with the rise of Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy, Burma saw the birth of a broad-based democracy movement, which joined hands with the ethnic armies. In short, power in Burma became less monolithic.⁶

With growing internal disunity and external demands for reform, the military needed new strategies to maintain control. In this situation some regimes seek to build stable, inclusive political institutions that will deliver general public goods, thus earning the support of the citizenry. When that happens, the transition to a democratic and legitimate government has begun. The regime in Burma, however, did not pursue that path. Instead, it

provided income and resource streams to key supporters, thus buying their allegiance, and to key opponents, thus buying off their resistance.⁷

In significant measure the regime has thus become a system for the delivery of bribes. First, the regime concluded ceasefire agreements with most of the ethnic armies, giving them certain economic opportunities in exchange for peace. Next, it allowed the regional commanders the freedom to extract income and resources from the civilians in their respective areas of control. Finally, the highest-ranking generals developed personalist and rivalrous networks of supporters, manoeuvring their people into key posts in exchange for their loyalty.⁸

But buying the allegiance of supporters is a risky game, and the next few years may show the risks. If people support a regime only because it provides them with tangible rewards, they may stop supporting that regime if the rewards dry up or if someone else offers them a better deal. If they become used to being bribed, they will be unhappy when the bribes dry up.

And in the past few years the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) has made a lot of elites—people who have in the past supported or at least not resisted the regime—quite unhappy. First, it has repudiated the ceasefires with the ethnic resistance armies, some of whom possess considerable fighting strength.⁹ Second, it has forced some officers to resign from the army so that they could take up civilian seats in the legislature, thus moving them from the most powerful governmental institution to one of the least powerful.¹⁰ Third, it has failed to keep the army itself well supplied and well fed.¹¹ Fourth, it has created a whole new class of players—the legislators in the union, state, and regional parliaments—who will soon be demanding their own income streams, separate from the military's.¹² If these elites go in search of a better deal—as some have already started to do—Burma's politics will become ever more fluid. If enough of them make new deals with each other, they could develop the power to displace the military regime.

This article will consider that possibility. Like buying political support, prognostication is always risky, especially with respect to Burma, because information is always in short supply. In considering this possibility, I draw on published reports but also on my experience in working with the Burma democracy movement for almost 10 years. In that role I have had access to unusual sources of information. For example, I regularly advise the Military Alliance and the Committee to Effectuate a Federal Union, two umbrella groups that include almost all the ethnic armies. I have also been inside the areas of Burma wracked by war or controlled by insurgent organisations.

The next section explains that, under the new constitution, the military still controls the government and can block constitutional change. The following section examines the military's original strategy of holding power through internal unity and external coercion. The third section explains the regime's more recent strategy of buying support by providing income and resource streams. The final section then examines the recent developments that have made that basis of power less stable, and considers the possibility of a new alliance that could oust the junta from power.

Incremental change through constitutional means?

The new Burmese constitution, authored by a compliant convention and adopted by a sham referendum in 2008, ensures that the military will remain the dominant power in the country. I have analysed the new constitution at greater length elsewhere,¹³ so a somewhat cursory overview will suffice here. First, the constitution gives the military a substantial share in the civilian government: serving soldiers comprise 25 per cent of the members of every legislative chamber, and the commander-in-chief appoints the ministers of defence, home affairs and border affairs.¹⁴ Second, and more importantly, the military will serve as a separate and independent government within its own, very broadly assigned domain.¹⁵

Thus, the civilian government may not seek to control the military: 'The Defence Services has [sic] the right to independently administer and adjudicate all affairs of the armed forces.'¹⁶ Even the Constitutional Tribunal must keep its hands off: Article 46 gives the tribunal the power to review executive and legislative action but notably omits reference to military action.

