A Myanmar Miscellany

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A Myanmar Miscellany

Selected Articles, 2007–2023

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For
Distinguished Professor of Asian Studies Emeritus David I. Steinberg,
scholar, gentleman, mentor and friend,
and for
Pattie, as always.

Contents

Acronyms and Abbreviations

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ABMP	American Baptist Mission Press
ABSDF	All Burma Student Democratic Front
AEG	armed ethnic group
AIDS	acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
ANU	Australian National University
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BDA	Burma Defence Army
BGM	Burma Gallantry Medal
BMC	Burma Match Company
BMP	Burma Military Police
BSI	Bureau of Special Investigations
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
BURMA	Burma Unified through Rigorous Military Accountability (Act)
CBI	China-Burma-India (Theatre)
CCTV	closed circuit television
CDM	Civil Disobedience Movement
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
cm	centimetre
CNA	Chin National Army
CRPH	Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw
CSAAR	Centre for the Study of Australia-Asia Relations
CSIS	Centre for Strategic and International Studies
CTBTO	Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organisation
DA	Defence Attache
DC	District of Columbia
DDSI	Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence
DFA	Department of Foreign Affairs
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DIA	Defence Intelligence Agency
DSAC	Defence Services Attache Corps

DVB	Democratic Voice of Burma
EAG	ethnic armed group
EAO	ethnic armed organisation
ERO	ethnic resistance organisation
FDI	Future Directions International
FDI	foreign direct investment
G-2	military intelligence staff (usually at the divisional level or above)
GAI	Griffith Asia Institute
GDP	gross domestic product
GSP	Generalised System of Preferences
HBO	Home Box Office
HEIC	Honourable East India Company
HIV	human immunodeficiency virus
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IGSM	India General Service Medal
IISS	International Institute for Strategic Studies
IRA	Irish Republican Army
ISEAS	Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
ISIS	Institute for Science and International Security
JADE	Junta's Anti-Democratic Efforts (Act)
KA	Karenni Army
KGB	(Soviet) Committee for State Security
KIA	Kachin Independence Army
km	kilometre
KMT	Nationalist Party of China (*Kuomintang*)
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
LCMV	Lymphocytic Choriomeningitis virus
LDC	Least Developed Country
LDF	local defence forces
MA	Myanmar Army
MAF	Myanmar Air Force
MI	Military Intelligence
MIS	Military Intelligence Service
MN	Myanmar Navy
MOU	memorandum of understanding
MP	Member of Parliament
MPF	Myanmar Police Force
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NBC	National Broadcasting Company

NCGUB	National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma
NGO	non-government organisation
NLA	National Library of Australia
NLD	National League for Democracy
NPT	Non-Proliferation Treaty
NUG	National Unity Government
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
OOB	Order of Burma
PBF	Patriotic Burmese Forces
PDF	People's Defence Force
PDT	People's Defence Teams
PLA	People's Liberation Army
POW	prisoner of war
R2P	Responsibility to Protect
RAF	Royal Air Force
RAMC	Royal Army Medical Corps
RMC	Regional Military Command
ROK	Republic of Korea
ROSATOM	State Atomic Energy Corporation Rosatom
SAC	State Administration Council
SB	Special Branch
SENGEN	Senior General
SIGINT	signals intelligence
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SMH	Sydney Morning Herald
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
SPECTRE	Special Executive for Counterintelligence, Terrorism, Revenge and Extortion
SRBM	short range ballistic missile
TBA	Three Brotherhood Alliance
UDF	United Defence Force
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council

UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNTAC	United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia
US	United States (of America)
USDP	Union Solidarity Development Party
VC	Victoria Cross
VW	Volkswagen
WHO	World Health Organisation
WMD	weapon of mass destruction
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

Glossary[1]

In Burmese[2]

amay	mother
Amyotha Hluttaw	House of Nationalities
azani	martyr
Bamar	ethnic Burman
basha	temporary thatched shelter
bilu	ogre or demon
Bo Hmu Gyi	colonel
bodhisattva	a person who is able to reach *nirvana* (enlightenment) but who delays doing so out of compassion for suffering beings
chinthe	leogryph, or lion
dacoit	armed bandit
dah	sword or machete
dak bungalow	circuit rest house (from *dak*, meaning "mail")
dalan	informer
Dhammika	righteous, just, of good character
Daw	female term of respect (literally "aunt")
Dobama Asiayone	We Burmans Association
durwan	night watchman, or door-keeper
Duwa	chief (literally "big man") in Kachin
eingyi	traditional women's jacket or blouse
gaung baung	traditional head scarf (literally "head wrap")
gharry	horse drawn carriage available for hire

[1] Entries in this table follow the spellings and capitalisation found in the original sources. Currently, there is no official system for romanisation of the Myanmar language.

[2] For the purposes of this list, Pali, Indian and Anglo-Indian words commonly used in Myanmar are considered "Burmese".

godown	warehouse
hpoun or *hpon*	spiritual power
hti	umbrella (and top, or spire of a pagoda)
jaggery	unrefined sugar product made from palm syrup
jinglees	darts, usually sharpened bicycle spokes
karma	Buddhist principle of causality, doctrine of births and rebirths
Ko	title of a young male or close male friend (literally "brother")
koyin	novice Buddhist monk
kyat	state currency
lei bein	Mazda B600 Porter car (literally "four wheels")
longyi	Burmese sarong
Ma	title of a young female or close female friend (literally "sister")
Maran	one of the five main Jinghpaw clans, in the wider Kachin ethnic group
Maung	title given to young males (also adopted by older men to display modesty)
nats	animist spirits or ghosts
paso or *pasoc*	traditional sarong-like wrap
pongyi or *phongyi*	Buddhist monk (literally "great glory")
Pyidaungsu Hluttaw	Union Assembly
Pyitthu Hluttaw	House of Representatives
Pyitthu Kakweye Tatmadaw	People's Defence Force
Pyitthu Sit	People's Militia (literally "people's war")
Pyusawhti or *Pyu Saw Htee*	Name given to irregular pro-military militia
Sangha	community of Buddhist monks
Saya	teacher, also patron or respected elder
Sayagyi	male term of respect (literally "great teacher")
Shwe Daw Pyee, also *Shwe Pyi*	Golden Land
sit tat	army
tapyit	junior, acolyte or follower

tasay or *thaye*	restless spirits or unquiet ghosts
Tatmadaw	armed forces (literally "royal force")
tekkatho	university
Thakin	Master, or lord
thanaka	traditional skin treatment made from powdered tree bark
tumee or *Tu Mee*	traditional black powder firearm
U	male term of respect (literally "uncle")
zedi	stupa (mound or dome-shaped pagoda)
zei	market or outdoor bazaar

