

Myanmar Military's Propaganda Playbook

Unveiling Junta's Tactics After the coup

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Introduction

The people of Myanmar, who have endured both triumphs and tribulations, possess profound wisdom and vivid memories about the tactics employed by the junta. Our primary objective is to gather and consolidate these memories, along with lessons learned from similar situations in other countries. This objective has been achieved through comprehensive exploration in the Myanmar language version playbook, and this piece serves as an English translation of brief of the original version. Specifically, it focuses on the current propaganda tactics employed by the junta in Myanmar, with international events only serving as an introductory backdrop.

Throughout history, dictators have employed numerous tactics to manipulate and indoctrinate the public. They utilized various propaganda strategies, making use of platforms like radio, television, stamps, symbols, and even school textbook curricula. Their aim was to convince the oppressed population to trust them and enable their continued rule. These tactics encompassed a wide range of stories and narratives.

With the rise of social media¹ usage, people gained a platform to freely express their opinions. However, this also led to the spread of disinformation, misinformation and propaganda. Particularly, politicians inclined towards dictatorship and the dictators themselves began establishing systematic propaganda machines on social media to manipulate the public. Consequently, the need for fact-checking disinformation and misinformation became urgent and crucial. In the battle against disinformation, it is equally important to proactively address falsehoods through pre-bunking, alongside the process of debunking.

Those who engage in spreading disinformation will persist in using any available tactics. While major issues are often subjected to fact-checking processes, occasionally some may slip through the cracks. This underscores the importance of pre-bunking. To discern whether the content before your eyes is true, false or partly false, it is crucial to closely observe the manipulative tactics employed by dictators. Pay attention to how they exploit people's faith systems, fears and obsessions, as well as the individuals

¹ In Myanmar, Facebook stands as the most commonly utilized social media platform. Other platforms such as X, Telegram, TikTok and Instagram are also prevalent among the users.

or organizations they employ to carry out these manipulations. This paper serves the purpose of shedding light on these matters.

This paper gathers four primary narratives employed by the junta to disseminate propaganda. It outlines how they exploit patriotism, nationalism and religion, which are susceptible points for manipulation among the people of Myanmar. Additionally, it explores their historical utilization of the army and dictatorship to assert control and shape the country according to their desires. Furthermore, the article examines how they construct an image of the army as the savior of the nation.

Subsequently, this paper delves into a comprehensive examination of the narratives surrounding elections. It thoroughly explores how dictators exploit elections to manipulate the public, consolidate and maintain their power. Furthermore, it analyzes the current dictator's employment of elections as a means to manipulate the public. In the final section, the tactics of deception and shifting blame utilized by the junta are summarized.

In addition to describing these tactics, this paper also provides a summary of similar narratives employed by dictators in other countries. After discussing these, it delves into the propaganda narratives used by the Myanmar junta to manipulate the people, and their persistent attempts to maintain their grip on power.

By carefully examining these cases, it is believed that pre-bunking can be achieved by filtering forthcoming "fake news" and determining their reliability. Dictators employ specific "ideologies" when creating and disseminating propaganda and disinformation, tailored to each situation. Although this piece has the nature of a research paper, it is written in a straightforward manner to ensure easy comprehension.

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Chapter 1 | Exploiting Buddhist Nationalism

Nationalism has been utilized throughout history to consolidate and maintain power in various ways. Notably, Nazism and Fascism serve as significant examples. We can observe the influence of fascism, which spread during World War I and World War II, and how dictators exploited nationalism to exert control and manipulate the people.²

Benito Mussolini's fascism aimed to rebuild and reconstruct Italy, aspiring to regain the glory and territories once held by the Roman Empire. Through territorial expansion, Mussolini sought to restore Italy's greatness and establish dominance over the Mediterranean region, akin to the Roman Empire. His belief in the superiority of Italians was not based on biological origins, but on their culture and history. Mussolini viewed Italians as the bearers of culture and education for other nationalities.

Both Hitler and Mussolini embraced fascism. Hitler, driven by the desire to disprove Germany's status as a loser in World War I, became involved in politics. Utilizing his skills as a persuasive public speaker, he campaigned for Nazism. He propagated the belief that Germans were the superior race and entitled to rule over others. Hitler blamed and accused certain groups for Germany's failures, constructing Nazi ideologies based on divisive "us versus them" narratives. He ruthlessly persecuted those he deemed to have "impure blood," considering them as threats to the German fatherland.

Fascists employed extreme nationalism as a means of seizing and maintaining power by discriminating against, blaming and antagonizing others. Like all dictators, they resorted to violent tactics to suppress opposition and manipulate elections.

² Dictators and nationalism: (n.d.). [https://www.tilburguniversity.edu/sites/default/files/download/Thomas Bil - Dictators and Nationalism_2.pdf](https://www.tilburguniversity.edu/sites/default/files/download/Thomas%20Bil-Dictators%20and%20Nationalism_2.pdf)

Mussolini and Hitler utilized a more extreme form of fascism to deceive and sway the public. Mussolini emphasized the rich culture and traditions of Italians, asserting their superiority over other races. Hitler, on the other hand, claimed that Germans were biologically and genetically superior to others. They believed that by restoring the nation's greatness, its glory would be revived. To achieve this goal, they advocated for the removal of enemies and traitors. Both leaders sought to unite their respective nations under the banner of nationalism. They employed deceptive tactics, suggesting that the nation and its people were being harmed by specific groups or systems. Similar nationalist propaganda can also be identified in Myanmar's history.

History of Myanmar Nationalism

The protection of nationality, religion and nationalism in Myanmar has been closely linked to anti-colonialism since the time preceding independence from British rule. It emerged as a response to the oppression faced by the Myanmar people under the rule of British colonizers, as well as the influence of middle-class bureaucrats and Indian Chettiar merchants (known as "Chit-tees" in Burmese) who were brought into the country by the British. The rise of nationalism rooted in Buddhism in Myanmar was a result of resistance against racial discrimination caused by colonialism.

The Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) had a prominent slogan that emphasized nationality, religion (Buddhism) and education: "Love your nationality, respect your religion, value your knowledge." This slogan resonated with the anti-colonial movement rooted in Buddhist nationalism. Another organization, the Dobama Asiayone (We Burmans Association), which was established two decades after the YMBA, shared a similar purpose. Their chant reflected their commitment: "Burma is our country, Burmese is our literature, Burmese is our language. Love our country, celebrate our literature, respect our language."

During the parliamentary era under Prime Minister U Nu in 1961, Buddhism was officially declared as the state religion. There was even speculation and worship of U Nu as a religious figure, with some suggesting he may be a Bodhisattva – a being on the path to enlightenment.

Following the 1962 coup led by General Ne Win, administrative policies rooted in xenophobia and exclusion of non-Burmese individuals were implemented. Despite General Ne Win himself having a Chinese heritage, he openly pursued anti-Chinese policies. Additionally, he targeted Indian residents in Myanmar, declaring their properties as state-owned.³ Whenever the ruling class faced challenges from the people or when the country experienced turmoil, conflicts between the Chinese and Indian communities were often fabricated to divert public attention. Examples of such conflicts include the 1967 Chinese-Myanmar conflict, the 2013 Meiktila conflict and the 2017 Rohingya crisis.

As time passed, the true nature of the ruling class in Myanmar, who claimed to be the protectors of Buddhism, became evident. The practices of discrimination and incitement carried out, under the guise of preserving Buddhism, have persisted since the era of absolute monarchy in Myanmar and continue to exist within modern systems.

Throughout Europe, the palace (royals) and the church (religious leaders) collaborated to manipulate the people. Similarly, in Myanmar's absolute monarchy, a close relationship existed between the king and the monks. They supported each other in safeguarding both religion and power. The monks aspired to advise the king, while the kings sought the reputation of being great rulers who upheld and glorified the religion. This convergence of state and religion laid the foundation for the aforementioned slogans and chants during the period of anti-colonial resistance by the YMBA and Dobama Asiayone.

³ MUKHERJEE, K. (2022). *Race, ethnicity and religion in conflict across Asia*. ROUTLEDGE.

Throughout Myanmar's history, leaders of the Myanmar Army have often relied on the support of religious leaders to exert influence over the people and their fellow soldiers.⁴ They have exploited religion to legitimize their regime or present themselves as protectors of the faith. Slogans like "Courageous souls do not perish. And even if they do, they shall not be condemned to hell" were crafted to shape the mindset of their fellow soldiers, casting them as valiant defenders of the nation and religion.⁵ Certain monks even publicly preached that non-Buddhists were subhuman, justifying violence against them.⁶ They sometimes proudly proclaimed their success in driving away the "evil Kalars" from the country. Sitagu Sayadaw gained notoriety for some of his sermons. In a ceremony held in Yangon in March 2022, he publicly lauded the current leader of the regime, Min Aung Hlaing, by describing him as "a generous and wise king."

