

Tatmadaw troubles: Myanmar country briefing

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Nearly a decade into Myanmar's stumbling 'transition to democracy', the country's armed forces still dominate a fractious national, political, and security landscape. *Anthony Davis* reports

The legacy of decades-long military rule in Myanmar remains a major impediment to the development of democratic politics in the country but is also hampering aspirations to build what the armed forces (Tatmadaw) commander-in-chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, has repeatedly termed a 'standard military'.

Efforts to turn today's sprawling, repressive, and often corrupt behemoth of about 350,000 personnel into a professional force that might be viewed as meeting international standards hinge on two challenges. One is the modernisation of all three services as equipment purchased during a period of expansion in the 1990s becomes obsolete. The second is reform across a spectrum of pressing non-technical issues: institutionalising a stable relationship with civilian power; military accountability; improving pay and conditions; and, not least, ending a rash of long-running civil wars that morally and reputationally have proved deeply corrosive.



Tatmadaw Kyi (Myanmar Army) soldiers march during a parade to mark the country's 74th Armed Forces Day in Naypyidaw on 27 March. (Thet Aung/AFP/Getty Images)

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Snr Gen Min Aung Hlaing, who assumed command in 2011 and is due to retire by 2021, has imposed his stamp on both areas. Under his stewardship the Tatmadaw has taken significant steps towards modernisation with the induction of new equipment, which has transformed the air force and navy in particular.

Despite Western outrage over the military's egregious human rights record, modernisation has continued apace since 2017 with purchases from foreign allies including China, Russia, India, and Ukraine, which have sought to expand their share of Myanmar's defence market while ignoring the Tatmadaw's well-documented transgressions.

However, prospects for training and military-to-military ties with the West that might have developed into equipment sales have effectively collapsed. Despite the potential from tours of defence plants in Austria and Germany in April 2017 by Snr Gen Mind Aung Hlaing, engagement with the United Kingdom, United States, European Union (EU), and Australia is on hold at best and indefinitely terminated at worst.

Meanwhile, emphasis on developing domestic defence production has also underpinned modernisation. From an early base in small arms and munitions plants, the local defence industry has diversified into producing armoured vehicles, aircraft assembly and maintenance and, most notably, naval shipbuilding.

Technical modernisation has been paralleled by concerted efforts to integrate new systems into a joint land-air-sea-information battlespace. On paper the Tatmadaw recognises a doctrine of 'people's war' to counter foreign aggression that dates from the 1980s. In practice, however, large-scale divisional-level exercises to showcase a new capacity for combined-arms operations have been almost annual events since 2012. In February 2018 these exercises involved a significant naval component.

Reforming the military, traditionally a weapon of internal repression, into a professional force tasked with national defence poses a far more daunting challenge than acquiring hardware. The leadership of the armed forces coupled with an ethos traditionally dominated by the army, the least progressive and most inward-looking of the services, have done nothing to mitigate the problem.

The worst instincts of a defiantly unreformed army were on stark display during the Rohingya crisis of August-September 2017. Even by Tatmadaw standards the response to attacks by bands of poorly armed militants that killed 12 security force personnel was shocking. Set out in detail in exhaustive reports by a United Nations (UN) Fact Finding Mission and several human rights organisations, army 'clearance operations' involved the indiscriminate slaughter of more than 6,000 civilians, including infants, systematic gang rape, and the torching of hundreds of villages that drove about 730,000 refugees into neighbouring Bangladesh.

This was hardly the first time the Tatmadaw had faced international condemnation for massacres of civilians. However, the referral by a UN body of the Tatmadaw's senior-most

leadership to the International Criminal Court on charges of crimes against humanity and possible 'genocidal intent' highlighted a fundamental question: how could a disciplined, well-organised, and relatively modern state actor with growing aspirations on the international stage drag its own reputation, and by extension, that of its country, so low?

Three factors arguably account for the history of persistent abuse and periodic massacre that culminated in the Rakhine state atrocities. First is the way army combat formations have been exhausted and brutalised by seven decades of unremitting war against their own citizens, which has continually blurred the line between combatant and civilian.

Second, the crisis of professionalism in the Tatmadaw draws on a potent ethno-religious chauvinism shot through with deep-seated insecurities. The army is recruited overwhelmingly from among the country's majority Buddhist Bamar community – about 68% of a population of 52 million – and is led by an almost exclusively Bamar officer corps. Playing out as campaigns of colonial pacification, counter-insurgency operations are infused with a sense of Bamar cultural, linguistic, and ethnic superiority that fuels contempt and abuse of minorities.

Third, the Tatmadaw is indoctrinated with an unwavering belief in its indispensability as the guardian of Myanmar's territorial integrity and national destiny. Behind a fig leaf of elections and quasi-civilian rule the constitution of 2008 guarantees the military a lock grip on real power in Myanmar that Snr Gen Min Aung Hlaing has shown no interest in loosening. Without significant amendment, the military-scripted constitution precludes the possibility of ethnic autonomy in a federal framework that remains a basic precondition for peace.

Predictably, political power and economic privilege have bred corruption and a culture of impunity on the battlefield and beyond. As demonstrated during the bloody crushing of pro-democracy protests in 1988 and 2007, the army has not hesitated to turn its guns against ethnic Bamar civilians. Although the violence visited on the Rohingya was unprecedented in its scale and savagery, it emerged from institutional reflexes ingrained over decades.

Army

With a strength estimated at about 300,000, Myanmar's army, or Tatmadaw Kyi, is by far the largest service. Despite big-ticket procurement by the air force and navy, the army still accounts for the largest portion of the defence budget, which in 2018 was USD3.15 billion, or about 13% of the national budget. This figure marked a significant decline from an all-time high of USD3.81 billion in 2015.

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