In Other Languages

ad hoc	for this situation, for a particular purpose
alma mater	university, school or college attended (literally "nourishing mother")
annus horribilis	a year of disaster or misfortune (literally "horrible year")
Azad Hind	Provisional Government of Free India
bandes desinee	comics and graphic novels (literally "drawn strips")
burra	large, big or great
coup d'etat	sudden, violent and unlawful seizure of power (literally "stroke of state")
cri de coeur	a passionate appeal, complaint or protest (literally "cry of the heart")
de facto	in fact, whether by right or not
de rigeur	demanded by fashion, custom (literally "out of strictness")
deva	heavenly being or divine being
glasnost	openness
inter alia	among other things
Legion d'Honneur	Legion of Honour
locus dramaticus	place of the action
manga	Japanese comics and graphic novels
modus vivendi	arrangement allowing parties to coexist peacefully until a final settlement can be reached (literally "manner of living")

mujahideen	Muslims engaged in a holy war, or *jihad*
nom de guerre	pseudonym usually chosen during a time of conflict (literally "war name")
perestroika	restructuring
raison d'etre	reason or justification for existence
terra incognita	unknown land

Geographical Names[1]

Old Name	Current Name
Akyab	Sittwe (city)
Arakan	Rakhine (state)
Aye Island	Kokunye Kyun (island)
Bassein	Pathein (city)
Burma	Myanmar (sometimes Myanma)[2]
Burman	Bamar or Bamah (ethnic group)
Chindwin	Chindwinn (river)
Cocks Comb Island	Kyet Mauk Kyun (island)
Elphinstone Island	Thayawthadangyi Kyun (island)
Irrawaddy	Ayeyarwady (region and river)
Karen	Kayin (state, ethnic group)
Kengtung	Kyaing Tong (town)
Magwe	Magway (region, town)
Maymyo	Pyin Oo Lwin (town)
Mergui	Myeik (town, archipelago)
Moulmein	Mawlamyine (city)
Myohaung or Mrohaung	Mrauk U (town)
Pa-an	Hpa-an (town)
Pagan	Bagan (old capital)
Pegu	Bago (region and city)
Prome	Pyay (city)
Rangoon	Yangon (region and city)

[1] Some of these names were changed when Myanmar (then known as Burma) regained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1948. Most changes, however, were made by the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in 1989. See the note on "Protocols and Politics" below, and "Writing Systems: Romanization: Government of the Union of Myanmar Notification 5/89", 27 August 2002, https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/docs/8th-uncsgn-docs/inf/8th_UNCSGN_econf.94_INF.75.pdf. The old names still appear on some foreign maps and charts.

[2] The presence or absence of the final "r" in "Myanma[r]" relates to the tonal structure of the Burmese language.

Salween	Thanlwin (river)
Sittang	Sittoung (river)
St Luke's Island	Zadetkale Kyun (island)
St Matthew's Island	Zadetkyi Kyun (island)
Syriam	Thanlyin (town)
Tavoy	Dawei (town)
Tenasserim	Tanintharyi (region)
Victoria Point	Kawthaung or Kawthoung (town)

Foreword

Sean Turnell
Professor Emeritus, Macquarie University

Information, real information, has never been an abundant commodity in Myanmar. Even rarer has been dependable analysis of what facts have emerged from time to time. In the void left by these absences have come speculation, wishful thinking, power-worshipping, and a seemingly irresistible urge to signal one's own virtue. The latter aspect was especially egregious during Myanmar's brief experience with quasi-democracy (2016–21), when for a time there was a genuine and realistic hope for something better.

Standing against all of this for nearly five decades has been Andrew Selth. A former diplomat, intelligence analyst, and finally a scholar of unusual rigour and wisdom, Andrew's writings have graced the pages and websites of surely all the outlets that deign to consider Myanmar. This breadth of output is a distinct positive in terms of immediate outreach, but it also means Andrew's writings can go missing later, a phenomenon exacerbated by the churn of online publications of uncertain commercial viability.

Hence this book, and its importance. Covering events, people, and issues from 2007 and all the way to the present, it takes us from dark times, better times, times of cautious optimism—and back once more into Myanmar's deep despair. Throughout, Andrew keeps his head even as, as Kipling (a subject of the book himself!) might have put it, all around were losing theirs.

Andrew's deep knowledge of Myanmar, the product of both sustained scholarship as well as lived experience in-country, shines through all these essays. This means in areas in which he is rightly renowned (national security, strategic considerations—though in truth Andrew has long ranged much beyond these), Andrew's analysis is informed throughout by profound knowledge of Myanmar and the lens through which its key actors see the world. In other words, Andrew comprehends the big picture, but he also understands the particular landscape within.

All of this book is worth reading, but the serious student of Myanmar should not skip over the Introduction, falsely assuming perhaps it is just the usual bromides and throat clearing. It's not, and it sets a tone not just

for the book, but for Myanmar scholarship more broadly that just might—if it was emulated—lift discussion on the country to a better trajectory. I would similarly recommend Andrew's section on "Protocols and Politics". Some rookie (and not so rookie) mistakes could be avoided by a close reading of this.

Through his biographer, Sherlock Holmes is once to have said that it was a "capital mistake to theorise before you have all the evidence". Andrew respects evidence and, in the context of Myanmar, is one of its most assiduous collectors. This habit *and* virtue rings throughout this collection, and is the foundation upon which the deductions within are founded.

So much about Myanmar is a horror story. There is no avoiding this, and Andrew's writings on this reality are unsparing and clear. What a relief then also to see in this book a large collection of essays that provide relief and context too, especially those celebrating Myanmar's rich and varied culture. And it's not just the highbrow stuff that gets a guernsey. We get pieces on Burmese music, poetry and the art scene of the 1970s, but also insightful (and entertaining) thoughts on comics, superhero stamps, movies and graphic novels. Even Biggles flies in.

This book is a great read, and an important collection through which one can see a sustained argument for an unfashionable, but so necessary, pursuit of truth.

Introduction

You most likely know it as Myanmar, but it will always be Burma to me.[1]

When I worked for the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs, as it was then known, I was discouraged from publishing anything in public journals or newspapers.[2] It was felt that members of staff should not share their private views on international developments, lest they be seen as somehow representing official policy.[3] Even the use of pseudonyms was ruled out as it implied that the author had something to hide. On questioning this line, I was told bluntly that I had chosen a career as a diplomat, not as an academic or, God forbid, a journalist. It was to my great surprise, then, that after transferring to the Joint Intelligence Organisation (as it was then called) in 1986, I was given permission to publish articles and books, both under pseudonyms and my own name.[4] The usual caveats applied, regarding the protection of classified material, for example, and all my drafts had to be cleared by a senior officer, but the intelligence community seemed to be able to tolerate my literary aspirations much more easily than the diplomatic one.[5]

My first publication about Myanmar (then known as Burma) was an occasional paper on race relations in the country during the Second World

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[1] John O'Hurley (as J. Peterman), in "The Foundation", *Seinfeld*, Season 8, Episode 135, written by Alec Berg and Jeff Schaffer, *NBC*, 19 September 1996.

