NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL
Monterey, California

THESIS

THE ROLE OF THE TATMADAW IN MODERN DAY BURMA: AN ANALYSIS

by

Zaiton bte Johari

March 2000

Thesis Advisor: Donald Abenheim
Second Reader: Thomas C. Bruneau

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

1. AGENCY USE ONLY *(Leave blank)*	2. REPORT DATE	3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED
	March 2000	Master's Thesis

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE
The Role of the *Tatmadaw* in Modern Day Burma: An Analysis

5. FUNDING NUMBERS

6. AUTHOR(S)
Zaiton bte Johari

7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)
Naval Postgraduate School
Monterey, CA 93943-5000

8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER

9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)

10. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER

11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES
The views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.

12a. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited.

12b. DISTRIBUTION CODE

13. ABSTRACT *(maximum 200 words)*

The *Tatmadaw* (Burmese Army) has dominated Burma's politics since the Japanese and British occupation of Burma until today. Its role in Burma has received international attention, especially while other countries in Southeast Asia have seen the decline of military power, the most recent that being Indonesia. The *Tatmadaw* seems unshaken with all the recent development affecting the military institution in Southeast Asia. This study is significant in that it attempts to understand how the *Tatmadaw* can continue to play an important role in the politics of Burma despite popular opposition. From this study, much will be learned about how Burma's military managed to sustain its rule. It also tries to provide an answer as to why the *Tatmadaw* has become what it is today.

14. SUBJECT TERMS
Burmese military, coup d'etat, authoritarian rule, repression and Burmese Socialism.

15. NUMBER OF PAGES
109

16. PRICE CODE

17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT	18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE	19. SECURITY CLASSIFI- CATION OF ABSTRACT	20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT
Unclassified	Unclassified	Unclassified	UL

NSN 7540-01-280-5500

Standard Form 298 (Rev. 2-89)
Prescribed by ANSI td. 239-18

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THE ROLE OF THE TATMADAW IN MODERN DAY BURMA: AN ANALYSIS

Zaiton bte Johari
Ministry of Defense, Malaysia
B.Art (Hons) (Southeast Asian Studies), University of Malaya, 1982

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN INTERNATIONAL SECURITY AND CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

from the

NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL
March 2000

Author: _____
Zaiton bte Johari

Approved by: _____
Donald Abenheim, Thesis Advisor

_____
Thomas C. Bruneau, Second Reader

_____
F.C. Petho, Chairman
Department of National Security Affairs

ABSTRACT

The *Tatmadaw* (Burmese Army) has dominated Burma's politics since the Japanese and British occupation of Burma until today. Its role in Burma has received international attention, especially while other countries in Southeast Asia have seen the decline of military power, the most recent that being Indonesia. The *Tatmadaw* seems unshaken with all the recent development affecting the military institution in Southeast Asia. This study is significant in that it attempts to understand how the *Tatmadaw* can continue to play an important role in the politics of Burma despite popular opposition. From this study, much will be learned about how Burma's military managed to sustain its rule. It also tries to provide an answer as to why the *Tatmadaw* has become what it is today.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Prior to independence in 1948, two colonial powers ruled Burma; the British from 1826 to 1942 and again in 1945 to 1948; and the Japanese from 1942 to April 1945. During these periods of colonial rule, the *Tatmadaw* (Burmese Army) played an important role as the "people's army" in the struggle for Burma's independence which was achieved in 1948.

With the independence of Burma in 1948, the *Tatmadaw*, until today, still maintains its influence in every aspect of Burmese life. The question of why the *Tatmadaw* has been able to sustain its rule has become even more interesting, especially while other countries in Southeast Asia have seen the decline of military powers, the most recent being Indonesia. Ironically, the *Tatmadaw* seems unshaken with all the recent development affecting the military institution in Southeast Asia.

Based on the historical case study on the role played by the *Tatmadaw* in various phases of Burma's history beginning in 1942, it can be argued that the Japanese were responsible for the creation of a modern Burmese Army to assist the Japanese in ousting the British, in return for Burmese independence.

It was during the Japanese occupation that the *Tatmadaw* had a first-hand experience in the administration of the country. But when the Japanese failed to uphold the promise of granting independence to Burma, the *Tatmadaw*, in 1945, turned against the Japanese and formed a coalition with the British and successfully defeated the Japanese. The return of the British marked the second phase of British rule in Burma, from 1945 to 1948.

The years between 1945 to 1948 again saw Burma's struggle for independence, this time from the British. However, unlike the first phase of its rule (1826 to 1942), the British were more receptive to Burma's cry for independence. A constitution was finally drafted, and Burma was accorded full independence in 1948.

After Burma gained its independence, the military became a professional army devoted to the defense of the state. It was only in 1958 when the military played the role of "caretaker" government at the request of the civilian government that the military started to play an active role in politics. General Ne-Win, who was one of the pioneers from the Thakins (The Thakin movement was launched by young Burmese in the early 1930's as a way to recapture pride and to enlist Burmese in a truly nationalist movement), controlled the "care-taker" government. With the official transfer of power on October 28, 1958, senior military officers filled its key administrative positions. During this period, the Defense Service Institute (DSI), which was created in 1950 under the Ministry of Defense, became the largest and most powerful business organization in Burma.

When elections were held in 1960, the Burmese reacted by returning a civilian government to power. The "probation" period for the civilian government lasted two years and ended with the coup of March 1962 with General Ne Win assuming power. With the coup, all political parties were banned and Burma became a one-party state. A military blueprint entitled the "Burmese Way to Socialism" was introduced, as a "social revolution" declaring that both the economic and political system be altered before the nation's other problems

could be tackled. The Revolutionary Council also set forth the objective of building in Burma a socialist society. In March 1974, General Ne Win became the President of the New Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma.

General Ne Win's military dictatorship was widely criticized for failures in its economic policies, inefficient management, and corruption. In 1974 martial law was declared due to strikes and demonstrations by the dissatisfied masses. By 1987, it had become evident that the government could no longer control the state. Political parties began to grow, anti-government and pro-democracy marches took place, and this led to another military coup on September 18, 1988.

Unlike the first coup, the 1988 coup was not designed to overthrow a failing government, but to shore up a regime overwhelmed by popular protest. Following the coup, the military established the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and imposed martial law. Attempting to legitimize its rule, the SLORC, in May 1990, organized multiparty elections with Aung San Suu Kyi the charismatic leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD) winning a landslide victory. SLORC, however, refused to honor the results of the election.

In November 1997, the military made the transition from calling itself SLORC to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The SPDC claimed that it planned to transfer state power back to the people, but even today, there is no indication that it will materialize.

Invoking the legend of its noble origin and victorious campaigns against the imperialists before Burma gained its independence, the *Tatmadaw*, from

1962 onwards, assumed a self-defined concept of being the "savior of the nation," claiming to be the only "untainted" institution forming the bulwark of the nation's independence and sovereignty. As such, the military interpreted its role as an autonomous institution dedicated to preserving the unitary character of the state against centrifugal tendencies brought about by the follies of self-serving politicians.

For the past thirty-seven years (1962-1999), since the *Tatmadaw* took over the country, it can be said that Burma has had a distinct two-class society; the privileged military elite and the masses. Fears surround the *Tatmadaw* that should a civilian government come to power in Rangoon, the military will not only lose the privileges and standard of living they have enjoyed, they will also be held accountable for their past atrocities. Therefore, to ensure that they still hold power in order to safeguard their interest, the *Tatmadaw* embarked upon various policies and tactics of suppressing it rivalries.

There seem to be serious cracks in the *Tatmadaw* institution and General Ne is said to be the man responsible for holding the *Tatmadaw* together. He has been an important figure since Burma's independence in 1948, an autocratic leader since the coup of 1962, and the strongest personality in the country. Some argue that he is the man behind all *Tatmadaw* major decisions, but his mere presence may be a source of both fear and respect. General Ne Win's (he is eighty-four years old) death may change the path of the *Tatmadaw* and Burma in particular and may affect those active military personnel closely associated to him.

The argument of Eric Nordlinger in his book *Soldiers in Politics: Military Coups and Government* proved to be well suited in the analysis of Burma's military involvement in the socio-political sphere, providing a balanced road map in looking at why the *Tatmadaw* intervened in politics and how it is able to sustain its rule until today.

I. INTRODUCTION

Prior to independence in 1948, two colonial powers ruled Burma; the British from 1826 to 1942 and again from 1945 to 1948; and the Japanese from 1942 to April 1945. The majority of resistance against the British during the end of the first phase of British occupation came from the political parties and local leaders who despised the British government for not granting the Burmese their independence.

In 1940, the scenario changed when the Japanese (embarking on an expansionist policy in Southeast Asia) encouraged the Burmese into creating a modern Burmese Army (*Tatmadaw)* to fight against the British. In 1942 the Japanese occupied Burma with the assistance of the Burmese Army. From this period onward the Burmese Army began playing an important role in every aspect of Burma's history; politically, economically and socially even taking the role of "savior of the nation".

During the Japanese occupation, Burma's army was involved in the administration of the country. When the Japanese failed to uphold their promise of granting independence to Burma, the Burmese Army turned against the Japanese in 1945 and formed a coalition with the British to oust the Japanese.

The years between 1945 to 1948 saw Burma's struggle towards independence from the British. However, unlike the first period of its rule, because of the general trends, the British were more receptive to Burma's cry for

independence. A constitution was finally drafted, and Burma was accorded full independence in 1948.

After gaining independence, the military became a professional army devoted to the defense of the state. It was only in 1958 when the military played the role of "caretaker" government, at the request of the civilian government, that the military started to play an active role in domestic play. General Ne Win, who was one of the pioneers from the Thakins,[1] controlled the "caretaker" government. When elections were held in 1960, the Burmese reacted by returning a civilian government to power. The "probation" period for the civilian government lasted two years and ended with the coup of March 1962.

The people were told that the coup was necessary to preserve the Union, to restore order and harmony in the society, and to solve economic problems that had developed during the civilian rule. All political parties were banned and Burma became a one-party state. In March 1974, General Ne Win became the president of the New Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma. The new constitution of 1974 confirmed the military dictatorship.

The dictatorship was widely criticized by the masses for failures in economic polices, inefficient management, and corruption. In 1974, strikes and demonstrations were common occurrences. As a result, martial law was declared. By 1987, it had become evident that the government could no longer

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[1] The Thakin movement was launched by young Burmese in the early 1930's during the British occupation as a way to recapture pride and to enlist Burmese in a truly nationalist movement. The word Thakin meant master.

control the situation. Political parties began to grow, anti-government and pro-democracy marches took place, and another military coup occurred on September 18, 1988.

Unlike the first coup, the 1988 coup was not designed to overthrow a failing government, but to shore up a regime overwhelmed by popular protest. Following the coup, the military established the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and imposed martial law.

On May 27, 1990, while attempting to legitimize its rule, the SLORC organized multiparty elections. Aung San Suu Kyi's (daughter of General Aung San) National League for Democracy (NLD) won a landslide victory. SLORC, however, refused to honor the results of the election. Most NLD party leaders were imprisoned, and although Aung Sun Suu Kyi was officially released from house arrest in 1995, the military regime placed her under surveillance and restriction.

In November 1997, the military made the transition from calling itself SLORC to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The SPDC claimed that it planned to transfer state power back to the people but this far, there is no indication that it will materialize.

A. IMPORTANCE OF STUDY

This study is significant in seeking to understand how the military can continue to play a central role in the politics of Burma for most of the time since its creation in 1942, despite wide popular opposition. While other countries in

Southeast Asia have seen the decline of military power, as in Indonesia, the *Tatmadaw* seems unshaken. This study will provide the lesson learned by Burma's military on how it managed to sustain its rule over a half-century and more.

B. AIM OF THESIS

This thesis attempts to answer the question of why the *Tatmadaw* has been able to sustain its rule from its emergence in 1942 until the present. In answering this question, the study will trace the impact of colonial rule on the emergence of Burma's modern army and highlight the various phases of military rule in Burma. This thesis will also focus on the image of "savior of the nation", which is how Burma's army presents itself. While there have been frequent calls by the pro-democracy groups for the military to step-down, it is likely that the *Tatmadaw* will continue to rule directly in Burma.