Within its sphere, then, the military will be supreme. And the constitution defines the scope of that sphere in language that is both expansive and vague: the military shall 'participate in the National political leadership role of the state',¹⁷ and it shall have the power to safeguard 'the non-disintegration of the Union, the non-disintegration of National solidarity and the perpetuation of sovereignty'.¹⁸ That particular phrasing is important for two reasons. First, it is elastic enough to mean whatever the military wants it to mean, so even if the Tatmadaw stays strictly within constitutional bounds, it has *carte blanche*. Second, it casts the military in a particular constitutional role: the army is the institution that centrally holds the country together. As we will see, that role grows out of a particular historical experience: the military seized power in the first place so as to impose order on what it perceived to be chaos.

The constitutional provisions dealing with states of emergency assign the same role to the army. In settled times the Tatmadaw must safeguard non-disintegration and sovereignty, but the civilian government will still function. In unsettled times the Tatmadaw can go further: if necessary to safeguard non-disintegration and sovereignty, it can suspend the operation of the civilian government and rule solo. Article 40(c) provides:

If there arises a state of emergency that could cause disintegration of the Union, disintegration of national solidarity and loss of sovereign power or attempts therefore by wrongful forcible means such as insurgency or violence, the Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Services has the right to take over and exercise State sovereign power in accord with the provisions of this Constitution.

In other words, the Tatmadaw can do whatever it wants to protect non-disintegration and sovereignty, apparently because it alone can be trusted to keep the country intact.

It should be noted parenthetically that at a different point, the constitution does provide that, before it can send the civilian government home, the Tatmadaw must secure presidential agreement,¹⁹ and it must eventually secure legislative ratification.²⁰ But these requirements flatly contradict Article 40(c), quoted above, which gives the commander-in-chief alone 'the right to take over'. Faced with a conflict between constitutional provisions, the commander-in-chief is likely to decide that he has the freedom promised by Article 40, rather than the constraints imposed by Articles 417 and 420.

He will be especially likely to choose this interpretation because, traditionally, the Tatmadaw has seen parliamentary government as itself the source of disorder and even chaos. Indeed, as we will see, the military has embraced a particular, and now orthodox, vision of its assumption of power: the army dissolved the civilian government precisely because the government's fractiousness was itself part of the maelstrom threatening to tear the country apart.²¹ In other words, in order to safeguard non-disintegration, the military may feel that it must rule alone for two distinct reasons. First, in some circumstances, it will need the freedom to act promptly and boldly, and parliament may be too cumbersome to deal with the threat. Second, in other circumstances parliament will itself be the threat, so that suspending it is the only way to counter the threat. But if parliamentary government is the problem to which a state of emergency is the solution, it would make no sense to give parliamentary government the power to veto a military takeover. Or so the commander-in-chief is likely to reason.

The 2008 Constitution can thus be understood not merely as a set of rules to structure government but also as a key to discerning the military's perception of itself and the political world that it inhabits. As it has for many years, the junta believes that Burma is always on the eve of destruction. Monsters of disorder prowl around the margins of the junta's psyche and keep them awake at night. Only the discipline and force of the army can keep them at bay, and the army must therefore be ever vigilant and ever ready to take control. Civilian governments may be allowed to exist some of the time, when the danger is not too acute, but the military will make the determination when and how. The army is the country's only permanent safeguard.

And the 2008 constitution ensures that the military will occupy that role for as long as it wants. The constitution does make provision for amendments, so theoretically the constitutional power of the army could be reduced.²² But a constitutional amendment requires support from 75 per cent of the members of each of the houses of Parliament.²³ Because the military itself appoints 25 per cent of the members of each chamber, amendments will not be possible without army votes.²⁴ The Tatmadaw's power cannot be reduced unless the Tatmadaw decides that its power should be reduced.

In short, then, the constitution does not permit a transition to a genuinely democratic and civilian government. As it stands, the constitution gives the army power to do whatever it wants, including the power to ensure that the constitution is never changed. And the constitution also reveals the military's intentions: the junta still does not trust civilian governments, and it does not

intend to surrender power. Change cannot occur incrementally and peacefully through the normal operation of Burmese law.

