Secrets and Power in
Myanmar

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Secrets and Power in Myanmar

Intelligence and the Fall of General Khin Nyunt

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ISEAS YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE

Deep in Burmese thinking is the belief that to have secrets is to be on the side of power.

Lucian W. Pye
The Spirit of Burmese Politics (1959)*****

* Lucian W. Pye, *The Spirit of Burmese Politics: A Preliminary Survey of a Politics of Fear and Charisma* (Cambridge: Centre for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1959), p. 14.

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2003, Myanmar was described as one of the most tightly controlled dictatorships in the world. The main instrument used by the military regime to maintain this status was the country's extensive intelligence apparatus, which was dominated by the Office of the Chief of Military Intelligence (OCMI), known before 2001 as the Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence (DDSI). It not only performed all the usual intelligence functions, but played a major role in Myanmar's political, economic and social life. It was also an important factor in its international relations. Since 1983, this apparatus had been managed by General Khin Nyunt.

During this period, five features marked the intelligence state. First, the apparatus was dominated by the armed forces. Second, the main focus of the national intelligence effort was on domestic security. Third, the intelligence apparatus was characterized by a total commitment to unity, stability and sovereignty, as perceived by the ruling military council. Fourth, all security agencies relied on human intelligence, much more than on technical sources. Fifth, there was a tension between the imperative to have a single person or organization directing the entire intelligence apparatus, and the wish to spread power between multiple agencies under independent managers.

The power and behaviour of DDSI/OCMI exacerbated tensions between Khin Nyunt and other members of Myanmar's military leadership, leading to his downfall in 2004. OCMI was comprehensively purged and replaced by the Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs (OCMSA). Primary responsibility for internal security shifted to the Myanmar Police Force's Special Branch. However, Myanmar's intelligence capabilities had been severely weakened. Since 2004, considerable efforts have been made to recover these capabilities, but they have still not been fully restored, contributing to a number of notable intelligence failures.

Since the advent of Thein Sein's quasi-civilian government in 2011, and the election of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy administration in 2015, there appear to have been few significant structural changes to Myanmar's intelligence apparatus. The organizations and practices that characterized military rule appear to have survived, although the authorities now seem to be relying more on technical sources, and semi-legal rather than extra-legal means, to exercise controls. Some recent developments, however, including a series of attacks by militant groups in Rakhine State, could prompt greater attention to intelligence issues.

Since the political opening in 2011, Myanmar's security forces have reached out to their foreign counterparts, both in the region and further afield. New defence links have been forged. However, Naypyidaw is now facing the prospect of a return to international isolation and punitive sanctions, as the government and armed forces face charges of ethnic cleansing—even genocide—against the Muslim Rohingyas in Rakhine State. Relationships with Myanmar's neighbours and some others will survive, but one casualty of its renewed

pariah status may be any developing intelligence contacts with Western countries.

Even as Myanmar faces new external pressures, it is unlikely that the focus on internal security will change. Both Aung San Suu Kyi's government and the armed forces know that their survival—and, in their view, the country's survival—are threatened more by disunity and domestic instability than by any international developments. This will ensure that the national intelligence apparatus will continue to be given a high priority, will still be internally focused and will effectively remain under the control of the country's armed forces.

PREFACE

NOMENCLATURE

After Myanmar's armed forces crushed a nation-wide pro-democracy uprising in September 1988, the country's official name (in English) was changed from its post–1974 form, the "Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma", back to the "Union of Burma", which had been adopted when Myanmar regained its independence from the United Kingdom (UK) in January 1948. In July 1989, the new military government changed the country's name once again, this time to the "Union of Myanmar", which had long been the vernacular version (in the literary register, at least). In the formal declaration of the country's independence from the UK in 1948, for example, it was called the Union of Burma in the English version and the Union of Myanmar (or "Myanma") in the Burmese version. Also in July 1989, a number of other place names were changed to conform more closely to their original pronunciation in the Burmese language. In 2011, after formal promulgation of the 2008 national constitution, the country's official name was changed yet again, this time to the "Republic of the Union of Myanmar".

The new names have been accepted by most countries, the United Nations and other major international organizations. A few governments, activist groups and news media outlets,

however, still cling to the old forms, apparently as a protest against the former military regime's refusal to put the question of a name change to the people of Myanmar.[1] The old names were also believed to be the preference of then opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who was held under virtual house arrest by the military regime for almost fifteen years. Questioned about the official name of the country soon after her party took office in 2016, Aung San Suu Kyi stated her continuing preference for the colonial-era term "Burma", but said that both names were acceptable.[2] In this book, the official change of names has been observed, although "Burma" and "Burmese" have been retained for formal titles used before 1989 and for the citation of works using that name. "Burmese" is also used to describe the dominant language of the country. Such usage does not carry any political connotations.