C. SCOPE OF STUDY

This thesis will cover the Japanese expansionist policy in Burma, beginning in 1940. It traces the birth of the *Tatmadaw* during the Japanese occupation, when the *Tatmadaw* began to play a legitimate and expanding role in the socio-politic of Burma, until Burma gained its independence from the British in 1948. Additionally, this thesis will emphasize the various phases of military rule, beginning with the "caretaker" government of 1958 until the coups of 1988, when the *Tatmadaw* portrayed itself as the "savior of the nation".

D. STRUCTURE OF THESIS

This chapter is an introductory chapter. Chapter II examines the Japanese policy towards Burma, before it occupied Burma in 1941 and until its occupancy ended in 1945. The chapter will also illustrate the impact of Japanese occupation towards the emergence of a modern professional Burmese Army.

Chapter III will address the problems and challenges faced by the civilian government in building a new Burmese nation after its independence from the British in 1948. It will also analyze the factors that contributed to the beginning of the military's active participation in politics. Specifically, this chapter will trace the phases of political changes from the time Burma gained its independence in 1948 until the military coups of 1962.

Chapter IV will analyze and trace the development of the *Tatmadaw* after the 1962 coups in which the *Tatmadaw* began to exercise its power politically, economically and socially. The chapter will also elaborate on the rise of "people's power" and its consequences.

Chapter V will seek answers to whether Burma's military institution is united in its governing role or on the verge of collapse. Determining this situation is vital in predicting the future of the *Tatmadaw*.

Chapter VI will be the concluding chapter. It will present the findings of this study as to why the *Tatmadaw* has been able to sustain its rule from the beginning of its emergence in 1942 until today. Furthermore, this chapter will

determine if the hypothesis put forward by Eric Nordlinger, regarding military intervention, holds in Burma's case.

E. METHOD OF ANALYSIS

The methodology used in this thesis is a historical case study of the role played by the *Tatmadaw* based on various phases of Burma's history beginning from 1942. This thesis applies the literature put forward by Eric Nordlinger in his book titled *Soldiers in Politics: Military Coups and Government,* to assess military intervention in Burma.

1. Theories on military Intervention based on Eric Nordlinger's *Soldiers in Politics: Military Coups and Government*

According to Nordlinger, "military intervention is a situation in which military officers are major or predominant actors by virtue of their actual or threatened use of force".[2] He further states that military coups take place in societies where economic difficulties, social fragmentation and political instability lead to legitimacy loss, and occur when the professional or corporate interests of the military are threatened.[3]

Nordlinger defines interventionist officers as praetorian soldiers. Praetorianism refers to a situation in which military officers are major or predominant political actors by virtue of their actual or threatened use of force.

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[2] Eric A. Nordlinger, *Soldiers in Politics: Military Coups and Governments,* (NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977), p. 2.

[3] Ibid.

Military officers become praetorian soldiers when they threaten or use force in order to enter or dominate the political arena.[4]

The praetorian soldiers portray themselves as responsible and patriotic officers; these public-spirited qualities leaving them little choice but to protect the constitution and the nation from the unhappy consequences of continued civilian rule.[5] Particular coups are justified by charging the former civilian incumbents with a shorter or longer list of performance failures. The soldiers almost invariably claim that constitutional principles have been flouted by corrupt, arbitrary or illegal actions of the civilian incumbent.[6] Almost all praetorians announce their intention to hand over the reins of government to democratically elected civilians in the near or distant future. However, some praetorians subscribe to highly ambitious long-range political and economic goals. In these instances civilian rule is only to be restored sometimes in the indefinite future when these goals have been achieved.[7]

Based on the case study of the *Tatmadaw*, this thesis will prove that the hypotheses put forward by Nordlinger with regards to military intervention holds truth and is relevant in understanding military intervention in Burma.

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[4] Ibid., p. 3.

[5] Ibid., p. 19.

[6] Ibid., p. 20.

[7] Ibid.

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II. JAPANESE OCCUPATION AND THE EMERGENCE OF A MODERN BURMESE ARMY

Until this very earth doth crumble
We shall remain Burmese,
This precious heirloom from our forefathers
This land that we adore
This is our country,
This is our land,
Our own land!

Song: "We the Burmese"

The Burmese Army has always looked upon itself as a channel of nationalism, spreading nationalist feelings and anti-colonialism. The Army's roots and their strong societal influence can be traced back to the Japanese invasion of Burma in 1941 when the Japanese were able to exploit the anti-British feelings of a young group of Burmese nationalists to help in their campaign. The Burmese Independence Army (BIA), which the Japanese subsequently set up, was designed to strengthen Japanese control over the country. But in the end, this strategy backfired because the BIA supported the allied forces when they launched their campaign to re-conquer the country. This act placed the Army in a commanding position within the Burmese nationalist movement during its campaigns following the Japanese surrender to shake off restored British rule.

This chapter examines the Japanese policy towards Burma before it occupied Burma in 1941. Additionally, this chapter will discuss the background of

the Japanese occupation and how it contributed to the emergence of a modern professional Burmese Army.

A. JAPANESE POLICY TOWARDS BURMA

There were many disjunctions and ambiguities in Japan's policy towards Burma and Burma's independence (between 1940 and 1942) that leads one to conclude that it had no coherent Burma policy. In Tokyo, there were many statements that Japan's goal in Burma was to encourage independence, but these were often cancelled by contrary statements made nearly simultaneously.[8] A Review of Military policy during the Japanese War reveals that it was necessary for Japan to occupy Burma for three main reasons[9]:

1. To establish right flank key positions for the defense line against the British and Chinese enemy in the Indian oceanfront;

2. To effect the capitulation of the Chunking regime by disrupting the Burma Road to Yunnan; and

3. Politically, the occupation of Burma would accelerate the alienation of Burma from Great Britain.

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[8] Joyce C Lebra, *Japanese Trained Army in Southeast Asia,* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1977), p. 43.

[9] Ibid., p. 56.

B. JAPANESE STRATEGY TOWARDS BURMA AND THE BEGINNING OF MILITARY RULE

Unlike the Japanese who were responsible for training the Burmese Army, the British, during their occupation of Burma between 1862 and 1948 depended upon the British Indian Army and the Nepalese Army. The British anticipated that Burmans, Shans, Karens and Kachins would participate in the fighting against rebels, but attempts to raise any part of the army locally were quickly abandoned in 1890. Thus, the British recruited, with the exception of a few companies of Karens, entirely from India.[10] Shortly before the Second World War, there were only 159 Burmans, 3040 others from indigenous races, 1423 Indians and 1587 British soldiers in the Burmese Army; the number of officers were 4 Burmans, 75 indigenous race, 36 Indian and 163 British.[11]

Burma's nationalist feelings were running high when the Japanese entered the war in 1941, as they became yet more politically conscious. The introduction of representative government by the British in 1937 converted passive, voiceless people into voters who were wooed in and out of elections.[12] Furthermore, the Burmese were frustrated with the British regime; especially with

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[10] Michael Aung Thwin,"The British "Pacification" of Burma: Order Without Meaning," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies,* vol. XVI, no.2, September 1985, p. 250.

[11] U Maung Maung, *Burma in the Family of Nations,* (New York: Institute of Pacific Relation, 1957), p. 92.

[12] Ibid., p. 90.

the country being treated as a part of British India. Even after Burma was separated from India in 1937, the country was still represented by the High Commissioner of India in London instead of having a high commissioner of its own. Internationally therefore, Burma was seen, despite the separation, still to be an appendage to India. The Burmese were also disappointed with the British for not granting them independence as demanded and therefore the Japanese were seen as their saviors.

Contacts with the Japanese already existed among older Burmese politicians and those who were in the legislature such as, Ba Maw[13] and U Saw,[14] who collaborated against the British. With the completion of the Burma Road in 1940, which linked the port of Rangoon with Kunming in Yunnan, the Japanese military began intensifying their plans to invade Burma through their army, navy and consulate.

Japanese propaganda in Burma was subtle and effective. "Asia for Asians" was Japan's claim. Armies of an Asian nation, belonging to the great Asian brotherhood that Japanese propaganda made much of, were putting the 'superior and invincible' armies of the west to rout. It was an awe-inspiring scene

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[13] Baw Maw was the first Burman to be Prime Minister of Burma under the British in 1937. He was appointed as the Head of the Burmese Central Executive Administration (BCEA) under the Japanese Military Administration in 1941.

[14] U Saw was responsible for the assassination of General Aung San (one of the thirty heroes trained by the Japanese) and several other politicians in 1947. His objective was apparently to destroy the existing nationalist government and to blame the crime on the British. He was convicted of murder and hanged.

for the people, terrible and terribly attractive.[15] Confident in their anti-western propaganda, the Japanese, in 1940, decided that one of the best ways to achieve their goal was to organize and train military units which would engage in joint military operations against the British.

A joint service unit between the Army and Navy of Japan, the *Minami Kakan* (Minami Intelligence Organization) was formed to carry out a clandestine operation in Burma. In February 1941, the organization laid-out plans produced by Colonel Suzuki entitled "Plan for Burma's Independence," which later became formal Imperial General Headquarters policy.[16] Under the plan, the Japanese military would provide training, arms and other resources to the Burmese revolt. This action supported the concept that Japan would recognize the government of independent Burma.[17]

When the war clouds gathered, the nationalists were united under one umbrella of mass anti-British sentiment. A 'Freedom Bloc,' or *Htwet Yt Gaing*, which literally means "The Association of the Way-out", was formed demanding Burma's right to independence. The freedom Bloc consisted of three major parties that had the support of the masses. The three groups were: the Sinyetha Party, led by Ba Maw; The Thakin Party or the Dobama led by Aung San; and

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[15] Maung, *Burma in the Family of Nations*, p. 92.

[16] U Maung Maung, *Burmese Nationalist Movements 1940-1948,* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), p. 27.

[17] Ibid.

the All Burmese Student's Organization.[18] The Freedom Bloc designated Ba Maw as *Anashin* (dictator-king) and Aung San the General Secretary. Although there were differences in ideology among members, Aung San himself agreed that ideological differences must be substituted for broad national concerns and that political measures must be substituted for "riotous bluster and superstitious magic".[19] The Freedom Bloc, thus, urged all nationalists to unite. During this period, plans were made with Japanese officials for permanently removing the British from Burma.

The movement leaders such as Aung San and Hla Myaing, realizing that the British detected their nationalist movement and careful of being arrested, fled to China disguised as Chinese laborers aboard a Norwegian freighter. The purpose of this journey was to make contact with Chinese Communists, and gain support for Burma's continuing struggle for independence.[20] Instead, with the help of Colonel Suzuki Kenji, Aung San was brought to Japan where he was given preliminary military training. This incident marked the beginning of a direct and open alliance with the Japanese against the British through military participation. In fact, with Nationalist feelings running high, the Burmese

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[18] Ba Maw, *Breakthrough in Burma-Memoirs of a Revolution 1939-1946,* (London: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 67.

[19] John F. Cady, *The United States and Burma*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 154.

[20] Ibid., p. 428.

professed that they would accept assistance from outside countries that could help in their struggle for independence.

In 1941 Aung San returned to Burma on a ten-day trip to recruit thirty Thakin leaders for secret military training in Hainan Island (an island in Japan). These men were trained by Japan, militarily, to assist in the conquest of Burma. In an attempt to avoid being detected, they were shipped in small numbers by boat. These men, which later became military leaders, either belonged to the Thakin Party or were its sympathizers. Except for Aung San himself, Boh Let Yer, Boh Ne Win, and two or three others, the other members did not have a college education. Most were high school students but were well read. They were not merely young men who yearned for fun and adventure but ardent young patriots.[21] These thirty leaders were sent from Tokyo to a special training camp at Samah, Hainan Island, for military training. The Navy provided the center, the supplies of arms and ammunition while the army sent instructors to carry out the training.[22] The rigorous training did not deter the young leaders, for they were nationalists who were eager to pursue their objective, a "Free Burma". The guiding principles for these men were to "live dangerously," to take risks, and not to seek personal advantage at the sacrifice of nationalist's ends.[23]

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[21] Maung Htin Aung, *The Stricken Peacock: Anglo-Burmese Relations 1752-1948*, (Netherlands: Martinus Hijhoff, 1965), p. 111.