[2] In 1987, the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) became the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

[3] Years later, I learned that this fear was not entirely unjustified, when a journalist writing for *The Bulletin* refused to remove a reference to my official position from an article that quoted one of mine written under a pseudonym. An appeal over the journalist's head to the magazine's editor proved equally futile. This was apparently because even a gratuitous reference to an intelligence agency was considered "sexy".

[4] The Joint Intelligence Organisation became the Defence Intelligence Organisation in 1990.

[5] Ironically, the distinction between my private academic research and my professional interests was not clear to Myanmar's intelligence services, as I discovered on a number of occasions.

War. It was released by James Cook University's Centre for Southeast Asian Studies in 1985.[6] Since then, I have published nine books and more than 400 research papers, articles, commentaries and book reviews related to Myanmar in some way. About forty-five of these articles, many of them written under the pseudonym "William Ashton" for the *Asia-Pacific Defence Reporter* and *Jane's Intelligence Review*, formed the core of my full-length study *Burma's Armed Forces: Power Without Glory*, which was published in 2002.[7] Ninety-seven other articles, all taken from the Lowy Institute's blog *The Interpreter*, were collected and published in 2020 by Australian National University Press as *Interpreting Myanmar: A Decade of Analysis*.[8] This latest anthology reproduces another seventy-two works, covering a greater range of subjects, and taken from a wider variety of sources.

The main aim behind this book is to gather together in one place for easier access a range of articles that are currently scattered around the Internet. It is also intended to preserve a number which have, since first publication, dropped off the system. For one reason or another, some of these articles are no longer available online, or are hard to find. A few websites have changed their cataloguing systems, some no longer maintain records of older posts, some articles have been archived and, for sundry other reasons, some articles have disappeared altogether. A few publications carrying my work, such as *The Burma Fantail* and the *Bulletin of the Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, are not well known. I am occasionally contacted by researchers and asked to send them copies of pieces that are no longer accessible, or which had never been published in soft copy. With all this in mind, it was felt worth selecting a range of articles that were relevant to current developments in Myanmar, had some historical value or which were likely, for other reasons, to be of continuing interest.

The seventy-two works collected for this anthology were written between 2007 (shortly after I became a full-time academic and author) and December 2023. The focus is on "minor" pieces, namely short articles and blogs (usually between 1,000 and 2,000 words long) that have not, generally speaking, been reproduced elsewhere. Also deemed worthy of inclusion, however, are a few longer articles that seemed to be in danger of

[6] *The Anti-Fascist Resistance in Burma, 1942–1945: The Racial Dimension*, Occasional Paper No. 14 (Townsville: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, James Cook University of North Queensland, 1985). Burma was formally renamed Myanmar in 1989.

[7] Andrew Selth, *Burma's Armed Forces: Power Without Glory* (Norwalk: EastBridge, 2002).

[8] Andrew Selth, *Interpreting Myanmar: A Decade of Analysis* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2020).

slipping off the worldwide web. The majority of the works chosen focus on contemporary political and security issues, including the 2021 military coup, but there are a number that cover various historical and cultural matters, notably colonial Burma's place in the popular imagination of the Western world. I have also included a few lighter pieces based on my recollections and personal experiences, such as "The Rats of Rangoon" and "Diplomatic Intelligence". Each article has been introduced by a short note outlining the circumstances in which it was written, or the developments around the time that encouraged me to put pen to paper.

Given the pace of events in Myanmar, and the nature of the continuing debate over its politics and security, some articles in that section overlap with others. There is inevitably some repetition, particularly when introducing new subjects to an uninitiated audience. However, generally speaking, articles that largely duplicate other works I have written have been left out of this collection. This is the main reason why, for example, I have only included one report produced for the now-defunct Australian think-tank Future Directions International (FDI). The longer and more detailed studies written for FDI between 2012 and 2021, on such subjects as Myanmar and weapons of mass destruction, tended to form the basis for shorter articles published in other outlets. There are also gaps, of course, due to the prior publication in the anthology *Interpreting Myanmar* of all my articles written for *The Interpreter* between April 2008 and December 2019. The only *Interpreter* articles reproduced below are those written for the blog after January 2020.

Most articles in this collection were published as stand-alone pieces, but a number of issues remained topical throughout the period under review, and were the subject of several posts, written as events unfolded and situations developed. After the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, for example, I wrote several articles, mainly for *The Interpreter* and Melbourne University's *Asialink Insights*, to outline events for the general public and comment on developments in the subsequent civil war. Inclusion of these articles in the latest anthology is in part to help observers keep abreast of the evolving situation in Myanmar. It is also in response to a request for such articles that was expressed in a review of *Interpreting Myanmar* published in the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studie*s in October 2022.[9]

[9] Anthony Ware, "Review of *Interpreting Myanmar: A Decade of Analysis* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2020)", in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 53, no. 3 (October 2022): 608–9.

As explained in *Interpreting Myanmar*, I have written articles for publication with four main aims in mind. First, I wanted to provide background information on, and insights into, developments in Myanmar, a country that even now is little known and poorly understood. In the words of two well-known observers, it has long been considered an "exotic unknowable"[10] with "fiendishly complex"[11] problems. Second, I was keen to correct any reports by politicians, officials, journalists, activists and others that I felt were either factually inaccurate, incomplete or in other ways misleading. Unfortunately, many news reports and op-eds on contemporary Myanmar suffer from these shortcomings. My third aim was to provide objective, evidence-based analyses of developments, public comment on which was often clouded by political, moral and emotional considerations. Lastly, I have tried to stimulate questions and encourage discussion about Myanmar-related issues, both among Burmese themselves and the wider community.

One theme that comes up over and over again in this anthology is the dearth of reliable information (particularly for foreign observers) about many aspects of Myanmar's politics, security, economy and society. These gaps in the public record have tended to be filled by anecdotes, rumours, gossip and speculation. Often, this problem has been recognised and the necessary measures taken to find the facts, or to acknowledge the need for caution in reaching conclusions. At other times, however, insufficient scepticism or a failure adequately to interrogate suspect sources has contributed to serious misunderstandings and errors of judgement. Widely accepted, but later discredited, claims that China had a "massive" military base on Great Coco Island, for example, or that Myanmar was likely to be producing a nuclear weapon a year, every year, by 2014, are obvious cases. However, there have been many lesser examples where the public debate has suffered from a tendency to accept stories at face value that warranted more careful scrutiny and then to give them greater credibility by repeating them uncritically.

Another recurring theme is the difficulty, for analytical purposes at least, of setting aside one's personal, emotional feelings and trying to assess

[10] Chao-Tzang Yawnghwe, "The Political Economy of the Opium Trade: Implications for Shan State", *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 23, no. 3 (1993): 306–26.