Internal unity and external coercion

Although new, the 2008 constitution grows out of the military's recollection of the past. It carries the shadow of a particular spectre: the military seized power at a time when many worried that civil war was about to split the country into pieces. The Tatmadaw claimed to be the only force capable of keeping the country together, because it alone possessed the practical power and spiritually embodied the country as a whole. Clearly, the 2008 constitution takes the same view of the military's role: it has the right and responsibility to prevent social breakdown.

That self-understanding goes back at least to the 1950s when, in the military's mind, Burma was becoming so fractured along so many lines that only drastic action could save the country. Before Britain conquered it, the area that now comprises Burma was never a single political system. Rather, the Burman kings had tried to establish dominance over other peoples—the ethnic minorities—in the areas surrounding the Burman heartland, but those peoples had never been wholly integrated into the Burman polity.²⁵ After independence many of the ethnic minorities wanted either independence or at least strong local autonomy, but they received neither. The Karen quickly took up arms; the Mon and Pa-o shortly joined them. Eventually, all the other large ethnic minorities would field their own resistance armies. The Tatmadaw thus spent its early years locked in battle with a formidable Karen adversary that, at one point, threatened Rangoon itself.²⁶

Meanwhile, in Rangoon, the Communist Party split into the more radical White Flags and the less radical Red Flags. The Red Flags quickly went into resistance. For a time, the White Flags remained a part of the APFPL, the dominant centrist party that controlled the government, but eventually the party expelled them. Locked out, they too took up arms and took to the hills. They were soon joined by remnant People's Volunteer Organisations (PVOs). At the end of World War II, Aung San—the army's leader during the war and the government's leader after it—formed these PVOs from demobilised soldiers to serve as his personal army. After his assassination, they became free-floating private militias.²⁷ Together the communists and the PVOs constituted a less severe threat than the Karen, but they still added to the list of armed groups facing the Tatmadaw.

To make matters worse, after the collapse of the Nationalist Chinese government in 1949, remnants of the Kuomintang moved into Shan State, where the American CIA trained and supplied them to invade Yunnan. After three failed attempts the KMT turned around and advanced on central Burma. To stop the advance, the Tatmadaw had to fight on yet another front. Even after the advance was halted, the KMT threatened Burma's security, because its presence in the country risked a proxy war between the USA and China on Burmese soil. The KMT also became one of the biggest narco-trafficking groups in the world.²⁸

Finally, in 1958, the AFPFL itself split into two factions—the Stable AFPFL and the Clean AFPFL. The army primarily supported the Stable group, but the Cleans controlled the government under the prime minister, U Nu, and had many supporters in the police and local militias. Tension rose rapidly, and when army leaders informed Nu that Burma had become a powder-keg, he agreed to surrender power to a military caretaker government headed by General Ne Win. The so-called *Bogyoke* (or ‘general’) government ruled with greater efficiency and effectiveness than had the parliamentary government, with some genuine achievements to its credit, including improved sanitation, decreased corruption, and police reform.²⁹ In 1960 Ne Win permitted elections, which returned Nu to power at the head of the new Pyidaungsu (or ‘Union’) Party. But the Union Party itself split, and when Nu began to reverse the policies introduced by the caretaker government, the military again seized power in 1962, this time for good.³⁰

Thus the army took control during a time of tremendous socio-political fracturing, and its own justification for the seizure was that only the military could keep the country together. U Nu had been in negotiations with ethnic minority leaders to create a looser federal structure, which would have allowed the minorities greater home rule.³¹ Immediately after the takeover, army leaders explained that, if those negotiations had borne fruit, the country would have fallen to pieces—literally—so the army had to intervene.