[22] Lebra, *Japanese Trained Army in Southeast Asia*, p. 57.

[23] John F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1958), p. 376.

The leaders were divided into three groups with a different training emphasis for each. The first group was given regular training in command of soldiers; the second was given special training in guerilla tactics and espionage; and the third group was trained especially as leaders of the independence movement. The latter group included Aung San and Ne Win.[24] Colonel Suzuki, who was the supervisor of the "thirty heroes," was later known to the Burmese as *Bo Mogyo* (Colonel Thunder Bolt). The name was adapted from a Burmese saying concerning lightning striking the spire of the palace, symbolic of the destruction of British rule.[25]

In 1941 Aung San and his colleagues had bargained in Japan that the Japanese armies would launch the Burma Independence Army (BIA) into Burma, but not enter the country. The Japanese would then immediately recognize Burma's independence and treat the new nation as an ally in the war against the British.[26]

The BIA formally came into existence in December 1941, headed by Suzuki, the thirty trained leaders and a force of over three hundred young descendents of Burmese settlers and their Thai supporters recruited in Thailand. This was followed by (in Bangkok) the *Shutsu-jin-shiki,* or "leaving for the-front ceremony," in accordance with Japanese military tradition. All the thirty leaders

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[24] Ibid., p. 58.

[25] Ibid., p. 437.

[26] Maung, *Burma in the family of Nations,* p. 95.

changed their names. Suzuki, who was to be known as *Bo Mogyo,* was appointed a general and the commander in chief of the new army and Aung San, now known as Bo Te Zo, was made a Major General. All the other leaders and their Japanese instructors became officers of varied ranks and grades. With the formation of the BIA, the *Minami* (Minami Intelligence Organization) which was formed in 1941, operating as undercover against the British, was dissolved.[27]

The BIA was given several hundred rifles by the Japanese, which were to be distributed to Thakin followers as recruitment proceeded. The rest of the arms would be gathered along the way as they fought with the British soldiers. The army was a motley crowd. Starting off from Thailand, where Thai residents and Burmese had been recruited, the army grew in size as it pushed forward towards the southern-most end of Burma and then to Bhamo in the North.[28] The slogans, "Burma for the Burmans" and "Asia for the Asiatic" carried a powerful message, which increased the effectiveness of the campaign as the movement progressed. At its peak, the BIA was able to recruit 30,000 young men, the majority of them recruited by Thakin leaders through the student movement cadres.[29] Men who had attended the university became officers because they had been members of the university training group. Others came from all walks of life, i.e., teachers, politicians, professionals, farmers, workers, and even

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[27] Maw, *Breakthrough in Burma- Memoirs of a Revolution 1939-1946*, p. 140.

[28] Maung, *Burma in the family of Nations*, p. 95.

[29] Cady, A *History of Modern Burma*, p. 441.

thugs.[30] Cars, trucks and transportation of all types, including elephants, were requisitioned to transport troops and supplies.

Although each unit of the Burmese Army was led by one of the thirty leaders, they operated away from the battlefront in small, ill equipped, untrained units, which were inadequate for regular battle. Independently, each unit recruited new members, made promotions, confiscated arms and procured supplies. Discipline depended entirely upon the column commander. In spirit, all branches of the BIA were firmly united against the colonial system and all its beneficiaries.[31]

The BIA gave full support to invading Japanese troops, based on the belief that the Japanese troops would honor its promises of supporting Burma's independence. In return, the BIA assisted the Japanese by restoring law and order in newly occupied areas, by obtaining labor and resources from the Burmese, by collecting information essential to the Japanese forces, by infiltrating into Rangoon and directly sabotaging activities to disrupt the British troops, and by actively participating in combat against the British. During the campaign, as the Japanese army made progress, Japanese leaders exerted

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[30] Maung, *Burma in the family of Nations,* p. 94.

[31] Dorothy Guyot, "The Burma Independence Army: A Political Movement in Military," *Southeast Asian Studies,* Monograph Series no. 7, Yale University, p. 53.

minimal influence over the BIA, so as not to disrupt the goodwill the BIA was creating.[32]

C. BURMA INDEPENDENCE ARMY DURING JAPANESE OCCUPATION

After the successful Japanese conquest of Burma from the British in 1942, the BIA was confident that the Japanese would grant Burma's its independence as promised. This however did not materialize, as there was friction among the Japanese officials regarding when the independence of Burma should be granted. Colonel Suzuki, the Commander in Chief of the BIA contended that Japan should grant Burma early independence as the BIA and the Burmese nationalists had given full support to the Japanese forces against the British with the understanding that Japan would fulfill its commitments. Colonel Ishii Akiho, Senior Staff Officer of the Southern Area Army, rejected the proposal and argued that early independence was an impediment to the Japanese military operation. In addition to that, based on Japan's past experiences in China, the military staff realized that independent governments were unwilling to offer as much as what the Japanese forces demanded. China was reluctant to assist the Japanese because it felt that as an independent government, China was not obliged to fulfill Japanese demands.

As a result, the independence of Burma was delayed and a military administration under the Japanese was formed. The military administration

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[32] Won Z Yoon, "Military Expediency: A Determining Factor in the Japanese Policy Regarding Burmese Independence," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. IX, 2 September 1978, p. 254.

consisted of Japanese army officers and civilians. By July 1943, over 800 Japanese were recorded as being in the employment of the Military Administration Headquarter.[33] The major objectives of the administration were the procurement of the resources essential for national defense and self-sufficiency of the Japanese forces in Burma. The administration retained complete control over Burmese political, economic, diplomatic, and military affairs.[34] Resentment grew within the BIA, as it was now evident that the Japanese were intending to rule Burma and they were seen as no different from the British. Liberators, as they were once called, became occupiers. The action of establishing the military administration sowed the seeds of Burmese mistrust of the Japanese, which would continue to grow and later led to anti-Japanese movements.

The Japanese military administration needed the BIA's political machinery to assist them in the occupied villages, towns and districts. Thus, in April 1942, Colonel Suzuki was given the task of establishing the Burma Baho Government or Burma Central Government with its headquarter in Rangoon. The BIA welcomed this move as they expected the Baho Government would become the legitimate government of Burma. Thakin Tun Oke, one of the thirty original leaders, was appointed chief administrator. However, after only two months of existence, on June 3, 1942, the Baho Government was abruptly dissolved by the

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[33] Ibid., p. 255.

[34] Ibid., p. 254.

Japanese military administration. In its place, the Burmese Central Executive Administration (BCEA), headed by Dr. Ba Maw, was established. He called his government the *Bama Khitthit Asoya* (New Age Burma Government), and in his inaugural speech on August 21, 1942, he proclaimed the rousing theme of his government: "One blood, One Voice, One Command together with Nippon."[35] Consequently, the chief function of the BCEA was to carry out the policies of the Japanese Army under tight supervision and direction of the Japanese commanders.[36]

Japanese motives became clear to all. Having law and order generally restored by the end of May 1942 when the Japanese had already completed its occupation, the Thakin government was no longer needed. Furthermore, the Japanese found it difficult to work with the BIA because they were already demanding independence from the Japanese.

For the same political reason, the BIA was disbanded on Jun 10, 1942 and reorganized into the Burma Defense Army (BDA) on July 27, 1942, with Aung San appointed as its commander. Unlike the BIA, the BDA consisted of a smaller, disciplined cadre of 3,000-5,000 men as the nucleus for the reorganized force, with applicants being selected by examination. Those selected were between the age of nineteen to twenty-three with at least an elementary school

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[35] Maung, *Burmese Nationalist Movements 1940-194,* p. 50.

[36] Yoon, "Military Expediency: A Determining Factor in the Japanese Policy Regarding Burmese Independence," p. 260.

education.[37] Three battalions were formed under the original thirty leaders; Ne Win, Yan Naing, and Ze Ya as commanders. All thirty became officers in the reformed BDA. Four additional battalions were subsequently organized and stationed in Pyinmana, making a total of six-infantry battalion.[38] A Military Academy was also established at Mingaladon and by March or April 1943, there were 55,000 new recruits. Most of the members of the Revolutionary Council of the 1962 coup and commanders of the Burmese Army were graduates of the Mingaladon Military Academy during the Japanese occupation. The first graduates of the academy were selected to study in Tokyo. A second group was sent later and an additional ten were sent to the Air Force Staff School in Japan.[39] As far as command was concerned, in reality, the BNA was completely controlled by the Japanese commander under the terms of the Japanese Secret Military Agreement with BCEA.[40]

Frustration and discontent grew among the BDA and the Burmese Nationalists as they saw the 'true colors' of the Japanese officials. The Japanese were quick to see that they were losing the support of the people, especially the BDA. In an attempt to win support back, the Japanese Imperial Government

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[37] Guyot, "The Burma Independence Army: A Political Movement in Military," p. 69.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Yoon, "Military Expediency: A Determining Factor in the Japanese Policy Regarding Burmese Independence," p. 264.

announced on January 8, 1943, its decision to set up Burma as an independent state within the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.[41] Most important of all was the urgent need for more positive support from the Burmese people, especially the BDA, for the Japanese war effort in the face of a large-scale counter-offensive by the British. Another likely factor that aroused the Japanese decision to grant Burmese independence was the political situation in India, Burma's neighbor. Japan sensed that declaring independence to Burma would significantly stimulate and intensify India's anti-British and independence sentiments, which in turn would disrupt the British war efforts in Southeast Asia.[42]

In August 1943, Burma's formal independence was recognized with Baw Maw accorded the pretentious title of *Nainggandaw Adapati* (Head of State). But the independence gained was within the Japanese Co-Prosperity Sphere and the external relations of the state rested entirely in the hands of the Japanese. The Japanese sincerity in granting independence to the Burmese is undoubtedly questionable. It was done in haste. For example, the Japanese urgently pushed for the production of the new constitution to the extent that on one occasion, as quoted by Dr. Maung Maung, a Japanese official said, " . . .

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41 Maung, *Burma in the family of Nations*, p. 98.

42 Yoon, "Military Expediency: A Determining Factor in the Japanese Policy Regarding Burmese Independence," p. 261.

get through it, do it, and think afterwards".[43] In return for the independence granted the new government of Burma, acting on the demand of the Japanese, had to declare war against the British and her allies.[44] In addition, several treaties signed between independent Burma and the Japanese were more to the advantage of the Japanese. They accorded facilities to the Japanese fighting force in Burma and placed the Burmese Army and Navy under the command of the Commander-In-Chief of the Imperial Japanese Navy stationed in Burma.[45] Ministerial posts were created and filled by Burmese including some members of the Thakin. Thakin Nu was appointed as minister of Foreign Affairs and Thakin Aung San as the Minister of Defense.

Along with the independence of Burma, the BDA was reorganized. Colonel Ne Win was appointed Commander-in-Chief and Bo Ze Ya the Chief of General Staff. Ne Win then announced the change of name from BDA to Burma National Army, *Bana Tatmadaw* (BNA). In a speech to all the leaders, Ne Win stressed to the BNA not to retreat but to fight until victory in the war with their Japanese allies. He also stressed that Burma's independence would be achieved only through victory in the Greater East Asia War.[46]

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[43] Maung, *Burma in the family of Nations*, p. 98.

[44] Aung, *The Stricken Peacock: Anglo-Burmese Relations 1752-1948*, p. 114.

[45] Ibid., p. 99.

[46] Lebra, *Japanese Trained Army in Southeast Asia*, p. 72.