It is evident that the current regime in Myanmar openly exploits Buddhist nationalism, which has long been a cornerstone of traditional politics in the country. They propagate the idea that a more liberalized Myanmar poses a threat to the state religion. Monks manipulate the public by claiming that Buddhism will cease to exist if Western democratic influences gain more traction in Myanmar. Nadi Min, the author of Irrawaddy News, expressed concerns that the power dynamics between the monks and the regime could lead to a distortion of the true teachings of Buddhism, with the religion being portrayed in a manner that suits their own interests under the guise of Theravada Buddhism.⁷

Under the current rule of the Myanmar regime, various monk associations like Mabatha (Patriotic Association of Myanmar), nationalist organizations like YMBA, political parties such

⁴ Myanmar's military mindset: An exploratory survey. (n.d.-c).

https://www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0023/1418333/Military-mindset-web.pdf

⁵ ရဲသော်မသေ သေသော်ငရဲမလား. ရဲသော်မသေ သေသော်ငရဲမလား | Myawady Webportal. (n.d.).

<https://www.myawady.net.mm/node/780>

⁶ သီတဂူ ကျဆုံးမှုသည် နွေဦးတော်လှန်ရေး၏ အောင်မြင်မှုတစ်ခုဖြစ်သည်. Myanmar Now. (2023, November 30).

<https://myanmar-now.org/mm/news/13663/>

⁷ အာဏာရှင်နဲ့ ထေရဝါဒ. ဧရာဝတီ. (2023, July 16). <https://burma.irrawaddy.com/article/2022/06/25/252779.html>

as the Yeomanry Development Party, militias and pro-military armed groups like Pyu Saw Htee, as well as pro-military propaganda platforms disguised as media outlets, support and endorse military dictators in the name of religion. They organize pro-military rallies and extremist Buddhist ceremonies, spread defamatory content against anti-dictatorship movements using pro-military media, conduct Buddhist culture courses within military bases and employ armed threats to further their objectives.⁸

The dictator General Min Aung Hlaing oversaw the construction of a massive Buddha image in Nay Pyi Taw, which stands among the tallest stone statues of Buddha. It is named Marawizaya, meaning "the Buddha who conquers all the dangers of Mara." This statue is said to intend to symbolize peace and prosperity for the country. By associating himself with this religious symbol, the dictator aims to portray himself as a benevolent and devout ruler to the people and the military. This represents the regime's manipulation and propaganda, exploiting religion and the influence of monks.

In addition to emphasizing the army's role in safeguarding Buddhism, the regime also employs the term "Bamar race" to differentiate themselves. Conversely, they depict other ethnic groups as followers of different religions and rebels who disrupt the country's stability.

The regime manipulated people's minds by asserting that the Burmese Buddhist army was the guardian of the country, its people and the state religion while labeling ethnic groups as rebels. However, these ideologies were shattered during the anti-dictatorship movement in 2021. Even the majority of Burmese people from the central region of Myanmar resisted the military regime. Despite this, the dictators either denied or ignored the resistance, persisting in distracting the people of Myanmar.

⁸ Monitoring Ultranationalist Movements in Myanmar, October 2021 Report

The spokesperson for the SAC, Major General Zaw Min Tun, expressed his astonishment about ethnic Bamar people fighting against each other in a press release on August 22, 2023. He said: "I'm really surprised to see Bamar people fighting amongst themselves. One KIA leader claimed that they allowed the flow of weapons near Sagaing Region, and now the whole region is in chaos. They even mentioned that if they distributed all their weapons to everyone, Myanmar would be in big trouble. Some people, including a few from the media, supported this statement with joy. I would like to ask those who support this statement, especially Bamar people, to think carefully. I am amazed that some Bamar people are cheering and encouraging violence within their own community. You should know better than that. That's all I have to say."

The way he associated the Burmese race with the army and labeled ethnic groups as the "other side" clearly reveals the army's perspective. Myint Than, the author, mentioned that nationalism is not always bad, but in Myanmar, it tends to take an extreme form.⁹ Myint Than highlighted that the nationalism and patriotism instilled by the Myanmar Army are extreme, lacking critical thinking, and fueled by hatred towards other races.

Nationalism and patriotism have their positive aspects. Ko Tar, the author, described it as a cultured form of love for one's country. To conclude this chapter, let me share a paragraph from a translated article in the book "Thamine Sagar, Pan Sagar" by the renowned author Mya Than Tint. "The ultimate expression of nationalism is a warm and embracing patriotism. It's that feeling of excitement and love that gives you goosebumps when you hear your national anthem at the Olympics."

⁹ BBC. (n.d.). မျိုးချစ်စိတ်အကြောင်း ပညာရေးနှင့် ဘာသာရေး ပြုပြင်မှုတွေအကြောင်း. BBC News မြန်မာ.

<https://www.bbc.com/burmese/in-depth-48541363?fbclid=IwAR0p0pZfUd1fbajH2h8Zq3YQJMPNCqqsMiLIKtjmlopZOnjE2UExrXSenGY>

The military is depicted as the guardian of the nationhood. In the upcoming chapter, we will explore how the regime utilizes the military as their instrument.

Chapter 2 | The Military as the Guardian of the Nation

The military, established during Myanmar's independence, is often regarded as the institution responsible for safeguarding the nation, state and religion. It serves as a tool for the regime and is often referred to as the "Perfect Agent" by dictators.¹⁰ Unlike military institutions in other countries that are seen as protectors and guardians, the Myanmar military is described using special adjectives and honorifics.¹¹ However, it should be noted that modern militaries in some countries maintain a long-term vision for the financial well-being of the nation, rather than solely focusing on the interests of generals and soldiers.

The leader of the military is not always limited to generals or soldiers. Examples include Hitler (Germany), Saddam Hussein (Iraq), Ferdinand Marcos (Philippines) and others. Military power influences the systems under a regime.

The military, as an armed group, holds a higher position than other institutions. It is hailed as the defender of the country against foreign threats and plays a crucial role in maintaining a structured nation. Additionally, dictators heavily rely on the support of the military for their survival. In some cases, civilian governments also gain support from the military, governing the country while prioritizing the military's interests.

Some individuals can become influenced and convinced that the military should be in control to bring about stability and restore order. They spread propaganda emphasizing the crucial role of the military and dictators. They provide justifications like protecting the country from external threats posed by rebels, communists and those influenced by the West, as well as internal threats to maintain their grip on power. Propaganda becomes a manipulative tool used to sway the people, as well as fellow generals and soldiers within the ruling regime.

¹⁰ Acemoglu, D., Ticchi, D., & Vindigni, A. (2008). *A theory of military dictatorships*. National Bureau of Economic Research

¹¹ Márquez, X. (2023). *Non-democratic politics: Authoritarianism, dictatorship, and democratization*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Dictators utilize the military to seize power through coups and suppress opposition to maintain their hold on power. They justify these oppressive actions by claiming that the country is in imminent danger, manipulating the people. They employ propaganda to highlight the significance of institutions like the military in safeguarding the country from such perceived threats.

History of the Military in Myanmar

The military in Myanmar traces its origins back to the country's struggle for independence. Throughout its 75-year history, Myanmar has only experienced brief periods of democracy, lasting a total of 20 years. These periods occurred between 1948 and 1958, and from 2011 to 2021, despite the military's influence. Initially established as a local army to support Japanese operations during World War II, the military later evolved into a political force.¹² Due to their training by the Japanese, there existed a belief that being a soldier held more nobility than being a civilian during the era of Japanese Fascism. The military in Myanmar portrayed themselves as fighters for independence and protectors of the nation, rather than mere mercenaries. This perspective was evident in an article titled "The Coup in Burma: The Army, Democracy, and the Political Vicious Cycle" published by BBC Burmese. Similarly, propaganda within the military aimed to manipulate the soldiers by promoting the idea that they were not mercenaries, but members of a special institution tasked with safeguarding the country.¹³ This narrative helped justify the military's involvement in politics and solidified its position as a significant institution responsible for national defense. This belief ultimately contributed to a tradition of recurring coup d'états and the military's grasp on power whenever political circumstances challenged their authority.

In 1960, the political party supported by the military did not emerge victorious in the election. Consequently, a coup took place in 1962. Similarly, in 1990, when their party failed to win the

¹² BBC. (n.d.). မြန်မာပြည်မှာ သိမ်းသည်၊ တပ်မတော်၊ ဒီမိုကရေစီနဲ့ နိုင်ငံရေးသံသရာ. BBC News မြန်မာ.

<https://www.bbc.com/burmese/in-depth-55988519>

¹³ တပ်မတော်အတွင်းတွေ့ကြုံသိမြင် ခံစားခဲ့ရသော အဖြစ်အပျက်များ. ottara2008. (2008, April 10).

http://ottara2008.blogspot.com/2008/04/blog-post_1248.html

election, they refused to transfer power. However, there was an exception in the 2015 election. Despite their party's defeat, the National League for Democracy (NLD) won, and they handed over power. It was the first time in Myanmar's history.