The armed forces have effectively ruled Myanmar ever since General Ne Win's military coup in March 1962 but, from 1974 to 1988, they exercised power through an ostensibly elected "civilian" parliament dominated by the Burma Socialist Programme Party, the country's only legal political organization. On taking back direct control in September 1988, the armed forces created the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which ruled by decree. In November 1997, apparently on the advice of a United States-based public relations firm, the regime changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), but continued to rule through executive fiat.[3] In May 2008, it held a constitutional referendum, with predictable results.[4] This was followed by carefully managed elections on 7 November 2010. The resulting national parliament, consisting of 75 per cent elected officials and 25 per cent non-elected military officers, met in January 2011. A new government was installed under President Thein Sein in March that year.

Continuing this process, by-elections were staged on 1 April 2012 to fill 48 seats left vacant after recently-elected Members of Parliament (MPs) had resigned to take up ministerial appointments, or had died. The opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), which was re-registered for the elections in December 2011, claimed that fraud and rules violations were widespread, but the party still won 43 of the 45 seats available on the day. One successful candidate was the party's leader, Aung San Suu Kyi.

On 8 November 2015, a new general election was held which, by most accounts, was reasonably free and fair.[5] The NLD received about 65.6 per cent of all votes cast, while the pro-military Union Solidarity Development Party received 27.5 per cent. Under Myanmar's "first-past-the-post" electoral system, this gave the NLD 79.4 per cent of all the available seats.[6] It secured 255 in the 440-seat lower house (*Pyitthu Hluttaw* or House of Representatives), and 135 in the 224-seat upper house (*Amyotha Hluttaw* or House of Nationalities), a total of 390 of the 491 seats contested at the Union level.[7] The armed forces were allocated 25 per cent of the seats in both houses, but this gave the NLD a clear majority in the combined Union Assembly (*Pyidaungsu Hluttaw*). As a result, it was able to elect a new president in 2016 and pass a law creating the position of State Counsellor for Aung San Suu Kyi (who under the 2008 constitution is unable to become president).[8] The national charter clearly states that the president "takes precedence over all other persons" in Myanmar but, even before the elections, Aung San Suu Kyi had made it clear that she intended to be "above the president" and act as the country's de facto leader.[9]

After the UK dispatched troops to the royal capital of Mandalay and completed its three-stage conquest of Burma

(as it was then called) in December 1885, Yangon (then known as Rangoon) was confirmed as the administrative capital of the country. It remains the commercial capital, but in November 2005 the SPDC formally designated the newly-built city of Naypyidaw (or Nay Pyi Taw), 325 kilometres north of Yangon, as the seat of Myanmar's government. Where they appear in this book, the terms "Rangoon regime", "Yangon regime", or in some cases simply "Rangoon" or "Yangon", are used as shorthand terms for the central government, including the military government that was created in 1962 and re-invented in 1974, 1988 and 1997. The government after 2005 is referred to as the "Naypyidaw regime", or "Naypyidaw", to reflect the administrative change that took place that year.

Another term used in this book is *Tatmadaw*. It is usually translated as "royal force", but the honorific "daw" no longer refers to the monarchy. Since 1948, the name has been the vernacular term for Myanmar's tri-service (army, navy and air force) armed forces. In recent years, it has gained wide currency in English language publications on Myanmar. Sometimes, the Tatmadaw is referred to simply as "the army", reflecting that service arm's overwhelming size and influence, compared with the other two. While the term "Defence Services" usually refers only to the armed forces, it is sometimes used in a wider context to refer collectively to the armed forces, the Myanmar Police Force, the "people's militia" and sundry other state-endorsed paramilitary forces. On occasion, the Myanmar Fire Services Department and Myanmar Red Cross have also been included in this category. As the 2008 constitution decrees that "all the armed forces in the Union shall be under the command of the Defence Services", the formal title of the Tatmadaw's most senior officer is Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services.[10]

Over the years, some components of Myanmar's intelligence apparatus have changed their formal titles several times. The military intelligence organization, for example, has periodically been renamed, usually to coincide with structural changes in the armed forces. These adjustments have not always been known to, or recognized by, foreign observers. Also, Burmese language titles have been translated into English in different ways. The use of popular names has added another complication. For example, ever since 1948 the Tatmadaw's intelligence arm has been widely known as the Military Intelligence Service, or simply the "MI" ("em-eye"). Similarly, the Police Force's Special Intelligence Department (or, strictly translated, the "Information Police"), has long been known as the Special Branch, or "SB". All this has meant that in the literature some agencies have been called by several different names, and not always accurately.

