

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Thus, what enables the wise sovereign and good general to strike and conquer, and achieve things beyond the reach of ordinary men, is foreknowledge.

Sun Tzu
*The Art of War*¹

Over the past 200 years, Myanmar has experienced almost every major system of government. After the monarchy was finally overthrown in 1886, it endured various forms of colonial rule and military administration before it regained its independence and installed a parliamentary democracy in 1948.² From 1958 to 1960, the country was managed by an unelected “caretaker” government, led by General Ne Win. A return to democratic government followed, but that was short-lived. The military dictatorship Ne Win installed under his Union Revolutionary Council in 1962 morphed into an authoritarian one-party state when a new constitution was promulgated by the Burma Socialist Programme Party in 1974.³ An abortive pro-democracy uprising in 1988 was followed by a new military regime, which reinvented itself under another name in 1997. Through a closely controlled seven-step road map announced in 2003, a “discipline-flourishing democracy” was allowed to emerge in 2011. It survived two mixed civilian-military administrations.⁴ A new constitution in 2008 ensured that the armed forces retained considerable power, but even that system was overthrown in 2021, when the Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services returned the country to direct military rule.

For almost all of this period, but particularly between 1962 and 2016, Myanmar’s governments were supported by powerful national intelligence systems. In keeping with their practice in other colonies, the British created an extensive intelligence apparatus in Burma (as it was then known), operated in large part through its civil police force. There was also a dedicated military intelligence element, operating under the broad guidance of Army Headquarters in India, but it was always small and geared to current and future army operations.⁵ This situation barely changed with

the creation of a Burma Defence Bureau in 1937, to fill perceived gaps in the colonial administration's intelligence coverage. The advent of an independent Burmese state in 1948 saw this pattern reversed, with the police intelligence function taking a secondary role to that of the emerging armed forces. Over the next half century, Myanmar was at the mercy of a succession of military intelligence organizations. So powerful did they become after the 1988 uprising that they came to be viewed by both local and foreign observers as "an invisible government", or even a "state within the state", effectively eclipsing the military regime.⁶ One Asian diplomat in Yangon was quoted in 2000 as saying "The SPDC survives because of the MIS [Military Intelligence Service]".⁷

Despite the election of a quasi-democratic government in 2015, it seemed unable or unwilling to curb the role and activities of the state's intelligence apparatus. There was an attempt to "civilianize" the MPF, and *inter alia* place greater controls on its Special Branch, which performed various political intelligence functions. However, these efforts do not seem to have been very effective. As for the military intelligence organization, it gradually recovered from its collapse in 2004, following the arrest of the Chief of Intelligence by jealous rivals in the Tatmadaw's leadership. As the military hierarchy came to accept its continuing value, the Intelligence Corps was restored and given greater power and responsibility. It was answerable to the Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services, however, and thus remained beyond civilian control. This was seen in the "area clearance operations" conducted by the police and armed forces against the Muslim Rohingya community in Rhakine State in 2016 and 2017. Both directly and indirectly, these pogroms encouraged the growth of the state's intelligence capabilities, outside the control of the NLD administration.⁸

Little is known about the development of the junta's intelligence capabilities since the 2021 coup, but from all indications considerable resources are being devoted to meeting the security challenges posed by the opposition movement.⁹ In particular, the tactics adopted by the EAOs and PDF units in the countryside, and by the LDFs and PDTs in urban centres, place a premium on accurate and timely intelligence. As the British general Julian Paget famously observed, "good intelligence is undoubtedly one of the greatest battle-winning factors in counter-insurgency warfare".¹⁰ For their part, the resistance forces need to know the location, disposition, capabilities and intentions of their enemies, not only to protect themselves, but also to undermine their morale and mount operations against them. Neither side can afford to fight blind. The bitter civil war that is currently raging, both in the countryside and the population centres, appears to have

no end in sight, which means that intelligence will remain an integral part of the conflict for the foreseeable future. In this regard, the junta enjoys the advantage of an established and well-resourced apparatus, but the opposition movement recognizes the threat it faces and is developing its own organic intelligence capabilities.