[11] Timothy Garton-Ash, "Beauty and the Beast in Burma", *The New York Review*, 25 May 2000, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2000/05/25/beauty-and-the-beast-in-burma/

developments rigorously and dispassionately on the basis of the available evidence. This is not easy, not only because there are often precious few verifiable facts on which to base assessments, but also because the behaviour exhibited by certain actors in Myanmar—notably the security forces—is sometimes so egregious that it cries out for the strongest condemnation in moral and ethical terms. Complicating this problem is the fact that many activists, campaigners and others who support the causes of democracy and human rights in Myanmar tend to see the world in uncompromising terms and are suspicious, if not openly critical, of any analyses that do not reflect their views. For professional Myanmar watchers in particular, this adds to the challenge of making considered, balanced and nuanced analyses of complex developments that accurately reflect the situation in Myanmar, yet still command the attention of the international community.

My goal in writing about Myanmar has always been to contribute to an informed, courteous and balanced public debate on a country that, ever since 1988, has increasingly captured the news headlines, often in rather sensational ways. That aim lay behind the publication of *Interpreting Myanmar* in 2020. This second anthology has been produced with the same intention, conscious that in this "post-truth" world objective facts and careful analysis often seem to be less influential in shaping public opinion (and at times even official policies) than appeals to raw emotion and personal belief.[12]

The articles in this book have been reproduced almost exactly as they first appeared online. No attempt has been made to edit them any further, or update them in the light of subsequent information and more recent events. Nor have I changed the headings chosen, for the most part, by various editors. That said, I have gone through the listings and made a few minor changes. These are:

1. Occasionally, I have restored my original paragraph breaks, which seemed better suited to reproduction of the articles in a book.
2. In a few places I have restored my original wording, where minor editorial amendments inadvertently changed my precise meaning, or slightly altered the nuance of the original text.

[12] See, for example, Andrew Selth, "Beware Sensational Claims about Myanmar's Security Environment", *The Interpreter*, 13 October 2023, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/beware-sensational-claims-about-myanmar-s-security-environment

3. I have also restored the original text in a couple of articles where I felt the editors made changes that were unnecessary, gave the house style priority over my own personal style, or in some other way affected the actual content.
4. Where any typographical errors or ambiguities survived the original editing process, they have been removed and the text corrected.
5. In a couple of places, I have added short explanatory notes to help readers unfamiliar with Myanmar's history and culture.
6. In a number of articles, I have replaced epigraphs that were considered superfluous by editors and removed before publication.
7. For the historical record, most electronic links given in the original articles have been retained as footnotes, even if the relevant web pages have since been changed or have died.
8. In a number of cases, however, I have updated the references, mainly where they applied to the main articles listed. Also, a few publishers gave permission for articles to be reproduced in the book on the condition that I updated the source references.
9. I have added a small number of new references, usually to books, to help identify certain quotations used in the articles, or where no electronic source was available at the time of writing.

After appearing in magazines or online, a number of the articles reproduced in this book were published (usually with the relevant editor's permission) in various other media outlets. Some were reproduced in Myanmar, while others were occasionally picked up by other websites or cited by international news services. Later versions of these articles were often given different titles, and in a few cases were subject to further editing. In a few cases, these new articles have been mentioned in the footnotes but usually they have been ignored.

Acknowledgements

If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.[1]

Over the past forty or so years, since I started publishing works of various kinds about Burma/Myanmar, I have accumulated many debts. Since I retired from the Australian Public Service in 2006, and became a full-time research scholar and author, these debts have steadily mounted up, to the extent that I am now hard-pressed to acknowledge them all. Let it be known, however, that I am deeply grateful to all those friends, colleagues, sources and acquaintances who have in so many ways contributed to my development as a Myanmar watcher, and thus directly or indirectly to the seventy-two articles, op-eds and commentaries that are reproduced in this anthology.

Special mention must be made of *Sayagyi* David Steinberg, to whom this book is dedicated. Since we first met in Bangkok more than twenty-five years ago, he has been a constant source of inspiration and advice. Many of the pieces reproduced below were shown to him as drafts in various stages of completion for his comments, corrections and criticisms, before appearing in print or being posted online. If any of them are still of interest and value, then that is in part at least down to David. His many contributions to my work over the years have been greatly appreciated.

I must also thank Sean Turnell for agreeing to write the foreword to this second collection of articles. Sean is not only a good friend, but an eminent scholar of Myanmar with a profound knowledge of its economy and government, gained in large part from years of first-hand experience working in the country alongside Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy government. He gained insights of a different kind after being arrested by the military junta in February 2021 and spending almost two years in Burmese prisons, enduring filthy cells, sham trials

[1] Isaac Newton, in a letter to Robert Hooke, 5 February 1675, https://discover.hsp.org/Record/dc-9792/Description

and other forms of abuse. His prison memoir is a remarkable book by a remarkable man.[2]

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank all the staff and members of the Griffith Asia Institute (GAI), at Griffith University. Since I joined the GAI in 2006, they have been a consistent source of support and encouragement as I have pursued my third career, as a full-time research scholar and Myanmar watcher. Special mention must be made of Meegan Thorley and Jill Moriarty, who over the years have shepherded my various research projects from the manuscript stage to (usually) hard copy publications. I am also grateful for Stephen McCarthy's friendship and advice over the past eighteen years.

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[2] Sean Turnell, *An Unlikely Prisoner* (Sydney: Viking, 2023).

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Canberra
December 2023

Protocols and Politics

> If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success.[1]

Protocols

After Myanmar's armed forces crushed a nationwide 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 ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) 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, for example, it was called the Union of Burma in the English version and the Union of Myanmar (or "Myanma") in the Burmese version. 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". This name is recognised by the opposition National Unity Government (NUG), but on its website the NUG also refers to the "Federal Union of Myanmar", the advertised goal at the end of the shadow government's twelve-point roadmap to national renewal.[2]

Also, in July 1989 a number of other place names were changed by the military government to conform more closely to their original pronunciation in the Burmese language. For example, Arakan State became Rakhine State and Tenasserim Division became Tanintharyi Division (later changed

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[1] *The Analects of Confucius*, translated by Arthur Waley (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1949), pp. 171–72.

[2] See, for example, the National Unity Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Ministry of Defence, https://mod.nugmyanmar.org/en/

to Tanintharyi Region).[3] The Mergui Archipelago became the Myeik Archipelago, the Irrawaddy River became the Ayeyarwady River, and the Salween River became the Thanlwin River. The city of Rangoon became Yangon, Moulmein became Mawlamyine, Akyab reverted to Sittwe, and Maymyo became Pyin Oo Lwin.[4] The ethno-linguistic groups formerly known as the Burmans and the Karen are now called the Bamar and the Kayin.[5] The people of Kayah State are widely known as Karenni (Red Karen), the state's name until it was changed by the Burmese government in 1952.[6]

The new names have been accepted by most countries, the United Nations (UN) and other major international organisations. A few governments, activist groups and news media outlets, however, still cling to "Burma" as the name of the country, apparently as a protest against the former military regime's refusal to put the question of a name change to the people of Myanmar.[7] The old name was also believed to be the preference of then opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who was held under house arrest by the military regime for periods totaling almost fifteen years.[8]

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[3] In 2010, following promulgation of the new national constitution, Myanmar's seven administrative "Divisions" were renamed "Regions". There are also seven States, one Union Territory, one Self-Administered Division and five Self-Administered Zones.