In reality, the Burmese government was subordinate to the Japanese Army Commander who made almost all-important political, economic, military and diplomatic decisions. It was not a satisfactory form of independence for the Burmese who were bearing the burden of Japanese control over the Burmese government. Japanese advisors were posted in important offices in the Burmese government mainly to give "advice" but in reality, they directed their Burmese counterparts on important policy issues. Nevertheless, the Burmese leaders were having their first training in the technique of modern diplomacy. The BNA, under the leadership of Defense Minister Aung San and General Ne Win, developed distinctive Burmese traits and characteristics despite the very close watch of the Japanese. Within the army, from the time of the reorganization of the BIA into the BDA, the Burmese began to organize themselves to fight the Japanese. As early as 1943, secret anti-Japanese lectures were held amongst the BDA. These lectures embedded the nationalist feeling that could lead, at anytime to fighting against the Japanese. Although there were plans for revolt by the young BIA members, the plan was opposed by Aung San. Aung San cited the Burmese proverb, "The frog got killed because it made a din", as Aung San felt that Burma was not ready for revolt because the society was still disorganized.[47]

British intelligence knew of the BNA's frustrations and took the opportunity to collaborate with the BNA against the Japanese. Aung San, by then, was able

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[47] Maung, *Burmese Nationalist Movements 1940-1948,* p. 59.

to organize a united front of all resistance groups. The Anti Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) was formed. Its immediate goal was to fight the Japanese. On the anniversary of Burmese "independence," General Aung San declared that Burma's freedom was on paper only and a long way from reality. This was followed by the clandestine publication and distribution within the BNA of a secret manifesto approved by the AFPFL inner circle. The manifesto called for the sabotage of the Japanese war effort and for attacks on the fascist Japanese and their agents among the Burmese.[48] At the same time, the BNA extended every effort to procure arms and ammunition from both the Japanese and the British. In November 1944, General Aung Sun managed to secure permission from the Japanese army commander in Burma to move the BNA to the front in the pretext that it could join up with the Japanese troops in the fight.[49] B Maw, the Head of State of Independent Burma, defined the Japanese refusal to accord the BNA a real military role as the turning of BNA to politics instead. He was quoted as saying, "I am convinced that the Japanese policy of creating an armed force in a totally new country and keeping it idle and exposed to all kinds of political contact and frustrations was one of the worst blunders the Japanese had committed in Burma".[50]

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[48] Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, p. 480.

[49] Yoon, "Military Expediency: A Determining Factor in the Japanese Policy Regarding Burmese Independence," p. 265.

[50] Lebra, *Japanese Trained Army in Southeast Asia*, p. 74.

In March 1945, General Aung San and his BDA revolted and took up arms alongside the British. The army was then renamed the Burmese Patriotic Forces by the Supreme Commander, Lord Louis Mountbatten. The main contingent of the 10,000 BNA led by General Aung San left Rangoon for the "front". The people gave full support to the BNA, for it was rumored that the BNA commanders acted on orders drafted by the AFPFL rather then the Japanese.[51] The Japanese only knew that they had been betrayed by the BNA upon receiving news that five thousand men of the Burmese forces had struck Japanese rear defense forces. During the five-month period following the March uprising, the BNA attacked and isolated Japanese garrisons and lines of communication, with heavy losses to the Japanese. The BIA continued their fight until the Japanese surrendered to the allies on August 15, 1945. Thus, the Japanese were reaping what they sowed for years; military power, which they used to destroy others, had destroyed their power.

D. IMPACT OF JAPANESE OCCUPATION

The Japanese occupation of Burma is responsible for the existence of the modern Burmese Army. Prior to this period, the Burmese army possessed no formal training doctrine. However, the Japanese turned that army into a strong unified fighting force. The Burmese Army became an agent and pioneer of

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51 Cady, A *History of Modern Burma*, p. 483.

revolution and modernization, stimulating new leadership groups and guiding the nation towards independence.

The thirty original leaders, known as the "thirty heroes", were the pioneers of the modern Burmese army. The vigorous military training instituted by this group further facilitated the already politically aware young nationalists to revolt against the colonial ruler. Even after they were recruited and trained, they generally did not regard themselves as professional soldiers. Their commitments were to independence, not to the military profession.

An interesting feature of the thirty leaders was that they were mainly from the Thakin Party, which was a member of the prewar, "The Freedom Bloc". This situation resulted in resentment among other coalition party members, because they were not represented, as noted by Ba Maw in his book "*Memoirs of a Revolution*".[52] The Freedom Bloc had agreed on foreign contacts and going abroad as actions to get foreign support for Burma's independence from the British in which all the component parties would equally participate. The outcome of this was far-reaching. Now, the Thakin had acquired a monopolistic position of military strength and the BIA became an army representing the Thakin Party and its followers. They made their party flag the national flag and their party song their national anthem.

The Japanese never suspected that the Burmese army was against them or that it would stage a revolt. When BIA hopes were dashed by repressive

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[52] Maw, *Breakthrough in Burma- Memoirs of a Revolution 1939-1946*, p. 131.

Japanese policies, the BIA adopted an offensive posture. Colonel Suzuki's warning to the Japanese began to materialize and in his words, "If Japan could not recognize the independence for which the Burmese nationalists vehemently struggled, the Burmese would certainly rise up against the Japanese in the future".[53]

The feeling of solidarity amongst the BIA can be traced through the rituals performed by the "thirty heroes". Following an old Burmese military tradition, all officers changed their names to military-sounding names. The change of names was followed by a deeply traditional and symbolic ceremony, *the Thwethauk* or blood-drinking ceremony.[54] This symbolized an oath bound together by the bond of blood.

Japanese training of Burmese Forces became a double-edged sword. It provided BIA officers initial basic military training and staff officer training, thereby enabling them to create and train the army of independent Burma. The situation also gave the inexperienced, but politically aware, Thakins, political experience and technical expertise, which served them well in the military bureaucracy of post-war Burma.[55] It also provided the Burmese, for the first time with a modern trained army; one that was denied by the British. Throughout the

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53 Yoon, "Military Expediency: A Determining Factor in the Japanese Policy Regarding Burmese Independence," p. 252.

54 Maw, *Breakthrough in Burma- Memoirs of a Revolution 1939-1946*, p. 139.

55 Lebra, *Japanese Trained Army in Southeast Asia*, p. 175.

entire country, the BIA brought eighty percent of the towns under their control and established fellow Thakin as administrators. In Lower Burma the proportion of towns governed by BIA appointees was over ninety-percent. *Table I* below illustrates the entire percentages of interim Town Administrations appointed by BIA, Japanese and Local Elders as of June 1942.[56]

Table I: Interim Town Administrations Appointed by BIA, Japanese, and Local Elders as of June 4, 1942

	Upper Burma		Lower Burma			
	District HQ %	**Other Towns %**	**District HQ %**	**Other Towns %**	**Total Towns**	**Total %**
BIA	75	25	78	100	32	80
Japanese	12	75	22	0	7	18
Local elders	13	0	0	0	1	2
Total towns	100	100	100	100	40	100

The achievements of the BIA far exceeded the bounds of expectation when they first came into existence in 1941. The patterns established by the BIA were so reinforced during the three years of Japanese occupation that they remained dominant for a generation. The BIA also created a transformation in the government by setting up individuals from the Thakin Party as administrators. Although their roles were limited, the situation afforded the men the opportunity to gain valuable experience.

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[56] Guyot, "The Burma Independence Army: A Political Movement in Military," p. 56.

A distinct feature of the BIA was its members were all drawn from a single ethnic group. Unlike the British, who preferred the minorities of Shan, Kachin and Chin in their army, the BIA was dominated by the Burmese who formed seventy percent of the population. Although the BIA claimed to be composed of many ethnic groups, in actual fact, the minorities had little opportunity to join the BIA because the military did not penetrate the region where those minorities lived.[57] Even when there were opportunities, the Shan, Kachin, Karen and Chin preferred not to join in the army. These facts had a great impact on the political development of the country. On one occasion, the BIA had to disarm the Delta Karen who opposed the Burmese and ruthlessly quash the rebellion.

The army became the center of Burmese hope, for it was the first national institution army the Burmese had and was looked upon as the champion and savior of the country. The Burmese army's origin as a single patriotic force fostered an atmosphere of unprecedented unity among its members. BIA veterans such as Ne Win still dominate the political arena in Burma today. The ideology of its leader, General Aung San, had a deep influence in the political undertakings and beliefs of the contemporary military juntas. Aung San foresaw Burma as: "one nation, one state, one party and one leader. There shall be no parliamentary opposition, no nonsense of individualism. Everyone must submit

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[57] Ibid., p. 53.

to the state, which is supreme over the individual. One party rule is so far, the best form to give and maintain a strong stable administrator".[58]

E. CONCLUSION

The establishment of the BIA is often described metaphorically as a "birth", as though the Burmese Army was nurtured and borne from a Japanese womb or at least brought into the world by a Japanese midwife.[59] Under the Japanese authority, the BIA was expanded to include between 20,000 to 30,000 men.

Japanese expansionist policy had a great impact on the birth of the modern army in Burma. Thereupon, the military juntas to-date have always looked upon themselves as the saviors of the nation. Thus, if national values and the security of the nation are threatened, they must take on the role of "saving the nation". In keeping with this objective, the military undertakes various measures that sometimes do not conform to the wishes of the rest of the Burmese society.

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58 Maw, *Breakthrough in Burma-Memoirs of a Revolution 1939-1946*, p. 127.

59 Mary P. Callahan, *The Origin of Military Rule in Burma*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Cornell University, 1996, p. 80.

III. TATMADAW AND ITS INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICS

A. INTRODUCTION

The independence of Burma in 1948 from the British brought no utopia to Burma. From the beginning of national independence, the new civilian government faced the problems of political rivalries as well as social and economic problems. Additionally, the ethnic minorities, which during the Japanese and British occupation were left entirely on their own, were demanding autonomy from the Burmese government.

This chapter examines the problems and challenges faced by the civilian government (after 1948) in building a new Burmese nation. It will also analyze the factors that contributed to the beginning of the military's active participation in politics as 'savior of the nation' when they feel that the stability of the nation is being threatened. This chapter will also trace the phases of political changes from the time Burma gained its independence in 1948 until the military coup of 1962.

B. THE PROBLEM OF NATIONAL UNITY: ETHNIC MINORITIES

Burma's political history is characterized by endless struggles amongst at least four indigenous groups inhabiting the areas of modern Burma. The predominant groups in the internal struggle are: Burmans, whose home was in the internal valley; the Mon or Talaing, who lived in the South; the Shan from the North, Central and Eastern part of the hill surrounding the Irrawady valley; and

the Arakanese whose home was the isolated western area that bears their name.

Since its independence in 1948, successive national governments in Burma have attempted to contain separatist movement based on ethnic identities in the non-Burman areas, which lie on the country's borders. These efforts have not been very successful despite the military measures taken to battle against multiple insurgencies in these areas.

The system of Burman's predominance abolished by the British in 1885, had been one of limited power sharing. The always fragile balance of power between the Burman and their independent-minded fellow compatriots was displaced by a classic colonial system that administered the former center separately from the frontier areas, which were left both physically and politically on the periphery.[60] Relations between the Burmans and the other ethnic groups worsened after Burma gained its independence as the Burman dominated central government attempted to increase control over traditionally autonomous minority areas. Thus, open confrontation between the Burmese Army and the minority's rebel groups was a common event.[61] Unlike the military, which is

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[60] Tin Maung Maung Than, "Neither Inheritance nor Legacy: Leading the Myanmar State since Independence," *Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, vol. 15, no. 1, June 1993, p. 25.

[61] Bertil Lintner, "An Insurgency Who's Who," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 28 May 1987, p. 49.

cohesive, and in control of the state, the insurgents are divided and control only the border areas in the north and east of Burma.[62]

C. THE IMPACT OF BRITISH RULE

British colonial rule has colored Burmese society on the distinctive nature of the state building enterprise of the colonial regime. Unlike most authors of Burmese history who look upon the Japanese occupation of Burma in 1942 as the era of the birth of the Burmese army, Callahan in her dissertation has suggested that the origins of army dominance within the state should be dated from 1826, the year of the first annexation of Burmese territory by British-India.[63] Although her argument can be substantiated, it must be noted that it was only during the Japanese occupation that the modern Burmese Army emerged. For, during the British occupation, although army dominance existed in Burma, the army were from the British Indian Army comprises mainly of British and Indian soldiers with the exception of a few Burmese minorities.