According to the 2008 constitution, the civilian government, led by former general Thein Sein, came into power after the 2010 election. As the military already held 25 per cent of seats in parliament, they were able to easily form a government in the 2015 election, securing an additional 26 per cent of seats through the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). Under the leadership of General Than Shwe, the regime had a strategic plan for politics beyond 2010. However, when paths were opened for Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) to enter parliament in 2012, the USDP's hopes for victory in the election were somewhat compromised.¹⁴ Nevertheless, they still held onto the belief that there would be changes favouring their aspirations in 2020. With their party facing repeated failures in the 2020 election, they resorted to the recurring cycle of staging a coup once again.

In comparison to neighboring Thailand, Myanmar has experienced fewer military coups (12 times in Thailand vs. 4 times in Myanmar). However, the impact of these coups has been significantly greater. The military in Myanmar has consistently exerted influence over the country's politics, resulting in the repeated destruction of Myanmar's social and economic fabric.

The image of the military as a necessary institution for the country has been consistently maintained. The portrayal of themselves as saviors who prevent the collapse of the nation and the claim of inevitability in controlling the country due to chaos and riots have been perpetuated. Even to this day, it is proudly mentioned that the country has been led towards the path of multiparty democracy by the military institution.

¹⁴ Htut, Y. (2019). *Myanmar's political transition and lost opportunities 2010-2016*. ISEAS.

"Myanmar is a country that is moving towards multiparty democracy, and this transition was initiated by the military in response to people's demands. The military has played a leading role in establishing multiparty democracy. It is not accurate to claim that the military is only now supporting multiparty democracy."

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing

2023 November 29, SAC meeting (6/2023)

Furthermore, the military consistently emphasizes in written statements that military coups are carried out to prevent the collapse of the country. In 2022, the military-owned media, MWD, published an article titled "The Military as a Pioneer in National Politics."

The article asserts: "The military has consistently prioritized the country and the well-being of its people above everything else. It has always been there to protect the people since the beginning of the independence movement ... The military will continue to be a national political force, ensuring the nation's interests and guiding politics in Myanmar towards the right path."

In the 2008 constitution, authored by the regime led by General Than Shwe over a period of 14 years, a specific chapter (Chapter 7) is dedicated to the "Defence Services". This chapter comprises eight sections (337 to 344) which outline general facts, including the recognition of the military as "the main armed force for the defence of the Union" and its responsibility to provide support when the state and its people are in jeopardy. Furthermore, in Chapter 1, under section 6, the basic principles of the union state the objective of "enabling the Defence Services to be able to participate in the National political leadership role of the State."

The military, always striving to be seen as the driving force behind the nation's independence and unity, continues to resist relinquishing control of the country even after 70 years. In other words, they still desire to govern the country based on these claims. Under the guise of national politics, they persist in exerting influence over the present and future of the nation.

The military consistently asserts that it is the one facing and overcoming various challenges, attacks and anti-military propaganda, all in the pursuit of maintaining national unity.

"The military indeed plays a crucial role in rebuilding the country amidst the dangers posed by those who cause chaos and jeopardize the interests of the nation and its people. However, the military faces and combats the spread of propaganda that promotes anti-military agendas. What drives these efforts? It is the deep belief of the military that this is our country, our people, and our heritage." (excerpt from the article titled "The military's responsibility in leading national politics," 2023)¹⁵

There are the slogans and chants that are used as propaganda in order to spread the above concepts and ideologies. Some are described below.

"The Tatmadaw (military) is the mother, the Tatmadaw is the father."

"The Tatmadaw shall never betray the national cause."

"Courageous souls do not perish. And even if they do, they shall not be condemned to hell."

"Join the Tatmadaw to safeguard our nation."

"Unity shall prevail, regardless of attempts to divide us."

"Never hesitating always ready to sacrifice blood and sweat is the Tatmadaw."

"Only if the Tatmadaw is strong, will the nation be strong."

"Tatmadaw and the People cooperate and crush all those harming the Union."

"With the strength of a wildfire against adversaries, and the gentleness of a delicate flower towards the People."

Among the slogans mentioned, the most contentious one is "The Tatmadaw is the mother, the Tatmadaw is the father."

¹⁵ အမျိုးသားနိုင်ငံရေးဦးဆောင်မှုကို တာဝန်ခံသည့် တပ်မတော်. MDN - Myanmar DigitalNews. (n.d.). <https://www.myanmardigitalnewspaper.com/my/amiusaaniungngnreuucheangmukiu-ttaa0nkhnsnny-ttpmttea>

The phrase “The People are the mother, the People are the father” was originally coined by General Aung San, the founder of the army. However, over time, it gradually transformed. U Tin Oo, the former commander-in-chief of the defense forces, explained that the original meaning implied that military personnel relied on the support of the people.¹⁶ In the years following 1988, it changed to “The Tatmadaw is the mother, the Tatmadaw is the father.” However, under the leadership of General Min Aung Hlaing, it has once again transitioned back to “The People are the mother, the People are the father.”¹⁷

According to Thaug Wai Oo, a former military official and author, the phrase “The Tatmadaw is the mother, the Tatmadaw is the father” was specifically intended for the soldiers of the army, as stated in an article he wrote. He explains that the military leaders clarified that this slogan was meant for the soldiers who are actively fighting to protect the unity of the country, and it was not intended for the general population.¹⁸

According to author Naing Htike, it is evident that the military's foundation is built upon treating soldiers as servants and practicing widespread oppression of the people. This pattern not only prevails in modern times but can be traced back to the historical periods of Myanmar's kingdoms and absolute monarchy. Naing Htike explains: “Those who serve and protect the prosperity of those in power are praised, regardless of their race or religion. Conversely, the people are indiscriminately exploited and oppressed. These longstanding traditions of absolute monarchy are still deeply ingrained in Myanmar society, even until very recently.”¹⁹ In the context of absolute monarchy, the modern dynamics within the military reflect relationships of provider-beneficiary, mentor-protégé and superior-inferior, akin to the master-servant dynamic. These relationship patterns persist in the military to this day. Promotions within the ranks are often influenced by connections and affiliations, rather than

¹⁶ BBC. (n.d.-a). မြန်မာ့ တပ်မတော် ရေလိုလလို ကျင့်ဖို့လို့. BBC News မြန်မာ.

https://www.bbc.com/burmese/burma/2011/03/110323_general_tinoo

¹⁷ တပ်မတော်သည်သာ အမိအဖမှ ပြည်သူသည်သာ အမိအဖဆီသို့. ဧရာဝတီ. (2023a, March 27).

<https://burma.irrawaddy.com/opinion/2014/03/25/56667.html>

¹⁸ Myawady. (n.d.). တပ်မတော်အင်အားရှိမှု တိုင်းပြည်အင်အားရှိမည်. [http://myawady-](http://myawady-myawady.blogspot.com/2012/10/blog-post_403.html)

[myawady.blogspot.com/2012/10/blog-post_403.html](http://myawady-myawady.blogspot.com/2012/10/blog-post_403.html)

¹⁹ Htike, N. (2016). Myanmar History, Warrior Kings and the Role of the Army. Sarout Zay.

qualifications. Financial opportunities and benefits are also contingent upon maintaining mentor-protégé relationships and adhering to the rules governing superior-inferior dynamics within the modern military²⁰.

In the military, higher-ranking officers often appoint individuals they trust and are close to, assigning them positions and responsibilities to safeguard their own interests. This practice serves as evidence that the military's foundation is rooted in the traditions of absolute monarchy, as it mirrors the strategies employed by past kings of Myanmar.

Former Minister of Home Affairs Lt. Gen. Soe Htut and his wife, who were retired by military leaders, unlawfully compelled their subordinates to carry out arbitrary tasks for their personal benefit. They gained notoriety for treating officers' wives and female staff as mere servants. A member of the military family shared the following account:

"They frequently assigned officers' wives to serve them, treating them as attendants or servants. Since these wives aspired for their husbands' promotion, they felt obliged to comply ... Whenever the minister's wife went shopping, attendance was mandatory. Even for basic chores, they were expected to handle everything while addressing them as 'ma ma.' These individuals endured and toiled persistently, all to secure favourable positions for their husbands' advancement and to maintain their own status."²¹

The army and its soldiers are often depicted as individuals willing to make sacrifices and give up their lives for the country, without expecting anything in return. Propaganda suggests gratitude towards the military for providing basic necessities, despite the meager salaries received by the soldiers. However, it is the top army leaders who wield control over various economic benefits, exploiting the country's resources for their personal gain.

²⁰ သူ့အတွေး သူ့အမြင်: စစ်တပ်ထိပ်ပိုင်း အကွဲအပြဲ ဘာကြောင့် မဖြစ်လဲ. ရော့ဝတီ. (2023b, July 16).