[4] In Burmese, Sittwe literally means "the place where the war meets" and was so named by King Bodawpaya after he defeated the Arakanese army there in 1784 (and subsequently annexed the Arakan kingdom). The settlement was renamed Akyab by the British during the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824–26), after the ancient pagoda Ahkyaib-daw, on the outskirts of the town, where the British troops were camped. Since then, the names Sittwe and Akyab have often been used interchangeably. Both still appear on European and American maps of the area, although Sittwe is once again the city's official name. Maymyo was originally a small settlement near Mandalay named for Colonel James May of the 5th Bengal Infantry, which was stationed there in 1886.

[5] "Writing Systems: Romanization, Government of the Union of Myanmar Notification 5/89", Eighth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, Berlin, 27 August 2002, Doc. E/CONF.94/INF75, https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/ungegn/docs/8th-uncsgn-docs/inf/8th_UNCSGN_econf.94_INF.75.pdf

[6] See "Karenni and Kayah: The Nature of Burma's Ethnic Problem over Two Names and the Path to Resolution", *Asia Peacebuilding Initiatives*, 5 February 2014, http://peacebuilding.asia/burmas-ethnic-problem-over-two-names-and-the-path-to-resolution/

[7] 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

[8] Aung San Suu Kyi's incarceration occurred, with a number of breaks, between July 1989 and November 2010. See "Burma: A Chronology of Aung San Suu Kyi's Detention", *Human Rights Watch*, 13 November 2010, https://www.hrw.org/news/2010/11/13/burma-chronology

Failure to acknowledge and use the new name has prompted complaints by successive Myanmar administrations, mainly to the United States (US) government which even now, nearly thirty-five years later, insists on using "Burma" in official correspondence and Congressional documents.[9] All US laws and regulations levelling sanctions against Myanmar refer specifically to "Burma".[10] 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 now acceptable.[11]

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 January 1886, Yangon (then known as Rangoon) was confirmed as the administrative capital of the country. It remains the commercial capital, but in November 2005 the ruling military council formally designated the newly-built city of Naypyidaw, 327 kilometres (203 miles) north of Yangon, as the seat of Myanmar's government.[12] The terms "Rangoon regime", "Yangon regime", or in some cases simply "Rangoon" or "Yangon", have been used by some authors and commentators as shorthand terms for the central government, including the military government that was created in 1962 and reinvented in 1974, 1988 and 1997. The government after 2005 was sometimes referred to as the "Naypyidaw regime", or "Naypyidaw", to reflect the administrative change that took place that year.

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aung-san-suu-kyis-detention. Some commentators have cited these dates and incorrectly stated that she was held under house arrest for a total of twenty-two years. Aung San Suu Kyi was detained again in February 2021 and at the time of writing is in jail serving a twenty-seven-year sentence, downgraded from an original thirty-three years.

[9] During his visit in 2012, US President Barack Obama called the country "Myanmar", but the following year the US Embassy in Yangon issued a press release which once again referred to the country as "Burma". See "Myanmar Rebukes US for Calling It 'Burma'", *Reuters*, 26 January 2013, https://www.reuters.com/article/myanmar-usa-idINDEE90P01R20130126

[10] It has been suggested that official recognition of the new name would require a revision of all these laws and regulations, a challenge that successive US governments have been unwilling to contemplate.

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

[12] Naypyidaw has been officially romanised as Nay Pyi Taw. It was built on a greenfield site near Pyinmana as an entirely planned city, in its own administrative territory. Occasionally, it is stated that the new capital is 367 kilometres north of Yangon, but that calculation is based on the distance by road between the two cities, not as the crow flies.

Another common term 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 and other publications on Myanmar.[13] 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 (MPF), the "People's Militias" (*Pyitthu Sit*), border guard forces and sundry other state-endorsed paramilitary units.[14] 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 (in English) of the Tatmadaw's most senior officer is Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) of Defence Services.[15]

Over the years, some components of Myanmar's national intelligence apparatus have changed their formal titles several times. The military intelligence organisation, for example, has periodically been renamed, usually to coincide with structural and personnel changes in the armed forces. These adjustments have not always been known to, or recognised by, foreign observers. Also, Burmese language titles have been translated into English in different ways. For example, the title "Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs" (OCMSA) has sometimes been written as the "Office of the Chief of Military Affairs Security" (OCMAS), or simply "Military Affairs Security".[16] The use of popular names has added another

[13] See, for example, Andrew Selth, *Transforming the Tatmadaw: The Burmese Armed Forces since 1988*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No. 113 (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, 1996).

[14] See, for example, John Buchanan, *Militias in Myanmar* (Yangon: Asia Foundation, July 2016), https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Militias-in-Myanmar.pdf

[15] *Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar* (Naypyidaw: Ministry of Information, Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2008), Chapter 7, clause 338.

[16] See, for example, Christina Fink, *Living Silence in Burma: Surviving Under Military Rule* (London: Zed Books, 2009), p. 96; and "Wives of the High-Ranking Officers of the Myanmar Armed Forces and the DSAC Attend the 'Coffee Morning'", *Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar*, 23 February 2006, http://mm.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwdt/200602/t20060223_1389577.htm

complication. For example, ever since 1948 the Tatmadaw's intelligence arm has been widely known as the Military Intelligence Service (MIS), or simply the "MI" ("em-eye"). Similarly, the Police Force's Intelligence Bureau, and later Special Intelligence Department (or, strictly translated, the "Information Police"), has long been known as Special Branch, or "SB".[17] All this has meant that in the literature some agencies have been called by several different names, and not always accurately.

Since the 2021 coup, many activist groups and commentators have refused to call the new military regime by its adopted title, the State Administration Council (SAC), which on 1 August that year branded itself a "caretaker government".[18] They refer simply to "the junta" or "the military regime", names rejected by the military leadership. Senior General (SENGEN) Min Aung Hlaing has been denied any official status, being widely known as "the junta chief" or "Ma Ah La", the Burmese acronym for his name.[19] It is no coincidence that "Ma Ah La", with a slight tonal shift, can also be translated as "mother-fucker". The same critics have also objected to calling Myanmar's armed forces the Tatmadaw, on the grounds that they do not deserve the status and prestige that has historically been associated with that title. The opposition movement and its supporters prefer the description *sit-tat*, which in the Burmese language means "military", or "army".[20] This is despite the fact that "Tatmadaw" occurs in the official name of the opposition People's Defence Force (*Pyitthu Kakweye Tatmadaw*, or PDF). Some governments, like that of the United States,

[17] Rhys Thompson, "Securing the Colony: The Burma Police Special Branch (1896–1942)", *Intelligence and National Security* 35, no. 1 (2020): 35–53.

[18] The SAC has sometimes been called (including by parts of the UN) the "State Administrative Council".