During the British colonization of Burma from 1826 to 1948, the British made several changes in Burma's social organization and political and economic institutions that thrust the country from being the background to the forefront of world events. The introduction of a British system of law and order throughout

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62 Josef Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and Politics of Stagnation,* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 44.

63 Callahan, *The Origin of Military Rule in Burma*, p. 80.

Burma altered the system of local government and destroyed the traditional patterns of authority.

Nationalist feelings were high among the Burmese toward the end of the first phase (1826-1941) of British rule in Burma. The Burmese resented the British policy of linking Burma to British India on all aspects of administration and demanded independence. Political parties grew in numbers and the most prominent was the *Dobama Asiayone*, often called the Thakin Party as noted above. In 1940, thirty members of the Thakin Party underwent military training in Japan and collaborated with the Japanese against the British when the British rejected their demand for Burmese independence.

The British occupation also resulted in a tremendous influx of immigrant labor and investment capital from India and overseas Chinese. Both these groups of immigrants played major roles in the Burmese economy. By 1931 the Indian population in Burma was more then one million, out of an estimated total population of 14,650,000.[64] Rangoon thus became an overseas suburb of Madras with over half the population being Indian origin. As a result, the average Burmese citizen no longer felt at home in his own house.[65]

British colonial policy of "divide and rule" had kept the ethnic population segregated from the majority Burmese population. The appearance of

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[64] Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and Politics of Stagnation,* p. 58.

[65] Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity,* (New Jersey: Zed Books, 1991), p. 42.

preferential treatment for different ethnic groups by the British brought about a widely varied response to British rule. As a result, even after Burma gained its independence in 1948, the British caused damage to inter-communal relations among the various ethnic groups.[66] Furthermore, the British left the ethnic groups largely independent from British control. Thus, when Burma gained its independence, these ethnic groups like the Karen, the Kachin and the Shan demanded autonomy from the government.

The emergence of the army as the predominant force in Burmese political life, venerated as the glue that would hold the country together, was already presaged in May 1945, after the fall of Rangoon to the British with the help of the *Tatmadaw*, when General Ne Win had declared that the *Tatmadaw* 'is not only the hope of the country, but its very life and soul'.[67] From that period onwards, the *Tatmadaw* began to play an important role in Burma; politically, socially and economically. The *Tatmadaw* sees it as its duty to protect the nation against any threat that would disrupt the stability of the nation.

At the end of World War II when the British reoccupied Burma from the Japanese, the Burmese Army was not the only armed group in Burma. Other groups included Burmese forces that were recruited by the British Indian Army. These groups of Burmese forces had returned from India with the British army and were mostly remnants of the colonial Burmese battalions. However,

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[66] Ibid., p. 46.

[67] Ibid., p.121.

because they were mostly drawn from minority groups, especially Karen who were opposed to Burmese nationalism, they were not on good terms with each other. The groups of remnants soon after returning joined their tribesmen who had already rebelled against the newly independent Burma. Unlike many other ex-colonies, Burma's army and political leaders decided not to use foreign officers in command posts. British officers were immediately replaced after independence was gained. General Aung San, the founder of the modern Burmese Army, insisted that the army should be organized on the principle of Burman ethnicity with the objective of establishing pure "Burmese" battalions and to assure the Burmazation of the officer's corps. As such, the army was reconstituted in 1945 to 1950, which resulted in a new government policy of accepting large numbers of Burmans in comparison to other ethnic groups.

D. CIVILIAN RULE OF 1948-1958

The independence of Burma did not transform Burma into a utopia. Prior to the coup of 1962, Burma was governed under a legitimate constitution while the people, through democratic processes, chose its leaders. The state recognized the supremacy of the legislative, judicial independence, and personal freedoms. The structure of government followed the British parliamentary model. The head of the state was the president who was elected indirectly by Parliament for a five-year period. Burma wanted to create a government blending the values and ideas of liberal democracy (inherited from the British) with the socialist values and goals expressed in revolutionary and evolutionary western

socialism.[68] The origin of socialism in Burma was a response to the identification of capitalism with imperialism and foreign domination of the economy of pre-World War II Burma, infusion of socialist thinking through the education of the Burmese political intellectuals in England, and an association of socialism with elements of Buddhism.[69] British journalist, Martin Smith, in his writing stated that, "Burma since independence, is, after all, that rarity, a country in which successive governments have always been regarded as left wing, but in which the principal political opposition has come from the left".[70]

The real power of the government was concentrated in the hands of the prime minister and his cabinet, which together formed a union government. The constitution contained no definition of federalism, but it conformed to the federal idea by providing for a separate system of government in each of its states. In terms of privileges, the states did not enjoy equal rights. The federal structure was more nominal than real, effective powers remained within the central government and only incidental powers passed to the state governments, the latter of which were technically under State authority.

The ruling party, the Anti-Fascists People's Freedom League (AFPFL), under the leadership of Prime Minister U Nu was established in 1944 as an effort

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68 Josef Silverstein, "The Political Legacy of Aung San," Ethaca: South East Asia Program, *Cornell University Data Paper* no. 86, 1972, pp. 91-100.

69 Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and Politics of Stagnation*, p. 29.

70 Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, p. 48.

by Aung San (its founder) to unite various parties against the Japanese. It was technically a coalition party; a combination of ethnic groups, mass organizations, independent members and at least one political party - The Socialist Party. The main partners in this party were the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, and the People's Voluntary Organization (a military political body under Aung San's leadership). It opened its ranks to all the people of Burma regardless of ethnic groups, religion, or political belief. After Burma gained its independence, this political party emerged as the most important voice in Burmese politics. Many felt AFPFL was the sole non-communist party in Southeast Asia with a strong apparatus on the national and on the local level. However in 1958, due to the split in AFPFL as a result of political differences between the members, the government was forced to seek military assistance.

E. THE "CARETAKER" GOVERNMENT OF 1958-1960

Prior to independence, the army played an active and important role in the Nationalist movement, but after World War II, Aung San sought to create a purely professional army devoted to the defense of the state and protection of the people against insurgency. The communist revolt of 1948 and the defection of Karen soldiers exposed the national army to the political threat of forces and others attempting to overthrow the civilian government. Until this point, the military had remained outside of politics, but in 1958 it was called upon by the civilian government to establish a temporary "caretaker" government due to

political differences in the AFPFL (the governing party) which later resulted in a split in the party.

During the constitutional period, Burma held three national elections. The first was conducted in 1951-1952, the second in 1956 and the third in 1960. In all three elections the ruling party (the AFPFL) was able to win with U Nu as Prime Minister. In reality, the coalition party was divided. The breakdown of the AFPFL was a result of long personal antagonisms among its members, structural defects and changing political climate in Burma.[71] By 1958, Burma was on the verge of civil war as two competing factions of the AFPFL organized against each other. U Nu led the "Clean AFPFL" and Kyaw Nyein and Baw Swe, the "Stable AFPFL".[72] The turmoil in the ruling party also resulted in the loss of the people's confidence in the governing party's elected leaders, except for U Nu who was seen by the Burmese as an honest and moral man.[73] U Nu sought to end the dispute by calling a special session of the Parliament in April 1958 to decide which faction of the AFPFL would control the unstable political situation. These developments led to widespread unrest and confusion. U Nu's leadership

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[71] Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation*, p. 64.

[72] David I. Steinberg, *The Future of Burma: Crisis and Choice in Myanmar,* (Lanham, New York: University Press of America, 1990), p. 10.

[73] Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation*, p. 65.

was based on his charismatic religious qualities and his reputation for impeccable honesty, but he was a poor day-to-day administrator. [74]

During the period of post-independence until 1958, the military had remained a professional army, rendering full support to the civilian government in maintaining order, especially against the insurgencies and minority rebel groups. However, the political crises of 1958 changed the military's role, from strictly keeping to its profession to active participation in politics. Becka has argued that until the 1958 AFPFL split, the army remained outside the struggle for political power and recognized the ultimate authority of the civilian leadership.[75] The AFPFL split alarmed the military leaders who were particularly concerned about the security of the country. As a result, they forced U Nu's government to resign and turn over the administration of the country to General Ne Win's military "caretaker" government. Parliament accepted the military's takeover and a "caretaker" government was formed. As Bixler has pointed out, the 1958 takeover was not a military coup, despite what westerners believed.[76] The transfer of power from U Nu to Ne Win, in many ways, was a perfect solution for the ambitious leadership of the *Tatmadaw*. Although the official name of the new regime was the "Caretaker" government, Callahan in her dissertation prefers

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[74] Clark D. Neher, *Southeast Asia in the New International Era,* (Colorado: Eastview Press, 1999), p. 162.

[75] Jan Becka, *Military Rule in Burma: A Political Analysis of General Ne Win's Revolutionary Council,* (Prague: Oriental Institute, 2 November 1969), p. 52.

[76] Norma Bixler, *Burma: A Profile,* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), p. 72.

calling it by the name the army itself as well as most of the contemporary newspaper and politicians of the era called it, the *Bogyoke* government.[77] The word "*Bogyoke*" in Burmese means "General" and by this refers to General Ne Win's leadership.

General Ne Win promised to maintain law and order, establish conditions for free and fair elections, and continue Burma's non-aligned foreign policy. With the official transfer of power on October 28, 1958, there was a major reshuffle of power. The new government consisted of non-party notables and senior military officers filling its key administrative positions.[78] Twenty of the twenty-three colonels in key positions during the "caretaker" regimes had been engaged in politics during the pre-independence period and were nominated by the political elite to military roles.[79] Most of the senior officers were the cream of the resistance movement during the Japanese occupation of Burma.[80] Not surprisingly, none of the members of the two parties of the two AFPFL factions were appointed to fill any governmental positions. Thus, U Nu and his disputing AFPFL colleagues laid the foundation to the military version of socialism and this then became the turning point of the military take-over of political and administrative roles from civilians.

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77 Callahan, *The Origin of Military Rule in Burma*, p. 480.

78 Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation*, p. 28.

79 Ibid., p.157.

80 Ibid.

The "caretaker" government, which was supposed to last for only six months (the period a non-member of Parliament was allowed to serve in the government) while preparations were made for holding national elections, extended to eighteen months. Initially, the military government was set to restore order in the nation and to create the proper atmosphere to hold elections by April 1959. The constitution was amended to allow for General Ne Win's government to hold office for more then the mandatory term. The government was composed of distinguished civilians, drawn mainly from the civil service. The cabinet was small with few members holding several positions. In each ministry, military officers held important posts, and they often were the real decision-makers.[81] The greatest opportunity for the military during the "caretaker" period was the shift of one hundred and fifty military officers to civilian posts.[82] A sizable number of these men were drawn from the senior ranks.

The military leaders who joined Ne Win in governing assumed power with a well thought-out set of ideas and goals for the present and the future of the nation. The keynote of the "caretaker" government was legality and constitutionalism. The ideological development of the military advanced a step

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[81] Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation*, p. 77.

[82] Lissak, *Military Roles in Modernization: Civil-Military Relations in Thailand and Burma*, p. 164.

further with the publication of a statement on national ideology and the role of the Armed Forces. It outlined three objectives[83]:

1. Restoration of peace and the rule of law.

2. Consolidation of democracy, and

3. Establishment of a socialist economy.

The government believed that to establish a socialist economy, democracy would be a prerequisite. Additionally, for democracy to flourish, law and order is essential.

During the eighteen months of the "caretaker's" rule the *Tatmadaw* was able to make its dominance felt due to the changes it made; politically, economically and socially. The Defense Service Institute (DSI), which was created in 1950 under the Ministry of Defense, became the largest and most powerful business organization in Burma. Its subsidiaries dominated vital areas in commerce and economic development. Besides securing these, the "caretaker" government was also able to deal effectively with insurgency and lawlessness in the countryside. A more centralized administration was developed and internal security was improved.