<https://burma.irrawaddy.com/opinion/viewpoint/2023/02/15/257983.html?fbclid=IwAR1x2RSbqR7JUE85hqApSKgPr2mNE5W7kuDEnno1loj5At4WsizqKEib-o>

²¹ ခေတ်သစ် (၂၀၂၂) ပြည်ထဲရေးဝန်ကြီး စိုးထွဋ် မိန်းမ နီလာစိန် ပေးတဲ့ ဒုက္ခနဲ့ စီးပွားရေး သောင်း ကျန်းမှု အရာရှိကတော်တွေနဲ့ ဝန်ထမ်း အမျိုးသမီးတွေ ခါးစည်း ကြိတ်မှိတ်ခံနေရ,

<https://www.facebook.com/khitthitnews/photos/a.386800725090613/1540660886371252/>

Young military officers and personnel are subjected to indoctrination through propaganda while minimizing their exposure to the outside world. Their daily routines are tightly scheduled with military duties, leaving little room for external awareness. This intentional isolation aims to prevent critical thinking and discourage questioning.

Soldiers are trained to unquestioningly accept and follow the army's directives. They are taught to view the army as the sole provider, and it is ingrained in them that if the army commands something, it must be done without hesitation. This fosters the belief that the "the Tatmadaw (military) is the mother, the Tatmadaw is the father." Soldiers are moulded into obedient servants, bound to unquestioningly obey the army's orders.

"From early morning, our days are consumed by military duties, leaving no time for social media usage. Social media is considered solely for mindless entertainment. If there are military-related news or speeches from leaders, and we receive an order to watch them on social media, it becomes mandatory for us to gather with our families in the large hall and view it together. Additionally, we are obligated to purchase and read newspapers issued by the military. Even after serving on the front line for two years and returning to the rear line for a year of rest, we continue to carry out army duties. Despite the physical demands, the notion of fatigue doesn't cross our minds. This is because soldiers are deeply ingrained with the belief that they must dutifully fulfil their assigned tasks without questioning."

- CDM Captain Htet Myat

(From "Sagar Ma Sat" program)²²

Soldiers are primarily recruited from marginalized backgrounds, including those who have previously been incarcerated, lack education or come from impoverished circumstances. They are often enticed to join the military with basic necessities like food, shelter, uniforms and weapons. It is widely believed that their motivation to become soldiers does not stem from a

²² YouTube. (2023, September 23). စကားမစပ် အပိုင်း-၄. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGu6Gqh6s44&t=724s>

genuine desire. Consequently, their ability to comprehend and reflect on matters beyond their immediate surroundings or the outside world is often limited.

“These soldiers simply carry out their duties out of fear and obedience. They lack the capacity to contemplate whether something is morally right or wrong in relation to their orders. At the officer level, their primary concern is which army they will join after completing their training. Their desire to become soldiers is driven by self-interest.”²³

- Captain Htet Myat

Another popular slogan is “only if the Tatmadaw is strong, will the nation be strong.” In this way, the Tatmadaw institution was built using a significant portion of the country's financial resources. The military was built using expenses much over the education and health budgets combined. They frequently label themselves as the Modern Army, suggesting development for the sake of the country, but in reality, it is primarily aimed at the construction of military development only. There are plenty of narratives that are most commonly propagated about this matter.

Both the United States of America and China possess formidable military strength, earning them respect and deterring potential aggressors. Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, insulting them was unthinkable. However, after the fragmentation, Soviet power weakened significantly. Given Myanmar's strategic location between major powers like India and China, having a strong military is considered necessary to prevent unauthorized entry and exit from the West. A robust army is crucial for protecting the 60 million people and ensuring that the country remains independent and unaffected by foreign influences in times of war, as it is today. The strength of the Tatmadaw is seen as essential for maintaining sovereignty.

²³ YouTube. (2023b, November 25). ကိုမင်းကိုနိုင်နဲ့ကိုထက်မြတ်တို့ရဲ့” ပန်းဝင်မယ့်ခြေလှမ်း’’. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CuKy9XFpjWU>

Even if a country is economically disadvantaged, a strong military can enhance its global standing, as demonstrated by North Korea, which attracts attention from major nations.²⁴ These perspectives are propagated through an article published by the Ministry of Information on Tatmadaw Day 2022. These narratives reinforce the belief that the country's strength lies in its military. However, there are counter-arguments to consider.

How strong is the Burmese Army? Can they truly protect the country? In the book "Myanmar History, Warrior Kings and the Role of the Army" by military researcher and writer Naing Htike, it is mentioned:

"What we see on the world map is a large society centered around the Irrawaddy River Basin, which holds significant geopolitical importance in East Asia. Myanmar is situated at the crossroads of East Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia. It is positioned between countries with the world's largest populations and the two largest and most technologically advanced militaries. Additionally, it is surrounded by over 80% of all nuclear warheads amassed in Asia. Therefore, advocating for the military to protect this territory and its waters may indicate an abnormal state of mind and could warrant psychiatric evaluation and rest. Myanmar is not located in a region where we can freely express aggression and indignation."

The facts speak for themselves. Those who advocate for military expansion are spreading baseless and deceptive claims. It is even mentioned in a propaganda article that these individuals, who are ignorant and foolish, aim to lead the country into a disastrous path similar to North Korea, which they admire. They seek to emulate North Korea, a nation that poses a threat to global peace and cruelly oppresses its own people.

In late 2010, the former leader of the military junta, Senior General Than Shwe, aimed to establish a pseudo-democratic system under military control. This involved granting seats in the parliament to the army and establishing a political party that originated from the military.

²⁴ တပ်မတော်အင်အားရှိမှု တိုင်းပြည်အင်အားရှိမည်. မူလစာမျက်နှာ. (n.d.).
<https://www.moi.gov.mm/npe/ttpmtteaaangaaarim-ttiungpnyangaaarimny>

Former Minister of Information U Ye Htut (Under Thein Sein's government) acknowledged that prior to this, the focus was primarily on building military institutions, which did not yield the desired results. It has been suggested that the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) failed in the 2015 election because they did not invest in developing other political institutions beyond the military.²⁵

Than Shwe's plan to manipulate the country from two fronts failed, as the military party known as the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) was not established effectively as a political party. Instead, it became a means to further develop military influence exclusively.

"The Tatmadaw protects the nation and upholds the national religion." "The Tatmadaw is the mother, the Tatmadaw is the father." "Only if the Tatmadaw is strong, will the nation be strong". However...

During the 2021 military coup and the subsequent spring revolution, a narrative started to emerge that the country could only be strong if it did not have a military force. This perspective was expressed in an article by Khit Thit Media titled "Only if the Tatmadaw is weak, will the nation be strong."²⁶

The matter at hand goes beyond mere words in an article. There exists a country that made the decision to disband its military in order to prioritize meeting the basic needs of its people. This country is Costa Rica, located in Central America.

After emerging victorious in the civil war of 1948, Costa Rica's president made the historic announcement that the nation would no longer maintain an army. The military was dissolved, and significant steps were taken to improve the lives of the population. Free education was made accessible to all, efforts were made to provide housing for the impoverished and

²⁵ Htut, Y. (2019). *Myanmar's political transition and lost opportunities 2010-2016*. ISEAS.

²⁶ Agency, Y. K. T. N. (2023, June 5). တရားမဝင် စစ်အုပ်စုအတွက် ခေတ်သစ်ဆောင်ပုဒ် သို့မဟုတ် "တပ်မတော် အင်အား ချို့တဲ့ တိုင်းပြည်အင်အား ရှိမည်." Khit Thit Media. <https://yktnews.com/2023/06/106205/>

immigrant black children were granted citizenship. Additionally, voting rights were extended to women and those who lacked a formal education.

President José Figueres eloquently proclaimed: "Peace will foster development, and development will promote peace. They are mutually reinforcing and share a common objective: the protection of human rights."

Dictators often manipulate elections in collaboration with the military to maintain their grip on power.

Chapter 3 | Elections

If one mentioned 'election', the new generation of Myanmar might see it as freedom and being democratic. Conceptually, elections are the cornerstone of democracy.

However, elections are also a part of dictators' favourite playing cards. Why?

Elections are often manipulated by dictators. There are also elections that have already been rigged or decided. Therefore, elections can often be one of the methods to sustain dictators.

The main thing that dictators enjoy about elections is their legitimacy. When it comes to legitimacy, they pay more attention to the foreign or international community (rather than the domestic). It is often aimed at reducing or eliminating the oppositions, rather than for the legitimacy, of the people inside the country. In other words, legitimacy towards the international community is to be included in the international front and to misrepresent legitimacy. Another important issue related to this is the accessibility of international aid.

They could hold an election with limitations. In this way, financial and other assistance from international donors can be requested. However, this funnel of money has become a source of income for some tyrants and cronies.²⁷

Though the dictators use elections to maintain power and to deceive the international community, they are still not able to manipulate them at will. At times, they would lose the elections and the democratic movement was allowed or they had to relinquish power. Sometimes, some faced threats of death²⁸.

Studying the elections of dictators in Myanmar between 1946 and 2008 shows that this can be more or less risky for them. Indeed, half of these elections resulted in the dethronement of dictators. Election years are five times more likely to see dictators fall from power.