Underneath the military’s aversion to federalism was an even deeper aversion to all forms of disorder, including democracy itself. The military repeatedly explained that democracy allowed self-serving politicians to pursue their own separate agendas, so that the only result could be discord and factionalisation. The problem was not just that parliamentary democracy was too weak to deal with the problem of discord; it was that parliamentary democracy was part of the problem. To avoid sociopolitical breakdown, Burma needed a more disciplined and unified power structure. The answer to civilian disunity was military unity.³² Thus, as early as 1958, the army released a critique of the constitution that was widely influential within the military: ‘What we dread most is that unscrupulous politicians and deceitful Communist rebels and their allies may take advantage of these flaws, weaknesses, contradictions, and inadequacies in the Constitution and bring about in the country gangster political movements, syndicalism, anarchism and a totalitarian regime.’³³

From that day to this, the military has rehearsed this interpretation of Burma’s first years of independence and the birth of the present regime: parliamentary government could not prevent the disintegration of the country; only the military stands between the nation and chaos.³⁴ As already noted, the 2008 constitution rests on this interpretation of history as well: should a threat to national solidarity arise, the military has the power to do anything it wants to deal with it, because parliamentary government cannot be trusted so to do. The military has created a civilian government, but it still does not trust that government to keep the country from falling apart.

To govern with unity, the military adopted a two-fold approach: internally it managed to achieve internal cohesion, while externally it eliminated all

independent organisations and institutions so that it could rule through coercion rather than through compromise. In the internal dimension, in its early years, the military government was remarkably free of the internecine struggle that has come to be so characteristic of its later years. The military had become unified as a consequence of facing threats from a variety of sources: the ethnic armies, the KMT, the communists and parliamentary politicians. In this early period, the threats were real, and the army could not take its own power for granted. It was therefore forced by dint of circumstance to achieve cohesion.³⁵ In addition, as the military watched Burmese political parties fissure again and again, they took away the lesson that unity was the supreme value. As the leading historian of the Tatmadaw in this period explains: 'By the time of the 1962 coup, the army had become a standing, bureaucratized, and centralized institution, capable of eliminating such challenges over its claims to state power.'³⁶

In the external dimension the military government systematically eliminated all potential rivals for power.³⁷ It outlawed political parties other than the Burma Sociality Programme Party (BSPP), the Tatmadaw's alter ego, and eventually would discard even that one.³⁸ It brought the ethnic states directly under central control, terminating the local councils that had had a hand in governing the states.³⁹ Although the party created mass organisations, such as workers' and youth groups, these had no power; they allowed Burmese people to participate only in the work that the junta had prescribed for them and they functioned primarily to indoctrinate citizens and control their labour.⁴⁰ Because the party vetted all candidates, elections were not genuine contests for power but were instead processes to socialise voters into the values of the state.⁴¹ The military also took steps to reduce the political power of Buddhist monks.⁴² Few people tried to resist, but when they did, the regime responded with immediate and severe violence; the history of the repression of student protests has been especially long and bloody.⁴³

Instead of bringing civil society groups into a broad coalition, the junta simply took away all their independence; it ruled through coercion, not compromise. It was the more able to do so because it met surprisingly little resistance, aside from the ethnic armies.⁴⁴ As noted, Burmese political parties had fissured over and over, so there was no unified mass movement that could resist. But in the early years it is not clear that ordinary Burmans would have wanted to resist even if they could. During its previous time in power, the military had governed relatively well, and in the early years of its second time in power, the ethnic armies were still threatening. As a result, the regime had only limited occasion to use the brutality that would later become its trademark.

This combination of internal unity and external coercion served the military government well. During a period when one autocratic government after another succumbed to democratic revolution, the regime clung to power; the names changed, but the fundamental fact of military dominance did not. Today Burma seems almost anachronistic, a hangover from an age when democracy had not yet become a universal norm. Given this resilience, some have concluded that the military can hang on to power as long as it

wants, and as the previous section explained, it apparently wants to hang on forever. But, again, impressions can be misleading, because, although the military's original strategy for retaining power worked well, it has since moved to a different strategy that is likely to prove less stable.