The "caretaker" government's program for cleanliness and order was well received by the public who regarded the new government as one which "at the time at least was honest and efficient". It took no sides. Its leaders were direct and stuck to the rule of the law rather then being vague and moralistic, and its

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83 Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation*, p. 77.

administration was firm and uniform. The military's way of administering the country was a new experience for the Burmese.[84] Although it produced results, it did not win popularity.[85] When, in 1960, Ne Win's "caretaker" regime held its first free elections, the Burmese reacted by returning U Nu to the post of prime minister (he was opposed by a party supported by the *Tatmadaw*) who promised to continue the work and style of the "caretaker's" government. Although the "caretaker" government respected the results of the 1960 election and gave the reins of power back to U Nu's victorious party, the army continued to exert strong influence on the Burmese politics and government activities.[86] As Becker argued, at least some sectors of the army, reluctant to go back to barracks in 1960, waited for a new chance to intervene.[87]

F. THE CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT OF 1960-1962

The failure of the "Stable AFPFL" which was in opposition to U Nu, and had the backing of the military, may be interpreted as a victory against the military. R.H Taylor suggested that the outcome was a victory of the local Bo (meaning "leader" in Burmese) as well as for the recognized leaders of the

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84 Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and Politics of Stagnation,* p. 79.

85 Ibid., p. 28.

86 Becka, *Military Rule in Burma: A Political Analysis of General Ne Win's Revolutionary Council,* p. 54.

87 Ibid.

frontier areas, against an army that had spent much of the "caretaker" period attempting to undermine the independence of their private fiefdoms.[88]

The failure of the military to retain its power and its withdrawal from politics in 1962 was not fully accepted by all senior officers. As Lissak puts it, "The young officers looked reluctantly at the army's retreat from politics and considered it a blatant [mistake]".[89] By 1961, U Nu had made Buddhism the state religion, which became " . . . a substitute for rather than an evidence of, the country's progress in economic development and social welfare".[90] Establishing Buddhism as a state religion, however, furthered the Burmanization of the country and revived latent communal tensions between the mostly Burman Buddhist majority and many non-Buddhist minority groups. To the increasing alarm of the *Tatmadaw*, U Nu even contemplated revising the country's federal structure by promising to grant autonomy to the minority. The 'probation period' for the civilian elite lasted two years. Steinberg argues that there is evidence that some key *Tatmadaw* leaders were quickly disillusioned with U Nu's return to head a vacillating civilian government in 1960 and wanted to move against it.[91] The military was disturbed by the developments that took place: concessions

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[88] R. H. Taylor, *Elections in Burma/Myanmar: For whom and why? The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge, NY: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1996), p. 175.

[89] Lissak, *Military Roles in Modernization: Civil-Military Relations in Thailand and Burma*, p. 165.

[90] Ibid., p. 175.

[91] Steinberg, *The Future of Burma: Crisis and Choice in Myanmar*, p. 10.

that U Nu promised to the minorities which the army considered to be the final step leading to the dissolution of the union, the rapid succession of economic crises, the proclamation of Buddhism as the state religion, the inefficiency of the civilian administration, and the progressive disintegration of the ruling party.[92] These factors led to the coup d' etat by the military headed by General Ne Win and the Revolutionary Council in March 1962. The action by the military to carry out a coup was a clear indication of the role they assumed as the 'savior of the nation' when they felt that the security of the nation was being threatened. With the coup, the federal 1947 Constitution was suspended and the bicameral parliament dissolved. At a press conference after the coup, Ne Win declared that the army believed in democracy, socialism and "healthy politics". In principle, this meant a strong, central government controlled by the military. Thus, the army had developed from being a state within the state to becoming the state itself.[93] The Revolutionary Council charged that Parliamentary democracy "not only failed to serve our socialist development but also due to its very defects, weakness and loopholes . . . lost sight of and deviated from the socialist aims".[94] The Council took credit for having " . . . rescued the Union, not a moment too soon . . . and quickly established the Burma Socialist Progressive Party to

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92 Lissak, *Military Roles in Modernization: Civil-Military Relations in Thailand and Burma*, p. 165.

93 Lintner Bertil, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency Since 1948,* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1994), p. 171.

94 Josef Silverstein, "The Burma Socialist Program Party and its Rivals: A one-plus Party System", *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, March 1967 p.16.

implement its goal".[95] The coup brought to an end the multiparty electoral system of post-independent Burma and also to Burma's fourteen year long experiment with federalism and parliamentary democracy.

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95 David I Steinberg, "Democracy, Power and the Economy in Myanmar,"*Asian Survey*, vol. XXXI, no. 8, August 1991, p. 738.

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IV. THE AFTERMATH OF THE 1962 COUP

A. INTRODUCTION

From the beginning, the coup leaders were confident that their action was a legitimate one. In their speeches and publications, they verified their belief in the right of the military to intervene and to save the nation in times of crisis.[96] The *Tatmadaw* blamed U Nu's inefficient civilian government as the cause of all Burma's problem and felt that it was their duty to save Burma from further deterioration. Thus, the *Tatmadaw* took upon itself the task of molding Burma to its model to ensure what the *Tatmadaw* believed as social justice and enduring order was achieved. Therefore, from the outset of the 1962 coup the leaders never seemed to doubt the legitimacy of their actions. They justified their actions by asserting that, " We are just Burmese revolutionaries and socialists who are keeping pace with history".[97]

A month after the 1962 coup, a statement by a top military official characterized the military seizure of power as the second half of a revolution that began with the fight for independence. The official regarded the coup as the army's task to transform the society to socialism.[98] This chapter analyzes and traces the development of the *Tatmadaw* after the 1962 coup in which the

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96 Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and Politics of Stagnation*, p. 80.

97 Ibid.

98 Ibid.

Tatmadaw exercised its power; politically, economically and socially. It will also elaborate on the rise of people's power and its consequences.

B. THE BEGINNING OF THE AUTHORITATARIAN ERA

With the onset of the coup, there was no turning back for the military. Under the influential leadership of General Ne Win, the military began its consolidation of powers. Within less then a month of the coup, Ne Win had achieved a degree of power over the state machinery that nobody had enjoyed since the monarchy was abolished in 1885.[99]

The military rule was expected to last for only a short time. As Lintner pointed out, there was little immediate opposition to the coup, as few people seemed to believe that this takeover would be different from the caretaker period of 1958-1960.[100] The people were told that its purpose was mainly to preserve the Union, restore order and harmony in the society, and solve some of the economic problems that had developed over the previous two years. The assumption that military rule would be temporary, however, eroded as the military increasingly pursued policies with long-term goals.[101]

Freedom of movement in Burma and personal contact with foreigners was seriously curtailed. When the military seized power, it silenced the legal political

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[99] Bertil, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency Since 1948*, p. 170.

[100] Ibid.

[101] Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and Politics of Stagnation*, p. 80.

opposition by imprisoning some leaders while allowing others their freedom as long as they did not pose a threat to the military. It was not until March 28, 1964, with the promulgation of the Law to Protect National Solidarity, that all political parties, except the military's own Burmese Socialist Progressive Party (BSPP), were banned and all their property and assets were confiscated. The press was also nationalized during the same year.

C. THE REVOLUTIONARY COUNCIL

With the military takeover, all powers were passed to the Revolutionary Council. The Council, in turn, conferred all legislative, executive and judicial power on its chairman, General Ne Win. In addition, it decreed that in all existing laws, "Chairman of the Revolutionary Council" should be substituted for "President of the Union" and "Prime Minister"; and "Revolutionary Council" for the word "Minister".[102]

The Revolutionary Council did not repeal the 1947 constitution *de jure* though it did so *de facto*, and the same applied to the amendments to the constitution concerning Buddhism, which was passed in 1961 by the Union parliament.[103] Under General Ne Win, the Revolutionary Council was essentially a small military oligarchy, most of whose members had served together with Ne Win in the armed forces since World War II and also the "caretaker" government

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[102] Ibid., pp. 87-88.

[103] Becka, *Military Rule in Burma: A Political Analysis of General Ne Win's Revolutionary Council*, p. 53.

of 1958-1960.[104] Silverstein points out that the Revolutionary Council permitted little information to be published about its methods of operations and decision making. He asserts that the civilian elites assumed that Ne Win was the key figure in the Council. No decision was taken against his will and there were no indications of any serious challenges to his leadership within the council.[105]

Although the Revolutionary Council had seized the monopoly of power, it had faced, from the very beginning, the problem of winning and holding popular support. Becka points out that as the representatives of the military, a privileged class with no social roots and little popularity, the Revolutionary Council leaders were obliged to seek ways to evoke a positive response to the newly established military regime.[106] He also argues that this seems to be one of the main reasons why the Revolutionary Council presented to the people of Burma the 1962 military coup as a "social revolution" and why it came out with a policy declaration, a military blueprint entitled the "Burmese Way to Socialism".[107] This was followed later by the "System of Correlation of Man and his Environment" which, again, was an effort to provide philosophical underpinnings for the military government.

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104 Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and Politics of Stagnation*, p. 88.

105 Ibid.

106 Becka, *Military Rule in Burma: A Political Analysis of General Ne Win's Revolutionary Council*, p. 54.

107 Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and Politics of Stagnation*, p. 45.

In the "Burmese Way to Socialism", the military's social theorists declared that both the economic and political system must be altered before the nation's other problems could be tackled.[108] Based on the declaration issued on April 30 1962, the Revolutionary Council set forth the objective of building in Burma a socialist society, in accordance with the national traditions and specific conditions of the country.[109]

The Revolutionary Council leaders proclaimed themselves the leaders of the working people and announced their commitment to several goals which included the nationalization of vital means of production, distribution, transportation and external trade, which should lead to raising the production and standard of living for all classes of people.[110]

D. THE BLUEPRINT FOR DEVELOPMENT

In line with the government's economic policy to restructure the economy and political institutions along socialist lines. The blueprint set out four principal objectives: [111]

1. The elimination of foreign control of the economy;

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[108] Ibid., p. 81.

[109] Becka, *Military Rule in Burma: A Political Analysis of General Ne Win's Revolutionary Council*, p. 45.

[110] Ibid.

[111] Shwe Lu Maung, *Burma: Nationalism and Ideology,* (Dhaka: Dhaka University Press, 1988), pp. 53-55.

2. A reduction in the country's dependence on foreign markets;

3. A restructuring of the economy away from its dependence on primary production towards a more balanced industrial condition; and

4. The centralization of economic power in the hands of the state, in order to reduce the power of the private market.

In achieving its objectives, the government nationalized all vital means of production, including those in agriculture, industry, commerce, transportation, communication and external trade. While reinforcing its claim to ownership of land, it also attempted to eliminate landlordism and private agricultural debt by introducing the Peasants Rights Protection Law and the Land Tenancy Act in 1963.[112] In February 1963, the government seized all private banks, foreign and domestic. This nationalization was accompanied by other measures such as the introduction of a progressive income tax and demonetizations of high-value notes.[113]

The cumulative effect of nationalization and of most other measures was, however, disruptive in the lives of the majority of the people. Nationalization was made with undue haste and lacked proper organization.[114] Rapid action of nationalizing and socializing of the commercial and industrial sectors produced

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[112] Ibid., p.73.

[113] Becka, *Military Rule in Burma: A Political Analysis of General Ne Win's Revolutionary Council*, p. 46.

[114] Ibid.

shortages, rising prices and black markets.[115] Many nationalized shops and factories had to be closed down because of mismanagement due to untrained military personnel appointed to manage the vast state enterprise. Shortages arising from the government's mismanagement resulted in a steady decline of industrial and agricultural production, which reached its lowest ebb in 1967.[116] As a result, the living conditions of most Burmese rural and urban were badly affected. Furthermore, this led to a considerable decline of the people's faith in the benefits of the "Burmese way to Socialism".

E. THE PHASES OF MILITARY'S RULE UNTIL 1988

The change in the name of the government in 1971 to the Government of Union of Burma did not bring about any changes in the policy of the government. Military officials who were loyal to Ne Win held all ministerial posts. Ne Win himself was designated as the prime minister, while his most trusted right-hand man, General San Yu, was appointed as his deputy. In April 1972, with the retirement of twenty senior military officers, including Ne Win, from the Armed Forces, the government gave the impression that it was a civilian administration. But, in fact, the military was still the dominant power as these retired generals continued to run the government without the military titles, in favor of traditional

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115 Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and Politics of Stagnation*, p. 156.