²⁷ Geddes, B., Wright, J., & Frantz, E. (2018). *How dictatorships work power, personalization, and collapse*. Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

²⁸ You'd think dictators would avoid elections. here's why they don't. - The Washington Post. (n.d.-d). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/03/14/you-d-think-dictators-would-avoid-elections-heres-why-they-dont/>

Looking at the election years of dictators from 1946 to 2008 and extracting 259 data points, it is found that there are many possibilities for dictators to fall from power during election years. Only one-fifth of dictators' tenures are election years, but 50 per cent of dictators face the threat of death during election years.

There are two institutions that are most important to dictators. One is the army and the other is the political party.

A political party is used to mobilize the public. The army is used to terrorize the public and to instill fear. This is essentially using the combination of 'good cop, bad cop' technique.

Dictators have their own political party. Similarly, other parties are allowed as far as they are allowed.

After the end of the Cold War, only 10-20 per cent of dictators banned parties. At the beginning of the Cold War, about 50 per cent of authoritarian regimes banned parties, but that has declined since then. Especially in the late 1980s, only about 10 per cent of dictators banned parties. That is because, partisan dictators tend to last longer.

Under dictators, other (rival) parties are often exploited. They are often used; to strengthen the legitimacy of the authoritarian group and the authoritarian government; to show their strength; to strengthen the coalition parties in power; to find and isolate the opposition that could become a competitor; and to maintain control by utilizing a reward-punishment system if necessary.²⁹

Therefore, the most important lesson for dictators is not to give enough space for the opposition until they hang themselves. This is also a double-edged sword.

²⁹ Márquez, X. (2023). *Non-democratic politics: Authoritarianism, dictatorship, and democratization*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Summarized history of Myanmar elections and military coups

It might go unnoticed, but throughout Myanmar's political history, coups/non-transfer of power and elections have been going on hand-in-hand.

Myanmar has had elections since before independence in 1947. There were three elections until the military coup in 1962. There were two elections during the parliamentary government. However, in 1958, the military staged a coup. Some also noted that Prime Minister U Nu handed over power to General Ne Win, Commander-in-Chief of Defense Services of the Tatmadaw, because the Tatmadaw had given the conditions for a coup d'état³⁰. It is also commonly known as 'soft coup'. A military-led election was then held in 1960. The Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) party, which was friendlier to the military, was defeated and U Nu's Union Party won. Two years later, in 1962, the military forcibly took power. The military announced that the coup was due to worsening political and economic conditions.³¹

It is a noteworthy coincidence that the AFPFL party, perceived as having closer ties to the military and which experienced defeat in the 1960 elections, followed by the military coup of 1962.

Afterward, in 1974, an election was held that would usher in a one-party dictatorship. A single party, the Burma Socialist Programme Party, competed and won. Through that victory, U Ne Win, who had transformed into wearing 'civilian clothes', took over as president. In 1988, the Socialist Party was removed from power after the 8888 Uprising, and U Ne Win fell from power.

A military coup was led by Commander-in-Chief of the Tatmadaw General Saw Maung. Then, a multi-party democratic system was promised and the 1990 elections were held. The military-

³⁰ မာဝုလ်ဇေဝ်. ISP Myanmar Peace Desk. (2020, August 7).

https://ispmyanmarpeacedesk.com/cool_timeline/%E1%80%96%E1%80%86%E1%80%95%E1%80%9C%E1%80%81%E1%80%B1%E1%80%90%E1%80%BA/

³¹ Trumbull, R. (1962), "Burma Official Says Crisis Forced Coup," Dallas Morning News, March 8, 1962,

backed National Unity Party lost by a landslide against Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party.

However, the military refused to hand over power to the party that won the election, stating that the constitution was yet to be made. General Saw Maung wanted to hand over power but other leaders in the military did not want to.

The Myanmar military generals calculated that the National Unity Party, (which was transformed from the Burma Socialist Programme Party), which had been in power for a long time, could somehow win. Despite being a new party, the National League for Democracy party won outright.

There were comments that the Myanmar military justified the constitution by not handing over power. In addition, there was also speculation that if power was handed over after the 1990 elections, the generals might be prosecuted in (international) courts like the Nuremberg trials.

U Kyi Maung, the spokesperson for the NLD party at the time, denied those comments had baseless, in a meeting with Asiaweek magazine.

"If you really understand their position, you might be able to forgive them. I don't think that the next government will be so eager to take revenge as to tear them down one by one," U Kyi Maung stated³².

In 1992, General Saw Maung resigned from his position. General Than Shwe became the Commander-in-Chief of the Tatmadaw and the Chairman of the State Law and Order

³² Admin, I. (2018, March 6). ၁၉၉၀ ပြည့်နှစ်အတွင်း ဦးကြည်မောင်အား တွေ့ဆုံမေးမြန်းခဲ့ပြီး အပြည့်အဝ ဖော်ပြခဲ့ဖူးခြင်း မရှိသော မေးမြန်းချက် အပြည့်အစုံနှင့် ဆောင်းပါး. Myanmar. <https://www.ispmyanmar.com/burmese/%E1%81%81%E1%81%89%E1%81%89%E1%81%80-%E1%80%BB%E1%80%95%E1%80%8A%E1%80%B9%E1%80%B7%E1%82%8F%E1%80%BD%E1%80%85%E1%80%B9%E1%80%A1%E1%80%90%E1%80%BC%E1%80%84%E1%80%B9%E1%80%B8-%E1%80%A5%E1%80%AE%E1%80%B8/>

Restoration Council (SLORC). The 2008 constitution was drafted and approved, and then, the 2010 election was held.

Many regarded this constitution as the final exit of dictator General Than Shwe or the military's last resort. According to this structure, military personnel automatically occupy 25 per cent of the seats in various parliaments. Three important ministries in the union government were controlled by the military, and 76 per cent of the parliament representatives were required to have the right to amend the constitution.

Even if the military-backed party wins 26 per cent of the parliamentarians in the election, it can form a government.

Thus, the 2010 election was held. The election, which was boycotted by the main opposition democratic forces, was won by the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). There have been many allegations of rigged elections due to midnight advance polls and controversial election processes.

No surprise there. Then, the military handed over power. General Thein Sein, Prime Minister during the military government, became President U Thein Sein. By making economic and political reforms as part of democratic reforms and by allowing the National League for Democracy to enter the parliament through the by-elections, (the government) earned a positive name amongst the international community. President U Thein Sein even boasted that "Obama visited twice during my term."³³

Afterward, the 2015 election was held. It was advertised as a free and fair election, and the NLD party won enough votes to form a government. The military-backed USDP party did not even win 26 per cent of the parliament seats. Finally, the military handed over power.

³³ YouTube. (2023a, April 23). *Myanmar: The collapse of a modern military dictatorship | inside a dictatorship | war stories*. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4L4D_9MQ

In Myanmar's history, it is a rare occurrence for the opposition forces to win and a transfer of power to be processed at the same time. People assumed that Myanmar's democratic journey could not be reverted. However, they underestimated the genetics of the Myanmar military.

International criticism of the Rohingya issue during the NLD government; doubts about the ability to establish a federal democratic country due to heavy central control in ethnic areas; dissatisfaction with some ethnic political forces; the increase in criticism of some of the policies adopted by the NLD government, made the military calculate that the NLD government may be weakened in the next election.

The military thought they could take advantage of this situation in the next election, and seemingly calculated wrong that the USDP, its allied ethnic forces and the military representatives could win more than 50 per cent of the total seats.

However, the 2020 election didn't happen as expected. The National League for Democracy won enough parliamentary seats to form a government. Almost three months after the election, the military seized power. Their reason for doing so was mainly based on the allegation that there was electoral fraud; there were more than ten million ballot errors in the 2020 election. However, . . . That 'however' became a long story.

The Commander-in-Chief of Defense Services, General Min Aung Hlaing, would soon retire in six months; the uncertainty of post-retirement benefits and personal protections; the need to continue to embrace the political power of the Tatmadaw; are some of the many evaluations that General Min Aung Hlaing's lust for power led to the coup d'état, on the grounds of incorrect ballots³⁴.

It is difficult to estimate how the junta has calculated. However, the price to be paid is huge. The military stated that it was not a 'coup', but rather a 'takeover'. They are still openly stating

³⁴ Gunia, A. (2021, February 1). *Myanmar coup: Why the military overthrew Aung San Suu Kyi*. Time. <https://time.com/5934896/myanmar-aung-san-suu-kyi-detained-coup/>

that elections would be held soon and that the winning political party would be handed power. In other words, the authoritarians are still trying to cheat by using the election as their playing card.

Beyond the 2021 coup d'état

The morning of February 2021 gave new wounds to the new generation. For the older generation, it became an additional wound. Phone networks and internet reception were cut off/interrupted to a certain degree. After that, there was a press release about the National Defence and Security Council (NDSC) meeting. For those with experience, they already knew there had been a coup d'état.

General Min Aung Hlaing stated at the NDSC meeting that there was no action taken even after the Tatmadaw had requested repeatedly and in different ways to solve the issue regarding the legitimacy of a free and fair election; thus, the military had to 'take the power of the state forcibly'³⁵.