Buying support

As the decades have passed, the military government has found it increasingly difficult to rule by coercion alone, both because its own internal unity began to unravel and because new democratic forces posed unprecedented threats to its legitimacy. It was forced to find other ways to muster support or at least compliance. Although it continued to use coercion against some of the ethnic armies and even peaceful protesters, it increasingly sought to secure its power base by delivering income and resource streams to key supporters. In other words, although once it could demand support, now it must pay for it.

As the government's policies became increasingly heavy-handed and arbitrary, they plunged the country into economic immiseration. Finally, in 1988, protests spread across Burma so pervasively that the military felt unable to control them. Instead, it allowed an election, which it lost by a wide margin to the National League for Democracy, a new party led by the extremely popular Aung San Suu Kyi. The military refused to allow the parliament to sit, but for the first time it faced active resistance in the Burman heartland. Troops were needed to keep order in central Burma and also to fight the ethnic armies in the hills, as urban activists began to forge links with the resistance groups.⁴⁵ Doubtless the military government recalled the bad old days after independence when it had to fight on many fronts at once.

To avert that fate, the government—now named the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC)—entered ceasefire agreements with some of the more powerful ethnic armies in the 1990s.⁴⁶ Most of the agreements were unwritten, but the terms tended to be the same. On the one hand, the insurgents kept their arms but agreed not to attack the regime's forces. And on the other side, the junta agreed not to attack the insurgents and allowed them substantial self-government, including the power to extract income. For example, many of the ceasefire groups controlled part of Burma's international boundary with China or Thailand; these groups taxed the cross-border trade in teak, electronic equipment, drugs and other commodities. Other ethnic armies became narco-traffickers, though it should be emphasised that many of the armies specifically repudiated the drug trade. In effect, the junta bought off the resistance of these groups by giving them most of what they had been fighting for.⁴⁷

Next, the central governing body of the regime—first called SLORC, then later the SPDC—devolved power to the regional commanders. In their ability to govern the areas under their control without check, these commanders became virtual feudal lords over the area under their jurisdiction.⁴⁸ Over time these commanders became increasingly alienated from the centre, which they—accurately—thought was detached from the fighting and interested

only in patronage politics.⁴⁹ But, in fact, the commanders were themselves part of the spoils system: when the SPDC devolved power to the commanders, it also gave them the power to extract income and resources from the people whom they governed. As a result, the commanders became extremely wealthy and powerful. As one commentator explains, 'Anyone who travels outside Rangoon can see the mansions, luxury cars, and royalty-like treatment of these officers'.⁵⁰ Again, in effect, the SPDC bought the support of these commanders, rather than merely demanding their loyalty to a unified command structure as had been done in the past.

Finally, the SPDC itself became divided because of the personal ambition and business rivalry of its leading figures. Before the events of 1988, Ne Win exercised complete control over the government but, with his departure, none of his successors has held such monopolistic power. During the 1990s, after the ceasefire agreements, the army moved its focus from fighting to business. Several business organisations owned by the Tatmadaw came to dominate the formal economy, and they allowed the junta leaders to become extremely wealthy. But the opportunities to become rich also brought increased competition for the spoils.⁵¹

Since 1988, although the military government has always had a single overall leader, that leader has never been able completely to eliminate his rivals. Thus, Saw Maung succeeded Ne Win but, when he became unstable, Than Shwe and Khin Nyunt competed to replace him. Than Shwe eventually prevailed, but Khin Nyunt remained in the government, manoeuvring to advance his own agenda.⁵² His rivalry with Maung Aye, the third of the ruling troika, then intensified. By the early part of this millennium, Khin Nyunt briefly appeared to be in the ascendant when he replaced Than Shwe as prime minister, but shortly thereafter Than Shwe purged Khin Nyunt and thousands of his supporters.⁵³ Since that time Than Shwe and Maung Aye have competed for control, although the rivalry has never erupted into open conflict.