SOURCES AND METHODS

The aim of this book is to update and complement an earlier study of Myanmar's intelligence apparatus, first published as a working paper by the Australian National University's Strategic and Defence Studies Centre (SDSC) in 1997.[11] The paper surveyed the development of Myanmar's intelligence system and capabilities over the half century from 1948, when the country first created independent intelligence agencies. An extract from this paper later appeared as "SLORC's 'Intel-Net': Burma's Intelligence Apparatus" in the *Burma Debate*, a publication of The Burma Project of the Open Society Institute.[12] In 1998, a revised version of the SDSC working paper was published as an article titled "Burma's Intelligence Apparatus" in the academic journal *Intelligence and National Security.*[13]

This book is intended to reprise some of the historical background, establish a baseline for information, and take the story forward to the present day, using the downfall of General Khin Nyunt in 2004 to highlight a number of changes to Myanmar's intelligence system. It also briefly examines developments since the advent of a "discipline-flourishing democracy" under a mixed civilian-military government in 2011. A short introduction to the subject has already appeared in *Australian Outlook*, the blog of the Australian Institute of International Affairs.[14]

Despite the close attention paid to Myanmar's coercive apparatus since the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, little reliable information is available. Even now, after the political opening of 2011, hard data about the sizes, budgets and capabilities of the various security forces is still difficult to obtain.[15] The structure and internal workings of the country's intelligence agencies are even more opaque. It is unlikely that the civilian members of Aung San Suu Kyi's government—including the State Counsellor herself—are privy to all the relevant information. Particularly sensitive matters are probably known only to a small group of senior military officers. Indeed, secrecy has long been an obsession with those concerned with security issues, and harsh penalties are imposed on anyone believed to have betrayed state secrets, a term that has a very wide definition in Myanmar.[16] This has made most people in the country (and even outside it, if they wish to preserve their access and protect family members still resident there) wary of speaking about sensitive issues with researchers. Even foreign agencies with access to advanced technologies and privileged information consider the country's security forces, including the national intelligence apparatus, a black hole.[17]

Ironically, the lack of reliable information about Myanmar's intelligence agencies seems at times to be in inverse proportion to the number of people who have written about them, and commented on their organization, leadership and operations. Much of this product is based on anecdotal evidence, gossip and speculation. However, as Donald Emmerson once noted, "the plural of anecdote is not data".[18] Occasional glimpses behind the scenes have rarely, if ever, given observers the whole picture.[19] Also, Myanmar's security forces tend to arouse strong feelings on the part of some commentators, leading at times to biased and misleading reports. That said, over the years some useful contributions have been made to the public record by well-informed and objective reporters and analysts.[20] By carefully surveying all this material, weeding out improbabilities and trying to connect the dots, it is possible to make some broad observations about the historical development and current status of Myanmar's intelligence apparatus, its structure, activities and attitudes. Albeit based on incomplete data and informed guesswork, such an exercise can throw some light on the way that the apparatus functions and facilitate a greater understanding of its place in modern Myanmar.

It is acknowledged that this book relies heavily on works published in English. If they were able and prepared to speak frankly, much could be learned from members or former members of the Myanmar government and security forces. At the very least, they could correct or put into context reports that have appeared in the news media or online, the reliability of which must in many cases be considered suspect. Also, in recent years, a number of autobiographical and historical works have been published in Burmese by former military and intelligence officers, including by Khin Nyunt himself.[21] They tend to be rather self-serving, and are often couched in

cautious language, but even so they offer personal and in some cases useful perspectives on the developments discussed in this book.[22] A number of interviews were conducted, and unofficial translations of some memoirs were consulted.[23] Where appropriate, they have been reflected in the text and endnotes. However, it has been left to researchers with a greater command of the Burmese language to follow up the matters raised below, and to make the public record more accurate and complete.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In researching and writing this book, I was assisted by a number of colleagues and fellow Myanmar-watchers, notably *Sayagyi* David Steinberg and Rhys Thompson. Michael Wesley and Ian Holliday were kind enough to read the manuscript and provide comments for the cover. For various reasons, others did not wish to be named, but I owe them all my thanks. I am also indebted to the three anonymous reviewers who made a number of helpful suggestions for additions and amendments. As always, the encouragement and support of my wife Pattie was invaluable. Needless to say, any errors of commission or omission are mine alone. Finally, for the record, my 1998 article on this subject drew only on open sources, represented my views alone and had no official status or endorsement. The same caveats apply to this book.