After that, acting president U Myint Swe handed the three branches of power to the military. In this way, the takeover of the military coup was successfully carried out.

General Min Aung Hlaing stated that the 2008 constitution will be carried out according to the existing laws; and that after the implementation of the provisions of the emergency period, a free and fair election would be held and power would be handed over to the winning party. According to the emergency provisions, the military can take over power for a limited period of time.

"According to the constitution, the state of emergency can only last for one year. If the duties have not been fulfilled during the emergency period, the president (or acting president) can

³⁵ အမျိုးသားကာကွယ်ရေးနှင့် လုံခြုံရေးကောင်စီ အစည်းအဝေး တပ်မတော်ကာကွယ်ရေး ဦးစီးချုပ်ရုံး သတင်းထုတ်ပြန်ချက်၊ ဖေ ၁၊ ၂၀၂၁

allow temporary extension of six months once or twice. Therefore, we can't keep this period up for more than two years. So, we only have two years at the most (to carry out the duties)" General Min Aung Hlaing said in an interview with China-based Phoenix TV³⁶. That meeting was held on May 20, and it was published in June.

"Elections are a national responsibility related to the country's dignity. Only if it is free and fair, the multi-party democratic system that the people want will be strengthened. It will raise the country's political history and prestige internationally," he added.

After talking about the elections repeatedly, the military council is trying to change the current winner-take-all election system to the proportional representation (PR) system. The winner-take-all system didn't serve them well so they are trying to change it to a proportional representation system.

It is widely believed that changing the proportional representation system and claiming that everyone won't lose the votes cast, would allow the military council and its influenced parties to get more votes and to sustain its political life³⁷.

Junta leader General Min Aung Hlaing said in his August 2022 speech that sufficient time is needed to prepare the PR system³⁸.

Following the junta leader's deception, the military lobbyists are also talking about the election. They claim that the current situation in Myanmar can only continue peacefully with elections. At the same time, pro-military Telegram users have widely circulated fake news in which the National Unity Government (NUG) has directed PDFs to assassinate parliamentary

³⁶ <https://www.myawady.net.mm/content/phoenix-tv-people%E2%80%99s-republic-china-interviews-chairman-state-administration-council>

³⁷ PR စနစ်နဲ့ စစ်ကောင်စီ နိုင်ငံရေးအသက်ဆက်ချင်. ဧရာဝတီ. (2023a, July 16).

<https://burma.irrawaddy.com/article/2021/11/01/247173.html>

³⁸ နိုင်ငံတော်စီမံအုပ်ချုပ်ရေးကောင်စီဥက္ကဋ္ဌ၊ နိုင်ငံတော် ဝန်ကြီးချုပ် ဗိုလ်ချုပ်မှူးကြီး မင်းအောင်လှိုင် က ပြည်သူ့လူထုသို့ ပြောကြားသည့်...: By နောင်ရိုး:facebook. Facebook. (n.d.-b).

<https://www.facebook.com/100076098774674/videos/2186387224850125/>

candidates and their family members who will contest the upcoming elections³⁹. The anti-authoritarian forces, while being labelled as terrorists, are portrayed as those who would destroy the election and the obstacles of the country's peace process.

According to the provisions of the emergency period referred to by the military council, the emergency period lasts for one year. If the duty has not yet been completed, the temporary extension of six months can be allowed twice. Therefore, the military would have 2 years, in total, to take power and hold elections.

That is why, at the end of January 2023, the term of the coup government has expired, and elections were supposed to be held in the middle of 2023. It was also what the Chairman of the State Administration Council (SAC) stated in an interview with the above-mentioned Chinese television channel.

However, that did not happen at the NDSC meeting on 31st January 2023. In addition, the period was extended by six months, saying that there were abnormal conditions in the country. It is said that the constitutional court approved the matter.

No more timelines have been promised for the election. Afterward, during the NDSC meeting on 31st July 2013, the extension was extended again for another six months, giving reasons to an 'unusual' situation. The military stated that they have to work at full momentum to carry out the stability of the state and the rule of law.

The Chairman of the SAC presented two possible scenarios for the election at the meeting;

(1) To leave out regions that are unstable (considered by the military) such as Sagaing, Northern Magway, Chin Kayah (Karenni), Karen, Eastern Bago and a few regions of Tanintharyi Division, and hold elections.

³⁹ *Check lab Myanmar*. Facebook. (n.d.-a).

<https://www.facebook.com/CheckLabMyanmar/posts/pfbid05FWZAqiJzqWmGBbUXydgjQSMs81mtD1jG8pZypm7JNu9uBjoCWph4c5Zdo36s5rYlI>

(2) To conduct nationwide elections.

By looking at this, they can rig elections in areas they consider to be stable and hold elections with the minimum number of parliamentarians required to form a government. Twenty-five per cent of military representatives are already in place, which means that elections can be held for only the 26 per cent of the government that is needed to be formed (which is necessary to run the parliament). At a military council meeting held a week after the unusual second-term emergency period extension, the chairman of the military council blamed disruptions for the election delay⁴⁰.

However, it is not possible to say when and in what form the election will be held.

The military council's election playing card

Not only in Myanmar's history but also in the international dictatorship environments, the elections and coups, and elections and power relinquishments can be intertwined.

Myanmar's experience has shown that elections are a 'double-edged sword'. For example, the military relinquished power due to elections (2015) and almost lost during elections (1990).

The use of the party and the army combination is still going on. The obvious examples have shown that the military had tried to seize power by establishing its own political party on the other hand, by making an alliance with the parties supported by the military, and by using the election to continue in power.

⁴⁰ BBC. (n.d.-c). ရှစ်လေးလုံးတော်လှန်ရေးစိတ်ဓာတ်ကို နွေဦးတော်လှန်ရေးမှာ ပြန်ယူဖို့လိုတယ် လို့ NUG ပြော. BBC News မြန်မာ.

<https://www.bbc.com/burmese/articles/cx90d8kdgkdo?fbclid=IwAR21DFsru2uvN1NVswBvY7dcOPypnQ0uYaXJN73ais9Gltb3N6ow1M0tsCI>

Other small parties will be allowed to compete in the election to give the illusion that it is a multi-party democracy, and to gain international legitimacy. However, only the military-backed party would be rigged to make sure of their success.

The military has stated that after the emergency period is over, multi-party elections will be held and power will be handed over to the winning party. However, the army party is planning carefully to win.

There are cases where the registration of political parties that could compete with them on the same level was not allowed and stricter regulations were imposed. It may allow the opposition parties to win a few MPs, but this will not allow them the strength to defeat the ruling military-backed party.

There may be elections under a dictatorship. However, it will only be the elections that are carefully 'rigged' for them to continue in power. Dictators also like elections. However, they only use it to manipulate it as they wish and to spread propaganda.

Chapter 4 | Lying, deceiving, and blaming others

“Words are fine things, but muskets are even better”

- Mussolini, Italian Dictator

Dictators wield a firearm in one hand and a microphone in the other. They use these tools to manipulate and deceive, while on the other hand, they are armed with violence. This aims to shape public perception towards the world that aligns with their agenda. This way, dictators influence the trust of the audience. Some dictators have even become gurus by mastering the art of propaganda.

Propaganda encompasses messages about the virtues of their leadership. There are several ways to disseminate such propaganda, including state-owned broadcasts, pro-dictatorship online media platforms and paying independent media outlets to write news articles or planning other arrangements and using other methods to endorse online lobbies that favor the dictatorial regime⁴¹.

In China, there is a group known as the “50 Cent Party”. The individuals are tasked with lobbying, and writing comments and articles on Chinese social media platforms concerning the Chinese government and the Communist Party. They earn about 50 cents (approximately 250 Myanmar Kyats) for each comment they write. Therefore, they have been dubbed the “50 Cent Party”. This initiative started around 2004, during the early days of the internet.

According to a study, the Chinese government annually disseminates approximately 488 million fabricated narratives and comments across social media platforms. However, most of these comments originate from members of the “50 Cent Party”, many of whom are civil

⁴¹ Guriev, S., & Treisman, D. (2015, May 4). *How modern dictators survive: An informational theory of the new authoritarianism*. SSRN. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2602118

servants⁴². Their goal is to deflect public attention and shift the discourse away from certain topics.

About 80 per cent of the comments exhibit positive sentiments towards China, while 13 per cent comprise general praises and recommendations regarding government policies. Some say that despite the allegations that members of the “50 Cent Party” receive money, there is no evidence of them getting paid. Instead, they often perceive their actions as fulfilling their duties to the Community Party, to which they are affiliated.

There are some considerations that dictatorial regimes have regarding the control of information dissemination, including the extent to which information is made accessible to the public and the level of influence exerted by their narratives. Excessive control can lead to diminishing returns, as overt censorship may render the narratives less appealing to the public, who are aware of the censorship practices and public engagement may decline as a consequence.