116 Becka, *Military Rule in Burma: A Political Analysis of General Ne Win's Revolutionary Council*, p. 47.

civilian prefixes.[117] In June 1972, General San Yu was given control of the Ministry of Defense while still retaining the Deputy Prime Minister's post. As Silverstein has suggested, the appointment of General San Yu to two important portfolios was an indication that a continuing close linkage between the armed forces and the government was anticipated whether the members wore "*gaungbaung*" (traditional Burmese headwear for males) or military braid.[118]

On January 3, 1974, with the implementation of the new constitution, the country was renamed the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma and Ne Win as its President. The constitution made clear that BSPP had the sole power to lead the nation. Thus, as it was before, with no legal competitors, and as long as the constitution remained in effect the military's domination prevailed.[119] In 1981, although Ne Win stepped down from the presidency, he still maintained his powerful post as chairman of BSPP, continuing his dominance over political and economic decision-making.

Despite all measures adopted by the Revolutionary Council to uphold its monopoly of power, there existed a formidable, if divided, opposition to the military regime. It came from the university students; groups of intellectuals who were dissatisfied with the governmental regimentation of society and encroachment upon civil liberties such as freedom of expression and assembly;

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117 Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and Politics of Stagnation*, p. 92.

118 Ibid., p. 72.

119 Ibid., p. 122.

the Buddhist monkshood who disliked government intrusion into religion domain; and the minority groups.[120] During the twenty-six years of General Ne Win's rule (1962-1988), socio-political unrest, strikes by workers and students, and natural disasters resulted in the shutdown of schools and colleges and subjugation of students between 1962 and 1988. These shutdowns lasted from six months to three years, and major closures of schools and colleges across Burma were in effect for virtually three years in a row between 1974 and 1976.[121]

Martial law was declared in 1974 as a result of riots by students and monks to protest the way the government denied honors to U Thant when his body was returned to Burma for burial. U Thant was the third secretary general of the United Nations and a strong opposer of General Ne Win. Observers who witnessed these events reported that the students were using the U Thant incident as a means of expressing their general antagonism and hostility to an incompetent repressive government. The students singled out issues of corruption among government officials, basic food shortages, economic decline and loss of freedom.[122] Throughout military rule, costly guerrilla wars with ethnic opposition groups along the country's frontiers also continued.

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120 Becka, *Military Rule in Burma: A Political Analysis of General Ne Win's Revolutionary Council*, p. 48.

121 Mya Maung, " The Burma Road to the Past, *Asian Survey*, vol. XXXIX, no. 2, March/April 1999, p. 269.

122 Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and Politics of Stagnation*, p. 143.

F. THE 1988 UPRISING AND THE RISE OF "PEOPLE'S POWER"

As in previous years since the beginning of military domination in 1962, economic grievances and the culmination of years of frustration and disgust at the failures of the military government to bring development to Burma became a key factor in the outburst of social unrest and rioting that took place in 1988. Years of economic mis-management have converted Burma from one of the most economically promising countries in Asia to one of the poorest in the world.[123] Although rich in natural resources, Burma had been humiliated by the United Nations rating of it in 1987 as one of the world's least developed nations.

After twenty-six years of autocratic socialism under Ne Win (1962-1988), in July and August of 1988, the masses showed their frustrations and anger by marching through the streets of the country in millions, demanding democracy. The famous "8-8-88" (August 8, 1988) mass uprising started in Rangoon and spread to the entire country, drawing millions of people to protest against the BSPP government. Not to the surprise of the masses, some from the civil service, the lower echelons of the military, and the party itself, also joined in the anti-government pro-democracy march.[124] To defuse the threat to the army's continued political domination, Ne Win resigned from all political posts, but in reality, he was the final arbiter for the close-knit circle of loyalists in the cabinet

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[123] David I Steinberg, "Democracy, Power and the Economy in Myanmar,"*Asian Survey*, vol. XXXI, no. 8, August 1991, p. 738.

[124] Steinberg, *The Future of Burma: Crisis and Choice in Myanmar,* p. 31.

and the BSSP and was charged with the day-to day management of the crisis.[125] General Sein Lwin, the head of the security police who was responsible for the role in violently crushing student demonstrations in 1962, 1974 and 1988, was appointed the chairman of the BSPP. This sparked more demonstrations and after two weeks, for the first time since the military took-over in 1962, Dr. Maung Maung, a civilian, replaced Sein Lwin as the leader of Burma. Dr. Maung Maung's appointment was designed as a response to the disorder in the streets and the continuation of direct military rule. The move was seen as the military's strategy to a continued military dominance and was rejected by the "parliaments of the streets" and the politicians of the past who had reemerged to take advantage of the sudden political opening.[126]

In September 18, 1988, knowing that the military's dominance was at stake, General Saw Maung, the army commander in chief, apparently upon the directive of Ne Win, made on a coup (the third coup in Burmese history) and restored the military to power. Hundreds of unarmed demonstrators were gunned down and martial law was declared. Unlike the first two coups in 1958 and 1962 respectively, the 1988 military coup was not against an opposition government, as none existed, but was against the "civilian" government under Maung Maung, which the army itself created.[127] In 1988 alone, between four thousand to five

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[125] Neher, *Southeast Asia in the New International Era*, p. 163.

[126] Taylor, *Elections in Burma/Myanmar: For whom and why?*. p. 176.

[127] Neher, *Southeast Asia in the New International Era*, p. 165.

thousand people were killed in demonstrations and repression. Following the coup, the military established the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). Thus, a new cabinet composed of nineteen senior military officers who were loyal to Ne Win was formed with General Saw Maung as head. The military, which operated behind the scenes now, assumed full, visible and official command under martial law. With this development, Burma seemed to lose contact with the rest of the world, as SLORC appeared to be intent on isolating Burma internationally once again. Tourists and reporters were denied entry and Burmese were not allowed to leave the country.

To calm mass discontent, SLORC promised to hold "free and fair" elections for a new parliament, which would draft a new constitution. As a reaction to the authoritarian military regime, political parties and illegal opposition groups sprang up in great numbers, but were oppressively dealt with by the SLORC. The most prominent opposition party was the National League for Democracy (NLD) under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi (daughter of General Aung San). To the Burmese, Aung Sun Suu Kyi is a savior in the image of her legendary father who will free them from the enslavement of the *Tatmadaw*.[128]

Attempting to legitimize its rule, SLORC organized multi-party elections on May 27, 1990. Before the election, prominent opposition political leaders were detained. Among them were Aung San Suu Kyi and Tin U who were chairman

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[128] Mya Maung," The Burma Road to the Past," p. 271.

and Secretary General of NLD respectively. On November 29, 1989, another outspoken critic of the regime, former Prime Minister U Nu, and twelve of his associates were placed under house arrest.[129] Despite restrictions on key oppositional political leaders before the election, the move turned out to be a huge miscalculation. Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD won a landslide victory taking three hundred and ninety two of four hundred and eighty five seats in Parliament. The rest of the seats went to NLD allies from various minority areas; ten seats went to the military backed National Unity Party (NUP), an offshoot of the BSPP.[130] The failure of NUP showed a resounding rejection of military rule that demonstrated not only the depth of the Burmese people's alienation from the military regime, but also the failure of the generals to recognize the reality of their unpopularity.[131]

SLORC refused to honor the results of the election and began a systematic effort to destroy the NLD.[132] Most party leaders, including Aung Sun Suu Kyi, were imprisoned. Although after nearly six years Aung San Suu Kyi was officially released from house arrest in 1995, the military regime placed her under strict surveillance and restriction. Aung San Suu Kyi confirmed that her release

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129 Bertil Lintner, "The Election Charade," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 18 January 1990, p. 15.

130 Rodney Tasker, "Military Maneuvers," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 12 July 1990, p. 10.

131 Ibid., p. 11.

132 Ibid.

was an attempt by SLORC to rehabilitate itself in the eyes of the West and offer foreign investors "the shameful and shabby rags of a patched-up political conscience with which to wrap up their speculative forays into the country".[133] The move effectively opens the opportunities for foreign companies to invest in Burma. Ironically, the world viewed her release as a positive step, both toward dialogue and reconciliation between the two adversaries i.e. the *Tatmadaw* and NLD for the democratization of Burma which was in fact far from true.[134]

The victory of the NLD took the military by surprise. In order not to recognize NLD victory, SLORC stated that the election was not to elect a new parliament but to elect a "constituent assembly". The assembly would only have the power to draft a new constitution, which had to be ratified by SLORC upon completion.[135] The Director of the Defense Service Intelligence (DDSI), General Khin Nyant, who is believed by many to actually hold the real power in Burma, asserted that only SLORC has the right to legislate.[136]

The NLD believed that it is the legitimate government of Burma after it won the 1990 election. One of its first official acts was to declare that it had the authority to void all laws and regulations imposed by the SLORC during the past

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[133] Michael Christopher, "Reflection on a Visit to Burma," Asian *Survey*, vol. XXXIX, no. 2, March/April 1999, p. 541.

[134] Mya Maung," The Burma Road to the Past," p. 272.

[135] Burma, Asia 1991 Yearbook, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, p. 86.

[136] Ibid.

decade and then declare all laws of the military as illegal. Recently, in January 1999, the NLD sued the military, specifically the military intelligence, for attempted destruction of the party.[137]

On November 1997, the *Tatmadaw* made the transition from calling itself the SLORC to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). There were also reshuffles of cabinet ministers. The Chief of the Bureau of Special Operations stressed that SPDC was a military government that planned to transfer state power back to the people. He did not say when this would occur, but stressed the government was laying the grounds.[138]

G. STRENGTHENING TATMADAW CAPABILITIES AFTER THE 1988 COUP

Determined to strengthen its power, the *Tatmadaw* has undergone tremendous expansion in terms of its strength and military equipment from the time it took over in 1988. The military regime has been spending more than sixty percent of the central government's budget on the military at a time when ethnic insurgent activity is at its lowest level for many years.[139] In ten years, the *Tatmadaw* has spent on 140 new combat aircraft, 30 naval vessels, and numerous rocket launch systems, tanks, armored personnel carriers and other

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137 David I Steinberg: "Burma/Myanmar and the Dilemma of United States Foreign Policy," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 21, no. 2, August 1999, p. 286.

138 Periscope Daily Defense News Capsules, United Communication Group. December 16, 1997)

139 J. Mohan Malik, "Myanmar's Role in Regional Security; Pawn or Pivot?," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 19, no. 1, Jun 1977, p. 55.

hardware.[140] The People's Republic of China (PRC), SLORC's closest ally and primary diplomatic and financial supporter, is reported to have thus far supplied more then US1.5 billion dollars worth of arms to Burma, including fighter aircraft, radar equipment, patrol boats, heavy artillery, tanks, anti-aircraft missiles, guns and ammunitions for SLORC's military modernization drive.[141]

By the beginning of 1995, *Tatmadaw* strength stood at 265,000 thousand officers and men with the main combat element consisting of 223 infantry battalions.[142] The *Tatmadaw* aims to field a 500,000 man-army, one of the largest in Southeast Asia.[143] The rapid increase in the army was achieved through a vigorous recruitment campaign. There have been reports of recruits being accepted as young as fifteen years old and the military has also said to be enlisting orphans and homeless children, counting on their gratitude to ensure loyalty to the military regime.[144] The oppositions argues that SLORC has created a series of imagined external threats to secure a military grip on power, to

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140 Mary P. Callahan. "Junta Dreams or Nightmare? Observation of Burma's Military Since 1988", (unpublished), 1999, p. 1.

141 Malik, "Myanmar's Role in Regional Security; Pawn or Pivot?" p. 55.

142 Andrew Selth, "The Burmese Army," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, vol. 11, 1 November 1995, p. 155.