Notes

1. Andrew Selth and Adam Gallagher, "What's in a Name: Burma or Myanmar?", *The Olive Branch*, 21 June 2018, https://www.usip.org/blog/2018/06/whats-name-burma-or-myanmar.

2. Andrew Selth, "More Name Games in Burma/Myanmar", *The Interpreter*, 10 August 2016, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/more-name-games-burmamyanmar.

3. David S. Mathieson, "The Burma Road to Nowhere: The Failure of the Developmental State in Myanmar", *Policy, Organisation and Society* 17, no. 7 (1999): 108. See also "A SLORC By Any Other Name", *Washington Post*, 6 March 1998, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1998/03/06/a-slorc-by-any-other-name/84bdf222-1eb8-417c-97ee-032cd9535e91/?noredirect=on.

4. The SPDC claimed that 92.48 per cent of eligible voters endorsed the new constitution. *Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (2008)* (Nay Pyi Taw: Ministry of Information, 2008), p. iv.

5. The Carter Centre, *Observing Myanmar's 2015 General Elections: Final Report* (Atlanta: Carter Centre, 2016), https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/news/peace_publications/election_reports/myanmar-2015-final.pdf.

6. Kyaw Kyaw, "Analysis of Myanmar's NLD Landslide", *New Mandala*, 1 May 2012, http://www.newmandala.org/analysis-of-myanmars-nld-landslide/.

7. *The Myanmar Elections: Results and Implications*, Asia Briefing No. 147 (Yangon/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 9 December 2015).

8. "Myanmar's 2015 Landmark Elections Explained", *BBC News*, 3 December 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-33547036.

9. *Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (2008)*, chapter 3, clause 58. See also "Myanmar Election: Aung San Suu Kyi will be 'Above President'", *BBC News*, 5 November 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-34729691/myanmar-election-aung-san-suu-kyi-will-be-above-president.

10. *Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (2008)*, chapter 7, clause 338.

11. Andrew Selth, *Burma's Intelligence Apparatus*, Working Paper No. 308 (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, 1997).

12. Andrew Selth, "SLORC's 'Intel-Net': Burma's Intelligence Apparatus", *Burma Debate* 4, no. 4 (October 1997): 4–18.

13. Andrew Selth, "Burma's Intelligence Apparatus", *Intelligence and National Security* 13, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 33–70.

14. Andrew Selth, "Myanmar's Intelligence State", *Australian Outlook*, 20 September 2018, https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/myanmars-intelligence-state/.

15. Andrew Selth, "Known Knowns and Known Unknowns: Measuring Myanmar's Military Capabilities", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 31, no. 2 (August 2009): 272–95.

16. See, for example, "Reuters Reporters Arrested in Yangon Under Official Secrets Act", *The Irrawaddy*, 13 December 2017, https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/breaking-reuters-reporters-arrested-yangon-official-secrets-act.html.

17. Andrew Selth, "Myanmar's Coercive Apparatus: The Long Road to Reform", in *Myanmar: The Dynamics of an Evolving Polity*, edited by David I. Steinberg (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2015), pp. 13–36.

18. This comment was made at a workshop on Myanmar arranged by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Brookings Institution, held in Washington D.C. in October 2009 and attended by the author.

19. For example, the autobiography of former Chief of Intelligence Khin Nyunt, titled *The Experiences of My Life* and published in Burmese in 2015, as well as a number of other works by him, are useful but cannot be taken at face value.

20. In 2010 and 2011, a large number of cables sent from the US Embassy in Yangon (called Rangoon by the US Government) to the State Department in Washington D.C. were obtained by the Wikileaks organization and released without official authorization. While several of these cables have been quoted in this book, it must be noted for the record that, as leaked documents, they cannot be verified as genuine, or accurate.

21. See, for example, Sean Gleeson, "Still Not Sorry: Neither Modesty nor Mea Culpa in Khin Nyunt Memoir", *The Irrawaddy*, 3 March

2015, https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/still-not-sorry-neither-modesty-nor-mea-culpa-in-khin-nyunt-memoir.html; and "War and Politics, in Burmese", *New Mandala*, 17 November 2010, https://www.newmandala.org/war-and-politics-in-burmese/.

22. For example, a memoir by Nay Yi published in 2014 devotes an entire chapter to the fall of Khin Nyunt and the purge of the military intelligence apparatus in 2004. See Myo Lwin, "Book Review: Political Thoughts of a Former Military Intelligence Officer", *Myanmar Times*, 16 March 2015, https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/13523-book-review-political-thoughts-of-a-former-military-intelligence-officer.html.

23. Several attempts were made to arrange an interview with former general Khin Nyunt in Yangon, but they were unsuccessful. Other interviews are noted by place, month and year only, to protect the identities of those involved.