To secure their power base, these top leaders manoeuvre to place those loyal to them in positions of influence. In other words, the military government is not a single unified command structure; it is a collection of competing networks of patronage and influence. The power of each particular network waxes and wanes over time relative to the others. The top generals depend on these followers for their own power; without them, the generals would be helpless in a competition with the others. To keep their followers loyal, the generals reward them by giving them access to income and resource streams, usually from within their offices.⁵⁴ In other words, the power of any given general depends on his ability to secure the appointment of his people to offices of influence and wealth.

And the networks themselves are neither wholly hierarchical nor perfectly unified; the military government strongly resembles the multiple layers of a feudal system. The top generals appoint high-ranking subordinates, who in turn develop their own networks of followers, who owe their most immediate loyalty to the people who appointed them. Sometimes tension breaks out between the top generals and these more local networks. For example, the

generals sometimes try to crack down on corruption by restricting the ability of subordinates to extort resources from those around them. But corruption is what makes the whole system work: the subordinates are loyal to the generals only because they are allowed to extort. As a result, they have generally refused to cut back on extortion, and open conflict sometimes results. For example, in early 2002, two high-ranking officers conspired with relatives of Ne Win 'to protect their vast illicit empire by plotting a coup against the junta'.⁵⁵ The SPDC foiled the plot, but the very fact that the plot occurred is testimony to the divisiveness of the military government.

In practice, buying support multiplies the players, people who might have an influence on Burma's future. So long as the regime was unified and opposition disunited, the lines of command were clear and ran upwards to one person—Ne Win—who called all the shots and could therefore rule wholly through coercion. But as soon as the military government feels forced to buy the support of people lower down the command hierarchy, it empowers them to demand a reward for their services, rather than giving unquestioning loyalty to the regime. In practice, buying support diffuses power to some extent, and the diffusion of power is the first necessary step toward democratisation.

The basis of military power has shifted quite radically in Burma over the past several decades. Although there are no signs of the junta's imminent demise, the new basis for power is markedly less stable than the old. If people support the regime only because they are paid, they will continue to support the regime only if they continue to be paid. If the regime gives a group access to income or resource streams and then denies access, it could turn grateful supporters into bitter enemies.

The fracturing of the regime?

In fact, that is precisely what the regime has been doing for the past several years—extending privileges only to withdraw them from people whose support the junta can ill afford to lose. It has repudiated the ceasefires, thus driving the ceasefire armies back into active resistance; it has alienated the regional commanders by ordering them to launch campaigns that would be costly and perhaps unwinnable; it has alienated some senior generals by refusing to promote them as they thought they deserved; and it has alienated other high-ranking officers by forcing them to resign from the army so as to move into the parliament as civilian representatives. Finally, it has created a new class of players: the members of parliament who belong to parties other than the junta's own, most of whom are ethnic minorities and are looking to make a deal with other disgruntled persons.

When the ceasefires were initially concluded, the junta held the view that they would last only until a transition to a constitutional order. Indeed, for the regime, part of the reason for adopting a nominally democratic constitution was that the rest of the world would perceive Burma as a 'normal' country—ie not the sort of country that has ceasefire agreements with its own people. Accordingly, in the run-up to the referendum on the

constitution, the SPDC informed the ceasefire groups that it would revoke the ceasefires; the ethnic armies would be required to lay down their arms or else become part of the Tatmadaw. Some of the armies took the latter option, but most—including the most formidable—refused to do either.⁵⁶ Overnight, the junta turned these groups, which had been passively tolerant of the SPDC, into enemies. The regime attacked a small group, the Kokang, creating a wave of refugees who fled into China, which reportedly instructed the junta not to attack any groups on China's border without China's permission.⁵⁷ At the time of writing, the Tatmadaw is fighting the Shan State Army—North⁵⁸ and the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army in Karen State.⁵⁹ It has not yet attacked the two largest groups, the United Wa State Army and the Kachin Independence Army.