[19] See, for example, "Myanmar Junta Prepares for Name Change as End of Emergency Rule Looms", *The Irrawaddy*, 3 January 2023, https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-prepares-for-name-change-as-end-of-emergency-rule-looms.html. See also "The Master of the Myanmar Junta's 'Skyful of Lies'", *The Irrawaddy*, 14 June 2022, https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/the-master-of-the-myanmar-juntas-skyful-of-lies.html

[20] See, for example, Desmond, "Please Don't Call Myanmar Military Tatmadaw", *The Irrawaddy*, 25 May 2022, https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/please-dont-call-myanmar-military-tatmadaw.html; and Aung Kaung Myat, "Sit-tat or Tatmadaw? Debates on What to Call the Most Powerful Institution in Myanmar", *Tea Circle*, 3 October 2022, https://teacircleoxford.com/politics/sit-tat-or-tatmadaw-debates-on-what-to-call-the-most-powerful-institution-in-burma/

avoid such diplomatic conundrums by simply referring in public to "the Burmese military".[21]

Controversy also surrounds the term used to describe those ethnically-based armed groups that have been waging war against Myanmar's central government, some of them for decades. The Karen struggle, for example, has been described as the longest insurgency in the world, dating from Myanmar's independence in 1948.[22] For many years, these groups have been known as "ethnic armed organisations" (EAO), or variations thereof, such as "armed ethnic group" (AEG). Although it is widely used, they dislike the term "rebels", as it suggests a lack of legitimacy, both for the groups themselves and their struggles for independence, autonomy or other goals. Since the 2021 coup, not all EAOs have declared their support for the opposition movement but those that have, and are loosely allied with the NUG and PDF, are increasingly being referred to as "ethnic resistance organisations" (ERO).[23] An alternative meaning of ERO found in some sources is "ethnic revolutionary organisations". This follows moves by some activists and academic observers to describe the current armed conflict as a "revolution" and not a "civil war" (the more common term). This view is based on the nature of the armed struggle, the scope of the opposition's aims and the number of people in Myanmar who appear to support them.[24]

All Burmese personal names are particular. Most people do not have surnames or forenames in the Western sense.[25] Names may be one to four syllables long, and are usually chosen depending on the day of the week

[21] See, for example, "Burma Unified Through Rigorous Military Accountability Act of 2022", (BURMA Act: HR 5497), 6 April 2022, *Congress.Gov*, https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/5497/text?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22hr5497%22%2C%22hr5497%22%5D%7D&r=1&s=2

[22] See, for example, Ben Dunant, "The Longest War", *Frontier Myanmar*, 21 February 2019, https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-longest-war/

[23] See, for example, *Briefing Paper: Effective Control in Myanmar*, Special Advisory Council for Myanmar, 5 September 2022, https://specialadvisorycouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/SAC-M-Briefing-Paper-Effective-Control-in-Myanmar-ENGLISH-2.pdf

[24] See, for example, "Military Defeat Will Come from the Cascading Collapse of Military Forces in Different Parts of the Country", *Mizzima*, 11 May 2023, https://www.mizzima.com/article/military-defeat-will-come-cascading-collapse-military-forces-different-parts-country

[25] D.I. Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. xix–xx.

that a child is born (which is why many people in Myanmar share the same names). Sometimes, however, a child's name may derive from those of its parents, as is the case with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.[26] Also, among the majority Bamar ethnic group names are usually preceded by an honorific, such as "U", literally meaning "uncle", or "Daw", meaning "aunt". "U" can also form a part of a man's name, as in U Tin U. The titles "Maung", "Ko" ("brother") and "Ma" ("sister"), usually given to younger men and women, are also found in personal names, as in Maung Maung Aye, Ko Ko Gyi and Ma Ma Lay. To all such rules, however, there are exceptions. Some of Myanmar's ethnic minorities, like the Kachin, have family or clan names, which are placed before their given names, as in a case like Maran Brang Seng, where "Maran" is the name of a clan.[27] Other ethnic minorities, such as the Shan, Karen and Chin, have their own systems of honorifics and naming conventions.

In Myanmar, names can be changed relatively easily, often without seeking official permission or requiring formal registration. This situation is further complicated by the frequent use of nicknames and other sobriquets as identifiers, such as "Myanaung" (the town) U Tin, "Tekkatho" (university) Phone Naing, or "Guardian" (the magazine) Sein Win. Pen-names, *noms de guerre* and pseudonyms also have a long history in Myanmar.[28] For example, the birth name of General Ne Win, who effectively ruled the country from 1962 to 1988, was Shu Maung. Ne Win, which means "bright sun" in Burmese, was a *nom de guerre* he adopted in 1941 and retained after the Second World War, probably to hide his Chinese heritage.[29] Some

[26] In her case, "Aung San" comes from her father, independence hero Aung San, who was assassinated in 1947. "Suu" is said to come from her paternal grandmother and "Kyi" reportedly derives from her mother's name, Khin Kyi. Past military regimes have sought to reduce Aung San Suu Kyi's claim to these historical credentials by simply referring to her as "Suu Kyi" or "Ma Suu Kyi". To many of her followers, she was "Daw Suu" (Aunty Suu) or "Amay Suu" (Mother Suu).

[27] Strictly speaking, "Maran" is a clan of the Jinghpaw, who make up the majority of those now commonly called "Kachin". See also "A Note on Burmese Names", in Thant Myint U, *The Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism, and the Crisis of Democracy in the 21st Century* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2020), p. xii.

[28] See Andrew Selth, "Burma and the Politics of Names", *The Interpreter*, 12 July 2010, https://archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-and-politics-names

[29] Martin Smith, "General Ne Win", *The Guardian*, 6 December 2002, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2002/dec/06/guardianobituaries. Independence leader Aung San adopted the *nom de guerre* Bo Teza (Commander Fire), but stopped using it in 1942 when he was appointed commander-in-chief of the newly created Burma Defence Army (BDA).

Myanmar citizens were given or have adopted Western names, including those who attended Christian missionary schools in their youth. Others use only one part of their name for convenience, for example when travelling abroad or dealing with foreigners who are unfamiliar with Burmese naming systems. It is not uncommon for an obituary to list more than one name by which the deceased was known.

In this book, all the formal names and titles are used, except when they specifically relate to periods, events or institutions before 1989. This includes those names adopted after the coup by the opposition movement, such as the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), which in April 2021 created the shadow National Unity Government. Also, some publications, such as those based in the US, have continued to use the old names (notably "Burma" instead of "Myanmar") as standard editorial policy. The use of particular names or titles does not signify support for any party, faction or group. It simply reflects the reality of the current political scene in Myanmar in a way that makes the identification of various periods, groups and institutions easier for everyone.