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

In English

AA	Arakan Army
AIU	Air Force Intelligence Unit
AMIIM	ASEAN Military Intelligence Informal Meeting
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ARSA	Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BGP	Border Guard Police
BSI	Bureau of Special Investigation
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
CEC	Central Executive Committee
CI	Chief of Intelligence
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CID	Criminal Investigation Department
COMINT	communications intelligence
CPB	Communist Party of Burma
DDSI	Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence
DKBA	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
DSA	Defence Services Academy
DSIB	Defence Services Intelligence Bureau
DVB	*Democratic Voice of Burma*

EAG	ethnic armed groups
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
GAD	General Administration Department
GCSB	Government Communications Security Bureau
GDR	German Democratic Republic
HIV/AIDS	human immuodeficiency virus infection and acquired immune deficiency syndrome
HQ	headquarters
HUMINT	human intelligence
IB	Intelligence Branch
IBMND	Intelligence Bureau of the Ministry of National Defence (*Ch'ing pao chu*)
ICG	International Crisis Group
IMINT	imagery intelligence
INSCOM	Intelligence and Security Command
IT	information technology
KIA	Kachin Independence Army
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
KNU	Karen National Union
LORC	Law and Order Restoration Council
LID	Light Infantry Division
MAS	Military Affairs Security
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MFIU	Myanmar Financial Intelligence Unit
MI	Military Intelligence
MI5	(UK) Security Service
MI6	(UK) Secret Intelligence Service
MIS	Military Intelligence Service
MNDAA	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army

MOU	memorandum of understanding
MP	Member of Parliament
MPT	Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications
MPF	Myanmar Police Force
MRTV	Myanmar Radio and Television
MSA	Military Security Affairs
NCGUB	National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma
NCO	non-commissioned officer
NDSC	National Defence and Security Council
NGO	non-government organization
NIAS	Nordic Institute of Asian Studies
NIB	National Intelligence Bureau
NIU	Navy Intelligence Unit
NLD	National League for Democracy
NSA	National Security Agency
NUS	National University of Singapore
OCC	Operation Control Command
OCMAS	Office of the Chief of Military Affairs Security
OCMI	Office of the Chief of Military Intelligence
OCMSA	Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs
OIC	Organisation of the Islamic Conference
OSINT	open source intelligence
OSS	Office of Strategic Studies
OTS	Officer Training School
P(4)	People's Property Protection Police
PDC	Peace and Development Council
PPF	People's Police Force
RAW (also R&AW)	Research and Analysis Wing
RCC	Regional Control Command

RMC	Regional Military Command
RRT	Refugee Review Tribunal
SB	Special Branch
SB2	Special Branch 2
SDSC	Strategic and Defence Studies Centre
SID	Special Intelligence Department
SIGINT	signals intelligence
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
UAV	unmanned aerial vehicle
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States (of America)
USDA	Union Solidarity Development Association
USDP	Union Solidarity Development Party
UWSA	United Wa State Army

In Burmese

MaBaTha	Association for the Protection of Race and Religion
MaWaTa	Township Law and Order Restoration Council
MaYaKa	Township Peace and Development Council
NaAhPha	State Peace and Development Council
NaKaTha	Border Area Trade Directorate
NaSaKa	Border Area Immigration Control Command
NaSaYa	Border Supervisory Battalions
NaWaTa	State Law and Order Restoration Council
PaWaTa	Provincial Law and Order Restoration Council
SaSaSa	Bureau of Special Investigations

SaYaHpa	military intelligence organization
SaYaKha	Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs
YaWaTa	Ward/Village Law and Order Restoration Council
YaYaKa	Ward/Village Peace and Development Council

Other Languages**

DGSE	*Direction Generale de la Securite Exterieure* (General Directorate for External Security)
Gestapo	*Geheime Staatspolizei* (Secret State Police)
GRU	*Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravlenie* (Chief Intelligence Directorate of the Soviet General Staff)
IRASEC	*Institut de Recherche sur l'Asie du Sud-Est Contemporaine* (Research Institute on Contemporary Southeast Asia)
KGB	*Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti* (Committee for State Security)
KMT	*Kuomintang* (Chinese National People's Party)
Mossad	*Ha Mossad le Modiyn ve le Tafkidim Mayuhadim* (Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations)
RSF	*Reporters Sans Frontieres* (Reporters Without Borders)
Shin Bet	*Sherut ha-Bitahon haKlali* (General Security Service)
Stasi	*Staatssicherheitsdienst* (Ministry for State Security)

** Diacritical marks have not been included.