The sudden threat of attack united the ethnic armies as they had never been before. The regime had given these ceasefire groups a deal—home rule and income in exchange for peace—and when the deal was suddenly withdrawn, the groups looked for other partners to make other deals. Very quickly the leaders of most of the ceasefire and non-ceasefire groups began to meet to work out an alliance and, if possible, a joint strategy. They formed a series of increasingly inclusive umbrella groups—first the Military Alliance, then the Committee to Effectuate a Federal Union, and finally the United Nationalities Federal Council, which has adopted a 16-page constitution dividing the country into military regions.⁶⁰ I have been present at some of these meetings, and I have seen the documents that they have produced.

Thus the regime has alienated the ceasefire groups by threatening to attack them. It has also alienated the regional commanders who must do the attacking. These officers have lived lives very different from their predecessors. In the ceasefire areas they have done little fighting; even in the non-ceasefire areas they have generally attacked only civilian populations, avoiding conflict with the ethnic armies. Instead of fighting, they have dedicated their time to becoming rich, at which they have been markedly successful. But now the regime has ordered them to shift priorities: with the revocation of the ceasefires, the regime has announced that it will attack the ex-ceasefire armies.

The regional commanders are clearly unhappy about this direction. It would require them to focus on combat rather than profit, and currently the Tatmadaw is far from combat-ready. Although numerous, the soldiers are mostly conscripts chosen by village leaders, who naturally sent the least desirable young men. Consequently, morale is very low.⁶¹ In addition, although military spending has been a large part of the government's budget, little of it seems to have been spent on the people who will be doing the fighting. Some soldiers are reportedly starving; military equipment is everywhere in short supply; the desertion rate is rising.⁶² If the army actually were to attack the larger ethnic armies, it is unlikely that it would prevail. Many of the regional commanders blame Than Shwe; they believe that, because he comes from a background in psychological operations, he does not sufficiently value front-line soldiers.

The SPDC has set a series of deadlines for the ethnic armies to lay down their arms. As each deadline passed, the regime did nothing except to set another deadline. The SPDC reportedly ordered the regional commanders to attack various groups, but the regional commanders refused because they feared that they might lose the ensuing conflict. In short, the SPDC has alienated the regional commanders just as it has alienated the ceasefire armies. In the past the regime has tried to keep control over the regional commanders by reshuffling them, but it is not clear that this tactic will work indefinitely.⁶³ The regional commanders are already proto-warlords; if the gap between them and the central command widens, they could become actual warlords, powers in their own right in their respective domains.

In addition, the centre itself appears to be becoming even less unified than in the past. As noted, Than Shwe never had the monopoly on power that he appeared to possess from the outside; he always had to deal with complicated networks of power relations. Nevertheless, he clearly occupied the sole apex of power. In the months since the election, his role has become less clear. He has formally dissolved the SPDC, has resigned as commander-in-chief, and rarely appears in public anymore. On the other hand, he chairs the new State Supreme Council, a body nowhere mentioned in the constitution.⁶⁴ Despite this apparent lack of constitutional authority, it has propounded a number of statutes to govern the operation of the legislature. It seems fair to conclude that the State Supreme Council was created precisely to ensure that Than Shwe remains in ultimate command, although he may withdraw from the day-to-day operation of the government.

Nonetheless, his semi-retirement has clearly left something of a power vacuum, and the contenders are now circling. The most powerful figure under the constitution is the new commander-in-chief, Min Aung Hlaing.⁶⁵ He is a Than Shwe loyalist but, as Than Shwe ages, he will presumably become more his own man. In choosing him, Than Shwe passed over Lt General Thura Myint Aung, who was in line for the post because of seniority, but who was thought to be less loyal to Than Shwe. When he was offered the lesser post of defence minister, he declined and was promptly placed under house arrest. But he is popular with his fellow officers and has his own network of supporters, who are now more alienated from the government, while other high-ranking army officers are unhappy that Than Shwe has chosen to value personal loyalty over military hierarchy.⁶⁶ They too had been given a deal, loyalty to the hierarchy in exchange for promotion according to hierarchical principles, but Than Shwe has cavalierly revoked that deal. He is presumably calculating that by up-ending the system of seniority, he has ensured that his subordinates will not become too secure in their positions. That tactic may, however, backfire if the senior generals start to look elsewhere for a better deal.