With all these factors in mind, the following survey is an attempt broadly to trace the historical development of Myanmar's intelligence architecture, and the use of intelligence by governments and others in Myanmar, from the colonial period to the present day. It is based mostly on unverifiable open sources, and as such cannot be considered definitive. However, from the available evidence, it is possible to claim that, rather than being "the textbook example of a police state", or a "Gestapo-like police state", as it has sometimes been called, Myanmar can be described instead as a classic "intelligence state".¹¹ For more than two centuries, successive governments and security forces have relied heavily on the intelligence apparatus for critical support. At times, it has even threatened to eclipse those institutions. Under various authoritarian regimes, it has permeated civil society, deeply affecting the way that Burmese citizens have thought and behaved. It has also helped ensure the continuing loyalty and cohesion of the armed forces. Foreigners too have felt the influence of the country's coercive apparatus and have responded accordingly, in both attitudes and action.¹²

Without powerful intelligence systems it is unlikely that either the British colonial government or more recent military governments could have maintained their dominance over Myanmar's remarkably diverse and fractious society. The collection and manipulation of intelligence on both the civil population and domestic political activity was critical to their survival and longevity. Since 1948, military intelligence too (or at least intelligence operations conducted by military organizations) has become central to the maintenance of these regimes, including the junta established after the 2021 coup. Yet this aspect of Myanmar's history has long been neglected by officials, scholars and other observers. To adapt an observation by the British diplomat Alexander Cadogan, for Myanmar, as for so many other countries, intelligence has long been "the missing dimension" of its history.¹³ To gain a real understanding of the internal dynamics and external relations of this deeply troubled country it needs to be paid much more attention. Looking ahead, this situation does not seem likely to change in the foreseeable future, making the presence and activities of intelligence agencies in Myanmar of continuing interest and, given its mixed record, continuing concern.

Notes

1. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981), p. 90.
2. This is not forgetting that the Japanese granted Burma nominal independence on 1 August 1943, when it became a member of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.
3. There has been a long-running, if low profile, debate among Myanmar-watchers as to whether the government was authoritarian or totalitarian. The answer depended on how military rule in Myanmar was defined, and the extent to which civil society could be said to exist outside of official controls. See, for example, “The Myanmar junta’s census heralds a totalitarian nightmare”, *Frontier Myanmar*, 21 September 2023, at <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-myanmar-juntas-census-heralds-a-totalitarian-nightmare/>.
4. Andrew Selth, “All Going According to Plan? The Armed Forces and Government in Myanmar”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 40, No. 1, April 2018, pp. 1–26.
5. Selth, *Coercion and Control in Colonial Burma*, pp. 36–45.
6. See, for example, D.M. Seekins, “Burma in 1998: Little to Celebrate”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 39, No. 1, p. 13; and Aung Zaw, “Khin Nyunt: Maybe Insein’s the Right Place”, *The Irrawaddy*, 13 June 2005, at http://www2.irrawaddy.com/opinion_story.php?art_id=4710. Even members of the DDSI used to make similar boasts. See “Burma’s Spooky History”, *The Irrawaddy*, August 2004, at https://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=4019.
7. Aung Zaw, “The Enemy Within”, *The Irrawaddy*, March 2000, at https://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=676&page=1.
8. Selth, *Myanmar’s Armed Forces and the Rohingya Crisis*.
9. Selth, *Intelligence and Intelligence Agencies in Myanmar Since the 2021 Coup*, pp. 13–24.
10. Julian Paget, *Counter-Insurgency Campaigning* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), pp. 163–4.
11. The “police state” description is by Brad Adams, Head of Human Rights Watch’s Asia Division, cited in N.A. Englehart, *Sovereignty, State Failure and Human Rights: Petty Despots and Exemplary Villains* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 104. The “Gestapo-like police state” reference is from Patrick Winn, *Narcotopia: In Search of the Asian Drug Cartel that Outwitted the CIA* (London: ICON, 2024), p. 159. See also Jim Sciutto, “The Police State Playbook: An Introduction”, *World Affairs*, Vol. 174, No. 2, July/August 2011, pp. 45–9.
12. Selth, *Myanmar: An Enduring Intelligence State or a State Enduring Intelligence?*
13. David Dilks (ed.), *The Diaries of Alexander Cadogan OM, 1938–45* (London: Cassell, 1971), p. 21.