When that happens, it may become challenging for the regimes to shape the public perceptions effectively. On the other hand, loosening censorship measures may expose the public to opposing narratives, potentially leading to a backlash and dissent for the regimes. The stricter kind of regimes usually face this issue⁴³.

For dictators, the task of deceiving and misleading the public cannot be as easy. They must constantly exercise caution in their words and actions. Another tactic frequently used is the strategy of shifting blame onto blame. This political maneuver is a prevalent strategy used to

⁴² How the Chinese government fabricates social media posts ... (n.d.-b).

https://gking.harvard.edu/files/gking/files/how_the_chinese_government_fabricates_social_media_posts_for_strategic_distraction_not_engaged_argument.pdf

⁴³ Márquez, X. (2023). *Non-democratic politics: Authoritarianism, dictatorship, and democratization*. Bloomsbury Academic.

deflect attention from their own failures, redirecting responsibility onto others as a means of absolving themselves of blame⁴⁴.

It takes a minority of victims for a dictator or would-be dictators to manipulate a nation at will. They rely on identifying scapegoats to shoulder the blame. To conceal their weaknesses, they seek an individual or a group of people to attribute responsibility, asserting that public poverty and the lack of stability are not consequences of mismanagement of their own but the deliberate actions of said entity of individual.

During the Soviet Russian era, the bourgeoisie was to blame for the country's troubles. For Nazi Germany, the Jews were the culprits. In the United States, it's the businessmen⁴⁵.

Such assignment of blame undermines the fundamental principles of democracy. Throughout history, once an entity is singled out and held accountable for perceived wrongdoings, it often becomes the target of oppression. By being labeled as the culprits, they are subjected to mechanisms of repression under the premise that their punishment is justified by their supposed guilt.

History of Myanmar

In the colonial period, Myanmar nationalists regarded the British and Indian merchant class brought by them as the main enemies. Following independence, the nation faced internal turmoil caused by the Communist factions and armed ethnic groups. The remnants of colonial-era businessmen monopolized the country's resources and left the majority of Myanmar people in poverty.

⁴⁴ *The politics of blame*. Euro Crisis in the Press. (2013, October 20).

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/eurocrisispress/2013/03/22/the-politics-of-blame/>

⁴⁵ Rand, A. (2009, January 1). *The scapegoat*. Le Monde diplomatique.

<https://mondediplo.com/2009/01/21scapegoat>

In 1962, when the Myanmar military took over the country completely, properties belonging to foreigners and non-Myanmar individuals were confiscated under the pretext of public ownership. There are opinions that it might partly stem from the trauma of Myanmar's colonial and post-colonial periods, during which the country felt left behind by the foreign nations and businesses⁴⁶.

The dictator, U Ne Win, did not want to be affected by foreign economic, political and social influences. Driven by his severe xenophobia, tourists were initially permitted for only 24 hours inside the country; this gradually extended to 72 hours in 1969 and further expanded to 7 days by 1971.

The military's xenophobic sentiments did not stop there. Myanmar's history with the invasions of the British three times, the experiences and sufferings of war during the Second World War with Japan and alliance with British forces, and conflicts with colorful rebel groups and invasion attempts by the "white Chinese"/Bai Zuo (the government's terminologies at that time) made the Myanmar army more afraid of foreigners.

Moreover, insights from Andrew Selth, the author of the paper "Myanmar Military's Mindset", suggest that it made the military leaders more resentful when Western countries imposed economic sanctions and praised Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, a democratic leader opposed and treated like an enemy by the military junta, and being portrayed as a saint.

Additionally, the United States government-backed National Endowment for Democracy and the Soros Foundation, led by the donor, business tycoon George Soros, were condemned as subversive entities. These further fueled the modern coup regime's resentment, rooted in colonial trauma and compelled them to seek scapegoats when the last exit was closed.

⁴⁶ Selth. (2021) Myanmar Military's mindset: An Exploratory Survey.

The present State Administration Council (SAC) continues to harbor similar sentiments, attributing ongoing conflicts to the country's colonial history. During the commemoration of the 8th anniversary of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement held on October 15, 2023, General Min Aung Hlaing implied that the 75-year-old armed conflict in Myanmar is a direct legacy of past colonial administrations.

He referred to the state of affairs in Myanmar during the parliamentary era, saying that the current situation is similar to the period immediately following Myanmar's independence. Furthermore, while not explicitly naming any specific countries, he indirectly blamed Western nations during the event.

"Those who claim to be working for democracy committed electoral fraud. The problem was not resolved through lawful democratic processes but instead, devolved into instances of armed violence. We also see that some foreign nations that claim to be practicing democracy have either directly or indirectly supported and encouraged these violent actions."

Moreover, the leaders of the military junta also stated that international non-profit organizations are endeavoring to exert control over Myanmar.

During a conference focused on the registration of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs), a military minister expressed the desire to receive assistance to carry out development work in border, rural and remote areas⁴⁷. However, on the other hand, in a separate government meeting, the junta leader highlighted that some organizations are exploiting Myanmar through INGOs and NGOs⁴⁸.

⁴⁷ <https://www.moi.gov.mm/npe/index.php/niungngntteaaciimnaupkhuprekeangciaphaiwng-pnnythairewnkiitthaan-pnnytheaangcuwnkii-1>

⁴⁸ Team, Npmn. (n.d.). *INGO/NGO များမှတစ်ဆင့် ပြည်ပအဖွဲ့အစည်း၊ နိုင်ငံများက အသုံးပြုနေမှုများရှိနေ၍ ကြပ်မတ်ထိန်းသိမ်းရန် တပ်ချုပ်ပြော*. NPNews. <https://npnewsmm.com/news/64f049327ccef33b6841079a>

Paid Social Media Platforms

Following the dictator’s manual, the SAC suppressed the media after the coup by arresting and imprisoning them. Some media outlets had their licenses revoked. More than 51⁴⁹ journalists are still detained and at least 13⁵⁰ media outlets have had their licenses revoked after the military coup.

After restricting and controlling the independent media, the next step for the coup regime is to use tactics such as remunerating media entities and cultivating social media for their agenda. Alongside utilizing the media under their direct control, they are actively propagating biased news narratives through pro-military lobbyists and social media platforms (similar to China’s “50 Cent Party”).

The Red Flag has identified and been monitoring approximately 60 Telegram channels. These channels are managed by about 15 individuals who serve as the main bad actors in spreading fake news, disinformation and biased content. The Red Flag has been closely monitoring these 60 primary accounts, noting that in combination with numerous other accounts, the number is totaling more than 100.

These accounts contain key influencers, pseudo-media outlets and extreme national activists and individuals. Furthermore, there are hundreds of social media accounts, including 13 Facebook profiles that adopt names representing the states and regions within the country.

⁴⁹ မြန်မာသတင်းမီဒီယာတွေ ဆက်လက်ပိတ်ခံနေရဲ့။ Radio Free Asia. (2023, May 3).

https://www.rfa.org/burmese/program_2/media-05032023021956.html?fbclid=IwAR0TOMRyk_FFOSZor7gfG1GJ8oJrrQKmCeeoRfqshph5M80EXjDmdwlaYaE

⁵⁰ ဧရာဝတီသတင်းဌာန လိုင်စင်ပိတ်သိမ်းခံရ။ Radio Free Asia. (2022, October 31).

https://www.rfa.org/burmese/program_2/irrawaddy-news-license-bans-10312022064946.html?fbclid=IwAR3XgvtmmpmMjQd7P7-TWXuUhrUwbkQ-EYwguhMIGfTpD4EFhRoiO4U3Olc

They regularly upload at least 50 to 200 posts and 70 per cent of the news is the same. Moreover, it has been found that those accounts are connected, one way or another, to Zaw Min Tun, the SAC's spokesperson⁵¹.

This can be clearly seen in the October 9th midnight bombing in Munglai Hket village near Laiza in Kachin State. The attack resulted in tragic loss of lives totaling 29 individuals, including 11 children and 15 women, and 57 people injured. Furthermore, 10 households, including a primary school, were destroyed.

Hours after the incident, starting about 1:30pm on October 10, at least five pro-military Telegram channels expressed their satisfaction at the military's ability to carry out the bombing. However, their narratives changed after General Zaw Min Tun denied the attack the next morning.

These lobbyists then stated that the incident was caused by the explosion of the Kachin Independence Army's (KIA) arsenal. These military-lobby Telegram accounts subsequently propagated narratives asserting that this explosion was a result of the KIA's actions, including the alleged killing of monks in Sagaing Region and incidents of raping women.

These pro-military Telegram channels not only disseminate fake news and disinformation, but also advocate to report and arrest the individuals who openly oppose the military dictatorship. Between January and the end of October in 2023, a total of 1,224 individuals were detained due to their involvement⁵². These detainees included celebrities and journalists. The most recent high-profile individual to be apprehended was U Ye Htut, who previously served as a Minister of Information during President U Thein Sein's tenure. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison on two charges.