A warning about statistics is required. As any serious Myanmar watcher would know, considerable care needs to be taken in citing any numbers.[30] In British Burma, a major effort was made by the colonial authorities to produce accurate records. Census and economic statistics were usually reliable, but police strengths and troop numbers were constantly shifting and changing, meaning that a definitive figure is often difficult to identify.[31] Most statistics released by military governments between 1962 and 2015 were either based on unreliable sources, or were deliberately distorted to convey a rosier picture than was actually the case. Even statistics published by reputable organisations like the World Bank or United Nations need careful handling, as they often rely on base data provided by the Myanmar government, which can rarely be independently verified. Thus, in many modern sources, different numbers are cited by different authors, often leaving researchers scratching their heads and wondering where the truth lies. In this book, the most accurate figures available have been used, and relevant dates given, but inevitably there will still be discrepancies.

[30] See Andrew Selth, *Myanmar-Watching: Problems and Perspectives*, Regional Outlook Paper No. 58 (Brisbane: Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University, 2018).

[31] One scholar who has looked closely at fluctuating police numbers during the colonial period is Lalita Hingkanonta Hanwong, *Policing in Colonial Burma* (Chiang Mai: Centre for ASEAN Studies, Chiang Mai University, 2015).

Finally, a word needs to be said about intelligence, a complex and multi-faceted subject that has attracted a wide range of descriptions over the years, but has never been clearly defined.[32] In this book, "intelligence" is used to describe not only the official agencies responsible for the collection and analysis of information, but also the end result of that process. This product is usually derived from classified sources and methods, and is considered privileged in various ways, but aspects of the recognised intelligence cycle (namely planning, collection, processing, analysis and dissemination) can also be applied to open sources.[33] In addition, while popular conceptions of intelligence often relate to the activities of agents in foreign countries, or to the collection of information about foreign countries, their intentions and capabilities, there is also an important domestic dimension.[34] In Myanmar, intelligence agencies have always devoted more attention to the collection of information about the local population, local institutions and local developments than it has to targets abroad.[35]

Politics

The armed forces effectively ruled Myanmar for half a century, from Ne Win's coup d'etat in March 1962, when he formed a seventeen-member Revolutionary Council.[36] From 1974 to 1988, the armed forces exercised power through an ostensibly elected "civilian" parliament called the *Pyitthu Hluttaw*, dominated by the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), the country's only legal political organisation. On taking back direct control of the country in September 1988, after an abortive pro-democracy uprising,

[32] See Michael Warner, "Wanted: A Definition of 'Intelligence'", *Studies in Intelligence* 46, no. 3 (2002), https://www.cia.gov/static/72b2d4c0d01e4e05c60ff7d37fdd68b1/Wanted-Definition-of-Intel.pdf

[33] These steps can be described more fully as requirements, planning and direction, collection, processing and exploitation, analysis and production, and dissemination and integration. Throughout the entire cycle, evaluation and feedback should also occur. See, for example, "Intelligence Studies: The Intelligence Cycle", *US Naval War College*, https://usnwc.libguides.com/c.php?g=494120&p=3381427

[34] See, for example, The Joint Chiefs of Staff, US Department of Defence, *Dictionary of Military Terms* (New York: Arco Publishing, 1988), p. 183.

[35] As far as is known, Myanmar has never had a discrete foreign intelligence service.

[36] This is not to overlook the sixteen months between October 1958 and April 1960 when Ne Win and the armed forces ruled Burma under a "caretaker government".

the armed forces created the State Law and Order Restoration Council, which ruled by decree. In November 1997, apparently on the advice of an American public relations firm, the regime changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), but continued to rule through executive fiat.[37] In May 2008, the SPDC held a carefully contrived constitutional referendum, with predictable results.[38] This was followed by closely 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, first met in January 2011. A new government was installed under President Thein Sein (a former general) in March. The new constitution was promulgated the same year.

Continuing this process, by-elections were staged on 1 April 2012 to fill forty-eight 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, who had been released from house arrest in November 2010.

On 8 November 2015, a new general election was held which, by most accounts, was reasonably free and fair.[39] The NLD received about 65.6 per cent of all votes cast, while the pro-military Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) 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.[40] It secured 255 in the 440-seat lower house (*Pyitthu*

[37] D.S. Mathieson, "The Burma Road to Nowhere: The Failure of the Developmental State in Myanmar", *Policy, Organisation and Society* 17, no. 1 (1999), p. 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/

[38] 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)*, p. iv.

[39] *Observing Myanmar's 2015 General Elections: Final Report* (Atlanta: Carter Centre, 2016), https://www.uec.gov.mm/show_data_content.php?name=209.pdf&type=law&code=x&sno=8455&token=9ce69a1b8f9f0effbfeb662cab5728f5fbc183e9b61b04b06fc97ff71e62c7fc70510d5cc03e2cd38726c2d47dab9e8471cc95b390758055fbf40fa6fbe6e0cd

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

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.[41] Under the 2008 constitution, the armed forces are automatically 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. (Under the new constitution she was unable to become president, as her two children were the citizens of a foreign country).[42]

The national charter clearly stated that the president "takes precedence over all other persons" in Myanmar. However, even before the 2015 elections, Aung San Suu Kyi had made it clear that, if her party won office, she intended to be "above the president" and act as the country's de facto leader.[43] Consequently, under the NLD the president was essentially a ceremonial head of state. For practical purposes, Aung San Su Kyi acted as head of the government, within the limits of the constitution, which ensured that considerable power was retained by the armed forces. Anomalous it may have been, but her new position was readily accepted by most other world leaders, as evidenced by her attendance at various meetings of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and (as State Counsellor) at the enthronement of the new Japanese emperor in October 2019.[44] Aung San Su Kyi was also Myanmar's Minister for Foreign Affairs and, formally at least, attended some international meetings in that capacity.[45]

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

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

[43] *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

[44] "400 Foreign VIPs to Attend Emperor's Enthronement Ceremony", *Japan Times*, 19 October 2019, https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/10/19/national/400-foreign-vips-attend-emperors-enthronement-ceremony/

[45] When Aung San Suu Kyi represented Myanmar at the International Court of Justice in December 2019, to defend her country against charges of genocide, she did so in "a private capacity" as Myanmar's official agent, not as the de facto head of government or foreign minister. This posed a protocol and security dilemma for the Dutch authorities. Larry Jagan, "Suu Kyi Gears Up for Genocide Hearing", *Bangkok Post*, 2 December 2019, https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/1806409/suu-kyi-gears-up-for-genocide-hearing

Another general election was held in November 2020, with an estimated voter turnout of more than 70 per cent. Despite "serious deficiencies in the legal framework" noted by neutral observers, voters were able "freely to express their wills".[46] The result was an even more emphatic victory for Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD. The party won 258 seats (58.6 per cent) in the *Pyitthu Hluttaw* and 136 seats (61.6 per cent) in the *Amyotha Hluttaw*, or 83 per cent of the total.[47] Having secured more than 322 of the 476 elected seats, the NLD was thus able to form a government and choose a new president. The USDP suffered dramatic losses all around the country, garnering only thirty-three seats in both houses. The NLD also dominated the elections for the fourteen state and region assemblies, which were held at the same time. These results promised that, barring unforeseen problems, Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD would remain in office for another five years.[48] Once again, they would govern in partnership with the armed forces which, under the 2008 constitution, were allocated three ministries (Defence, Home Affairs and Border Affairs).