The contest for power will also have a new participant: the new members of parliament. Many of them are former officers, forced to resign their commissions so that they could occupy the civilian seats in the legislature. Many of these persons did not want to resign because reassignment to the legislature involved a loss in prestige, power and particularly wealth.

As part of the army, they had access to income and resource streams; in the parliament they have nothing but limited salaries and benefits. As noted earlier, the legislature will have extremely limited formal power under the constitution. Nonetheless, the legislators now have an extremely strong incentive to develop their own income and resource streams, available to them by virtue of their status as legislators. As a result, the army and the legislature will probably come into direct competition for wealth. The army will certainly be the victor if it manages to act in a unified way but, as already explained, it is no longer unified. The officers-turned-legislators were all part of power networks within the army; disgruntled current officers might easily turn to them for allies should the military fissures widen.

Some already purport to see this new civilian power base in the person of Thein Sein, the new president. In his first months in office, he has spoken against corruption and in favour of greater spending on health and education. He has also appointed U Myint, a friend of Aung San Suu Kyi, to chair the presidential advisory board on the economy.⁶⁷ But so far he has taken no concrete steps toward reform, so his words are more likely to be merely window dressing to mask continuing military domination. He too came to power as a Than Shwe loyalist, and in his inaugural speech he emphasised above all the central role of the army in keeping the country together and safe from 'neo-colonialists'. He also identified as the 'Three Main National Causes' those particular things that the constitution gives into the military's unrestricted care: non-disintegration of the union, non-disintegration of national solidarity and perpetuation of sovereignty.⁶⁸ At present at least, Thein Sein appears to be a puppet for the military forces-that-be.

But, though the president may not form the nucleus of a civilian power base, others more distant from the centre of power might. Of course, precisely because they are farther from power, they have less ability to effectuate change and more need for tactical alliances. And one last group has still less power and more need: the members of parliament who belong to political parties other than those backed by the military. These MPs are mostly from ethnic minorities and belong to parties organised to promote the interests of particular ethnic groups. The SPDC presumably allowed them to win so as to give the illusion of an ethnically inclusive parliament. They have very little power by virtue of their office: the legislature itself is virtually powerless, and they constitute only a small fraction of it. But they might play an important linking function. Some of them have close connections to ethnic minority communities and even the ethnic resistance armies. If the ex-officers in the parliament build bridges to disgruntled commanders, the ethnic MPs could help to broaden that alliance to leaders of the ethnic minorities. And these MPs too feel that they have been given a raw deal: despite considerable pressure to boycott, they agreed to participate in the elections in the expectation of having some influence, however small; instead, they are being housed in prison-like conditions and given no opportunity to affect policy.

Conclusion

None of these groups could bring down the military regime on its own. That fact is, however, good news. If any one of them could merely seize power on its own, it would probably rule on its own as well, becoming yet another in Burma's string of autocratic governments. Because only an alliance could unseat the junta, the elements of the alliance will have to accommodate each other's agendas—not out of a commitment to pluralism but simply out of practical necessity. Such messy, self-interested alliances against tyranny are the stuff of which democracy is born. The even better news is that the regime has given all these groups an incentive to resist. The military junta has in fact managed this transition rather artlessly. Having secured its power base by buying support, it decided that it didn't want to pay anymore. But that move has left a large number of disgruntled players on the board of Burmese politics. And these players are not the usual opponents of the regime, such as Aung San Suu Kyi or the non-ceasefire armies, but supporters whom the regime can little afford to alienate. If those players manage to work out a new deal, the junta may be in trouble. The regime has stayed in power for so long that its tenure has come to seem eternal and untouchable. For that reason, it cannot be said with any confidence that the junta will shortly expire. But it can be said that, because of the junta's own mistakes, conditions are more propitious for a transition than they have been for a long time.

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