⁵¹ Online Violence: A Study of Online Mechanisms of Myanmar Military's Propaganda, 2023

⁵² စစ်ကောင်စီကို ဝေဖန်ရေးသားမှုနှင့် ဖမ်းဆီးခံရသူ ၁၃၀၀ ကျော်ရှိလာ ~~~~~ ■ ၂၀၂၂ ခုနှစ် ဖေဖော်ဝါရီကနေ ၂၀၂၃ ခုနှစ် စက်တင်ဘာလကုန်အထိ လူမှုကွန်ရက်ပေါ်မှာ...: By RFA burmesefacebook. Facebook. (n.d.-c). <https://www.facebook.com/rfaburmese/videos/2109421766059349/>

By looking at these actions, it is seen that the regulation of information dissemination extends beyond military-controlled broadcasts, print media and radio, but also through social media accounts cultivated by them. Disseminating fake news, identifying and blaming the other groups as culprits, spreading religious and social hate speeches and the orchestration of arrests are carried out in this strategy.

The Culprit: American and China

The United States is the primary target of the military group. The junta has often expressed through its media for generations that not just the colonial British, but the United States as a neo-colonialist entity.

During a meeting in Nay Pyi Taw on October 26, 2023, General Min Aung Hlaing stated that the US-led group has continuously interfered in Myanmar's internal affairs in order to control China. A day after, the military faced an unprecedented loss that they have never had before; Operation 1027 by the Three Brotherhood Alliance in Northern Myanmar.

There was widespread speculation that, at the very least, China will not oppose this operation. Soon after, the anti-Chinese movements appeared on the streets of Yangon.

On November 19, 2023, patriotic monks and nationalist activists marched from Yangon City Hall to the Chinese Embassy on Pyidaungsu Yeiktha Road. Anti-Chinese slogans and cries were heard during the protest. A monk, who was one of the protesters, said he was protesting against China that was forcing the ethnic groups to kill each other.

General Zaw Min Tun claimed the operation as an invasion. Myanmar Now wrote that such anti-Chinese protests have taken place in dozens of cities in Myanmar and were carried out under the orders of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing⁵³.

Yet China, on the other hand, is needed to stop the military momentum of the Three Brotherhood Alliance, which threatens the seat of the coup leaders. Therefore, anti-China demonstrations could not be held for a long time and they had to stop.

"...The SAC has refrained from supporting anti-China protests. I think it is counterproductive for the military to spread such propaganda while still requiring China's assistance," says Jason Tower, the Director for Myanmar at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP)⁵⁴.

Following China, the focus shifted to the United States.

In late November 2023, in analysis published by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), it was stated that Myanmar is unlikely to descend into chaos after the fall of the regime, and that it has unique characteristics that can contribute to the stability in the post-junta period, suggesting that Myanmar has the potential to transition towards a new political paradigm, as outlined in "Why We Should Not Fear the Victory of Resistance"⁵⁵. General Zaw Min Tun reacted strongly to this analysis, attributing blame to the Western countries for their involvement in the conflict.

"...The Western media is spreading propaganda based on the analysis done by the United State Institute of Peace, which is backed by the United States government. Their analysis and presentations are making the situations in Myanmar worse than the current state."

⁵³ မင်းအောင်လှိုင် ဖန်တီးခိုင်းသည့် တရုတ်ဆန့်ကျင်ရေး လှုပ်ရှားမှုများ. Myanmar Now. (2024, February 8).

<https://myanmar-now.org/mm/news/45854/>

⁵⁴ ပြန်ပေးဆပ်ရမယ့် တန်ဖိုးကြီးမားတဲ့ တရုတ်အကူအညီ. ဗွီအိုအေ. https://burmese.voanews.com/a/democracy-forum-jason-tower-on-1027-operation/7401450.html?fbclid=IwAR2775teos4VDAXIU5PTU6OXg10pk3yol6vksjdZXj0_mnz-Ed_vH4gPGYg

⁵⁵ *We shouldn't fear a resistance victory in Myanmar*. United States Institute of Peace. (2023, November 16).

<https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/11/we-shouldnt-fear-resistance-victory-myanmar>

“One important point to note is that they are fueling the conflict to become bigger by asserting that armed organizations, individuals, responsible for instigating conflicts, will not resort to warlordism, banditry and that they remain unified. This indicates that they are openly interfering in Myanmar’s internal affairs. They are engaging in such actions, too. This also signals that these Western organizations will get more involved and increase deeper intervention in Myanmar affairs⁵⁶.”

Statement by General Zaw Min Tun

November 28, 2023

Therefore, he urged all citizens and neighboring nations to be vigilant. The USIP’s analysis is a blow to the military as it contradicts their narrative told to their soldiers and the international communities that only the military is capable of unifying Myanmar’s political fragmentation or maintaining peace within the country. Hence, there is a strong censure directed towards the USIP, blaming them as they are fueling the nation’s instability.

Since the end of 2023, the State Administration Council has been busy actively blaming China and the United States in turn. The fire of war ignited by the Northern Three Brotherhood Alliance has spread to Rakhine and Karenni. Following a series of unprecedented losses, they are now searching for someone to blame.

Everyone Is Guilty Except Me

In addition to this, the military generals are constructing a narrative within the nation, in which everyone else is guilty except themselves. In politics, they point fingers at Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy. And they blame the People’s Defence Force (PDF) and Ethnic Armed Organizations for not being able to hold an election.

Moreover, they accuse traditional business enterprises as being driven by greed, thereby assigning blame to them as well.

⁵⁶ <https://www.moi.gov.mm/news/48147>

During August and September in 2023, entrepreneurs emerged as the primary targets. The SAC criticized the enterprises as excessively greedy for the increases in dollar exchange rates, cooking oil and fuel prices during August. This pattern of seeking scapegoats during periods of commodity price fluctuations is an old habit of the military, as done by the previous military dictators.

“We need to take actions against those who have ill intentions, manipulating commodity prices by spreading fake news to disrupt the market. There are individuals in the currency market who are manipulating prices by hoarding local currency, foreign currency and gold. They need to be managed systematically. It is also found that some banks are practicing dishonestly, so we must monitor their actions more systematically.”

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing

Statement from a SAC meeting on August 25

In this statement, all the bank owners, gold traders, as well as entrepreneurs dealing in cooking oil and gas, are included. Shortly after that statement, during September, hundreds of business owners were summoned for interrogation, and subjected to threats. The term “negotiation” was used for this action. Unverified reports suggest that some of these individuals were temporarily detained.

Finally, the truth was revealed. The real culprits were the two generals who controlled and managed foreign currencies. As a result of their bribery and self-interested activities, the foreign currency market fell into chaos.

Both General Moe Myint Tun, the chairman of Myanmar Investment Commission, Foreign Exchange Supervisory Committee and Central Committee on Ensuring Smooth Flow of Trade and Goods, and his subordinate, General Yan Naung Soe, were sentenced to life imprisonment as they were convicted on multiple charges, including treason, corruption and violating the military regulations.

The State Administration Council did not exempt the former president, U Thein Sein, from their search for the culprit. During a meeting on November 19, it was mentioned that the current low manufacturing rate is due to the lack of encouragement for state-owned enterprises to sustain operations following the transition to the new government in 2011. They were being blamed for making changes regarding the state-owned enterprises during U Thein Sein's presidency.

Furthermore, they continued to blame how many people are "inactive" in the workforce. During the meeting on November 29, he stated that the decline in exports was not due to the country's lack of capacity, but rather because people were not working. This pattern of seeking scapegoats is not new for the military. The current military is casting blame in various directions as if everyone else is guilty except themselves.

Conclusion Note

"Repeat a lie often enough and it becomes the truth."

- Joseph Goebbels (Chief propagandist for the Nazi Party)

The spread of fake news and disinformation can be traced back to the Roman era more than 2,000 years ago. The rulers used various methods to manipulate the ruling class to be obedient. The main important thing is to shape and control the people's attention, trust and activities as desired. Numerous methods were used; slogans, gestures, mannerisms, banners, memorial monuments, music, films and clothing designs; from coins to hair designs, various platforms were used to spread propaganda.

Throughout Myanmar's history, the ruling class of kings have utilized songs, poems and literature to brainwash the public. Today, a medium like film is the best manipulation weapon to touch the hearts of the masses. For many years, the military portrayed itself as a prestigious institution, the guardian of Myanmar's national religion, and brainwashed the people into being military slaves. Now, it is again portrayed as a military that implemented the path to democracy through elections according to the will of the people. By doing so, a privileged class can manipulate the country at will.

Glorification of the ruler's mechanism and those who honour their own tribe; many narratives were created and disseminated to discriminate and spread hate of other ethnic groups. By repeating the narratives, the public becomes convinced. They start to assume it as the truth.

It is time to seriously reconsider such manipulations. It is time to eliminate the darkness of fear. It is time to wash away the military's propaganda. Beyond its psychological warfare, a very bright future awaits. Thank you.

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Myanmar Military's Propaganda Playbook

Unveiling Junta's Tactics After the coup