On 1 February 2021, however, almost exactly a decade after the SPDC permitted the transition to a "disciplined democracy", those expectations were rudely dashed. Before the new parliament could meet that day, the Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, unexpectedly declared a one-year state of emergency and created a State Administration Council, made up of eight military officers and three civilians. They were later joined by six more civilians.[49] The SAC immediately detained Aung San Suu Kyi and more than fifty other officials and activists. Many more arrests followed. A military spokesman stated that the Tatmadaw had been forced to seize power due to the NLD's failure to acknowledge

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[46] *Carter Centre Preliminary Statement on the 2020 Myanmar General Elections* (Atlanta: The Carter Centre, 10 November 2020), https://www.cartercenter.org/news/pr/2020/myanmar-111020.html

[47] "Myanmar's 2020 General Election Results in Numbers", *The Irrawaddy*, 11 November 2020, https://www.irrawaddy.com/elections/myanmars-2020-general-election-results-numbers.html

[48] Tamas Wells, "Reading Myanmar's 2020 Elections", *Election Watch*, University of Melbourne, 28 October 2020, https://electionwatch.unimelb.edu.au/articles/reading-myanmars-2020-elections

[49] Htet Myet Min Tun, Moe Thuzar and Michael Montesano, "Min Aung Hlaing and his Generals: Data on the Military Members of Myanmar's State Administration Council Junta", *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2021/97, 23 July 2021, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ISEAS_Perspective_2021_97.pdf

massive fraud in the November 2020 elections.[50] Few foreign observers (or indeed Burmese citizens) believed that that was the real reason for the coup but, despite widespread speculation in the news media and online, the thinking behind the takeover remained unknown.[51] To the people of Myanmar, however, one thing was clear. Once again, the country had an unelected military government, and faced an uncertain future.

Since February 2021, Myanmar has descended into a bitter civil war. On the one side is the junta, commanding the armed forces, the police force, the intelligence agencies, ad hoc militias, vigilante groups such as the *Pyusawhti* and death squads like the self-styled "Blood Comrades".[52] The latter two groups tend to be made up of ex-convicts, extreme Buddhist nationalists, unemployed youths and other fringe elements.[53] USDP members, army veterans and the families of serving military personnel have also been called on to join the fight against the opposition movement. Facing them is a diverse coalition of anti-junta and pro-democracy groups. It includes the members of a nationwide Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and followers of the shadow National Unity Government. Several ethnic armed organisations, now rebranded ethnic resistance organisations, have joined with units of the People's Defence Force to wage a guerrilla campaign against the junta.[54] Supporting them are over four hundred township-based

[50] Sebastian Strangio, "Myanmar's Military Seizes Power in Early Morning Coup", *The Diplomat*, 1 February 2021, https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/myanmars-military-seizes-power-in-early-morning-coup/

[51] See, for example, Hannah Beech, "Democracy Hero? Military Foil? Myanmar's Leader Ends up as Neither", *New York Times*, 1 February 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/01/world/asia/myanmar-coup-aung-san-suu-kyi.html. See also Andrew Selth, "The Coup in Myanmar: What Do We Know?", *The Interpreter*, 3 February 2021, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/coup-myanmar-what-do-we-know

[52] "Pro-junta 'Blood Comrades' Resurface in Myanmar with April Killings", *Radio Free Asia*, 9 May 2023, https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/comrades-05092023094008.html

[53] *Resisting the Resistance: Myanmar's Pro-military Pyusawhti Militias*, Asia Briefing No. 171 (Yangon/Bangkok/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 6 April 2022), https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/resisting-resistance-myanmars-pro-military-pyusawhti-militias

[54] David Scott Mathieson, "Ethnic Armies Rescue Myanmar's Democratic Forces", *Asia Times*, 22 March 2021, https://asiatimes.com/2021/03/ethnic-armies-rescue-myanmars-democratic-forces/

Local Defence Forces (LDF) and hundreds of so-called People's Defence Teams (PDT).[55] The latter two categories seem to include most of the small resistance cells responsible for the "targeted killings" and bombings that have punctuated Myanmar life, mainly in urban areas, since 2021.[56]

Indications are that the current political and military stalemate will continue for some time, possibly even years. The picture would of course change if there was a significant shift in the strategic environment, say if a major Tatmadaw combat unit mutinied, or if a foreign government broke ranks and (secretly or otherwise) provided the PDF with modern arms, like shoulder-fired missiles.[57] The NUG has also called for the imposition of a foreign-enforced no-fly zone over Myanmar to deny the junta use of its air power.[58] However, at this stage, such scenarios remain hypothetical. The international community does not seem prepared directly to intervene in the war. Also, neither side is in a mood to compromise. The junta has vowed to "annihilate" the opposition movement, which it describes as a terrorist organisation.[59] The NUG has formally declared a "defensive war" against the military regime and rejected any suggestion of a negotiated settlement. As US Counsellor Derek Cholet said at the Shangri-la strategic dialogue in Singapore in June 2022, there is currently "no off-ramp".[60] For

[55] Ye Myo Hein, "Understanding the People's Defence Forces in Myanmar", *United States Institute of Peace*, 3 November 2022, https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/11/understanding-peoples-defense-forces-myanmar

[56] The term "targeted killings", favoured by Myanmar's opposition movement and its supporters, gained popular currency after exposure of Israel's secret assassination program against Palestinian extremists, among others. It is now a widely used euphemism for a range of lethal actions, including drone strikes. See Ronen Bergman, *Rise and Kill First: The Secret History of Israel's Targeted Assassinations* (New York: Random House, 2018).

[57] Andrew Selth, "Is World Opinion Shifting on Lethal Aid to Myanmar's Opposition Movement?", *Asialink Insights*, 22 March 2022, https://asialink.unimelb.edu.au/insights/is-world-opinion-shifting-on-lethal-aid-to-myanmars-opposition-movement

[58] Andrew Selth, "A No-Fly Zone Won't Fly in Myanmar", *East Asia Forum*, 19 February 2022, https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/02/19/a-no-fly-zone-wont-fly-in-myanmar/

[59] Bertil Lintner, "Annihilation over Compromise for Myanmar's Generals", *Asia Times*, 4 April 2022, https://asiatimes.com/2022/04/annihilation-over-compromise-for-myanmars-generals/

[60] Derek Chollet was speaking at the Shangri-la Conference in Singapore, hosted by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 10–12 June 2022. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KldI75Yzq1Y

both sides, the goal is total victory, but notwithstanding the ebb and flow of battle, such an outcome is likely to prove a chimera.[61]

[61] Andrew Selth, "Myanmar's Civil War and the Myth of Military Victory", *Asialink Insights*, 28 June 2022, https://asialink.unimelb.edu.au/insights/myanmars-civil-war-and-the-myth-of-military-victory