143 Philip S Robertson Jr., *In Focus: Burma, Gateway to Foreign Policy*, vol. 2, no. 43, August 1997.

144 Selth, "The Burmese Army," p. 155.

preserve the cohesion of the armed forces and to provide the unity necessary for continued military rule.[145]

After 1988, the country's most senior military officer, General Than Shwe, became SLORC's chairman, Prime Minister and Defense Minister, as well as Commander-In-Chief of the Armed Forces. The positions of all Regional Commanders have been raised to the level of Major General. The number of military intelligence units has also increased from as few as twelve before 1988 to twenty three by mid-1992.[146]

Interestingly, at a 1988 conference sponsored by the regime, a Malaysian colonel recommended the down sizing of the Burmese armed forces to promote military modernization; but the *Tatmadaw* respondent emphatically denounced the idea.[147] The strengthening of the *Tatmadaw*, especially with its strong rapport with China through arms deals, may be seen as a threat to the security of Southeast Asia, but it can be argued that the expansion of the Burmese Army is in response to the domestic uprising in Burma. Furthermore, with the acceptance of Burma into ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nation) in July 1997, the possible fear of Burmese threat in that region was ruled out.

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145 Andrew Seth, "Burma and the Strategic Competition between China and India," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2, June 1996, p. 213.

146 Selth, "The Burmese Army," p.155.

147 Callahan, "Junta Dreams or Nightmare? Observation of Burma's Military Since 1988," p. 20.

Aung Sun Su Kyi argued that the acceptance of Burma into ASEAN does not have a positive impact on Burma. In an interview with the Cambodian Daily, she claimed that the *Tatmadaw* have turned out to be most oppressive after they became a member of ASEAN because, with its acceptance the *Tatmadaw* does not have to try to be "good-boys" as before. [148] To this statement the analysis would like to argue that it has been the policy of ASEAN not to interfere in the internal affairs of its members.

H. TATMADAW INVOLVMENT IN DRUG TRADE

Ironically, the military regime allows, and perhaps participates in an explosion of heroin production. Many of the SLORC's peace agreements with ex-communist rebels and other ethnic minorities in the northeastern border regions seem to have allowed the former guerillas to remain active in the drug trade within the infamous Golden Triangle region across Burma's frontier with China, Thailand and Laos.[149] It has been estimated that there was an increase of nearly 400 percent in Burma's heroin production since the junta took power in 1988. Additionally, opium production has doubled, equaling all legal exports and making the country the world's biggest heroin supplier. Burma now supplies the United States with 60 percent of its heroin imports and has recently become a

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[148] Bernard Krisher, "Start With Unity", *International Herald Tribune*, 17 February 2000.

[149] Malik, "Myanmar's Role in Regional Security; Pawn or Pivot?" p. 55.

major regional producer of methamphetamines.[150] Around the world, this flood of cheaper and purer heroin is causing a vast new wave of addiction.

Critics claim that the SLORC's policies seem to have made drug money an integral part of Burma's economy. Drug money is reportedly used to finance military hardware purchases from China and elsewhere.[151] With 50 percent of the economy unaccounted for, drug traffickers and government officials are able to integrate spectacular profits throughout Burma's permanent economy.

I. THE TATMADAW IN GENERAL

Since its active participation in politics in 1958, the Burmese Armed Forces have been the most open channel of social mobility in Burma's society. They have enjoyed a considerable advantage, compared to other public institutions, in attracting the most qualified individuals in the country. Many of the economic enterprises developed and controlled by the army were viewed by the military as a means to secure their own future. As a result, the military is willing to safeguard its interest when it feels that its interests are being threatened. Political power became after 1958, an inducement for those with aspirations for mobility. For the senior officers, this balance of rewards meant renewal of the "golden age" before and immediately after independence. Thus, it can be argued

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[150] Leslie Kean, "The Burma Singapore Axis: Globalizing the Heroin Trade," Covert Action Quarterly, Spring 1988, available at http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Global_Secrets_Lies/BurmaSingapore_Drugs.html, accessed on 2 February 2000.

[151] Lintner, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency since 1948*, p. 314.

that the military enjoyed special privileges and status that tended to set it apart from the rest of the society.

J. CONCLUSION

Despite being theoretically ousted by the people in the election in 1992, a military regime still holds power, spending forty percent of the national budget on the military to fight its own people. Some observers view Burma as nothing less then a fight between good and evil. On one side is the movement for democracy led by 1991 Nobel Peace Prizewinner, Aung Sun Suu Kyi, and on the other side is the military junta, SLORC. The fight even encompasses the name of the country; the democracy movement calls it Burma, while SLORC insists on Myanmar.[152]

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[152] Philip S Robertson Jr., *In Focus: Burma, Gateway to Foreign Policy*, vol. 2, no.43, August 1997.

V. BURMA'S MILITARY EDIFICE: UNITED OR DIVIDED

A. INTRODUCTION

Building a powerful and huge army was undoubtedly the vision of the post Ne Win and the post 1988 generation of government and army leaders. Judging its ability to curb the strong opposition of the pro-democracy movement and also the insurgencies, it seems as though the *Tatmadaw* is cohesive and unified in its own way. But with current developments and challenges within the *Tatmadaw*'s organization, the question arises as to whether the army is united or on the verge of collapse.

B. GENERATION OF CHANGE

Callahan argued that the unprecedented rise in power of army regional commanders and the emergence of a potential generational dissatisfaction in the officers' corps renders today's *Tatmadaw* the nemesis of both pro-reform and pro-military groups.[153] After twenty-six years of military rule, there exist two generations of army personnel. The first generation consists of those who, together with General Ne Win were responsible for the "caretaker" government and the coup of 1962. This group of military elite holds an important position in the administration. On the other hand, the second generation consists of leaders from different formative experiences than their predecessors, which has

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[153] Callahan, "Junta Dreams or Nightmare? Observations of Burma's Military Since 1988," p. 2.

influenced to some degree, their values, decisions and tactics.[154] The second generation officers have never led men into battle against external threats as compared to their predecessors who fought for independence against the Japanese and the British. In fact, the second-generation juntas were only involved in counter-insurgency campaigns that have met with varying degrees of success. Today, officers as high ranking as majors and in some case lieutenant colonels probably have less combat then road building experience.[155]

The gap between these two generations has resulted in an increasing gap of experience between senior and junior officers. This problem of generational factions is relatively new for the military. The experience of these junior officers in supervising conscript labor in infrastructure projects throughout the countryside may make them more sympathetic to the needs of the less fortunate within the society.[156]

With the resignation of former General Ne Win in 1988, after twenty-six years at the helm of the army and the country, Burma experienced its first major generation of change in army leadership. A junta made up of officers with no World War II or "revolutionary" experience replaced the prior regime. After a decade of State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and State Peace

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[154] Ibid., pp. 11-12.

[155] Lintner, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency Since 1948*, pp. 65-69.

[156] Callahan, "Junta Dreams or Nightmare? Observations of Burma's Military Since 1988," p. 14.

and Development Council (SPDC) rule, army leaders are far more completely in charge of the national political apparatus than when the Burmese Socialist Program Party (BSPP) was in power. At times, this second generation of officers appear frustrated by the old generation, particularly of Ne Win's role in precipitating the crisis of 1988, which led to an enormous loss of prestige for the army.[157] Unlike the second generation *Tatmadaw*, the Thai Young Military Officers Guard, "Khana Thahan Num" (The Thai Young Turks) turned against their leadership by influencing successful coups of 1977 and 1980. These officers tend to view their senior officers as corrupted, and blamed them for the failures of counter-insurgencies and the loss of the military's prestige among the populace.[158] The distinction between the pro-reform Thai "Young Turks" and the junior officers in today's *Tatmadaw* is that the Thai officers were sent straight into the Vietnam War after being commissioned, and this resulted in their becoming 'gelled' into a political organization.[159] The older generation of the Thai army and national leaders were getting these young officers and their men killed in underfunded, poorly strategized counterinsurgency campaigns. Therefore, their pressing for reforms of both the military and political system had life-or-death

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157 Ibid., p. 11.

158 Chai-Anan Samudavanija, "The Thai Young Turks," *Southeast Asia Strategic Studies*, 1982.

159 Callahan, "Junta Dreams or Nightmare? Observations of Burma's Military Since 1988," p. 14.

urgency. Callahan argues that it is difficult to know whether junior *Tatmadaw* officers will ever feel a similar sense of life-or-death urgency.[160]

C. THE RISE OF REGIONAL COMMANDERS AND THE MILITARY INTELLIGENCE

A notable change during the rule of the SLORC and its successor, the SPDC, has been the rise of regional commanders. With the military take over in 1988, there was an increased regional command from nine to twelve. Due to the 1988 mass uprising throughout Burma, and the defeat of the army backed by the National Unity Party (NUP), the central government then gave regional commanders informal *de facto* authority over anything they were interested in.[161] In many ways their powers resemble the warlords of the twentieth century China.

The SLORC gave the regional commanders the tasks of developing their constituencies, which included the building of roads, new towns and also promoting tourism in their area of command. Throughout the 1990's, tension arose between the regional commanders and the central government in Rangoon due to vast, and sometimes uncontrollable, powers of the regional commanders. Thus, in order to check the increased powers of the regional commanders, the Rangoon leadership managed to lure the most powerful commanders to Rangoon, so as to tighten the SLORC's control over the rest.[162]

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[160] Ibid.

[161] Ibid., p. 4.

[162] Ibid., p. 5.

Furthermore, with the reorganization of the junta into the SPDC in November 1997, drastic measures were taken to ensure that regional commanders abided by the rules laid down by Rangoon. These measures included demoting the regional commanders to less powerful posts or assigning them ministerial portfolios. Their positions have been replaced by junior flag officers. But evidence shows that even these young flag officers after holding this position for some time have the urge to accumulate wealth and powers for personal gain. As Callahan points out, to-date, the Rangoon-based junta has tried different mechanisms to lure regional commanders to tow the regime's line, but none have seriously changed the organizational set up that devolves power to military commanders up-country.[163]

Another sign of fissures within the *Tatmadaw* is between the line command and the military intelligence community. The formation of a sixteen-man "political committee" on September 18, 1988, is significant because it is chaired by General Khin Nyunt (SPDC Secretary I) of the military intelligence and is composed of many of his associates. It may signal the formation of a government-related political party and a first sign of a challenge to General Than Shwe (Chairman of SPDC) and the regional line commanders, who increased their role in the leadership in the November 1997 transformation from SLORC to SPDC.[164]

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[163] Ibid., p. 6.

[164] David I. Steinberg, "Burma/Myanmar and the Dilemmas of U.S," p. 298.

D. CHALLENGES TO TATMADAW'S SOLIDARITY

Although it seems that there may be a threat in the army's solidarity, historically, the *Tatmadaw* has remained, by Asian standards, remarkably unified. Ironically, when compared to other officer corps in Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines, the military leadership has never been seriously threatened by challenges from within.[165] There have been only two instances when intra-army tensions threatened army cohesion. In both cases, army leadership had little difficulty eliminating dissent. The first was in 1958, when army field commanders backed a coup attempt that would displace not only the political, but probably the military leadership as well. This was resolved by political negotiation and by the posting of the fractious field commands to overseas embassies.[166] The second incident was a plot against Ne Win in 1976 by young military officers, which were uncovered, and the leader was sentenced to death. The Minister of Defense, General Tin Oo, had to pay the price when he was sentenced to seven years in prison for not reporting what he knew about the plot.

During the last couple of decades, three factors most likely account for the continued unity of the officer's corps:[167]

1. Dismantling the socialist economy and state has opened up a vast array of patronage opportunities over which the army has undisputed control. As

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[165] Callahan, "Junta Dreams or Nightmare? Observation of Burma's Military Since 1988," p. 1.

[166] Ibid., p. 17.

[167] Ibid.

a result army personnel have been able to buy valuable land at cheap prices, receive under-market loans to launch businesses and channel wealth and resources towards private business people in exchange for substantial rewards.

2. The dramatic expansion of intelligence capabilities during the 1990's, which are aimed not only at eliminating political opposition among civilians but also coercing loyalty and unity within the *Tatmadaw* ranks. The Directorate of Defense Service Intelligence (DDSI), after the coup of 1988, has been expanded greatly, not only in its numbers of personnel, but also in its capabilities and territorial presence. Before 1988, there were ten to twelve military intelligence detachments under the DDSI. The number rose to seventeen in 1987 and by 1992, it had increased to twenty-three.[168] Out of these twenty-three DDSI intelligence detachments, three are responsible for the surveillance of army, air force and navy personnel. They depend on informers from within the ranks and dossiers are compiled on units and individuals in the military.[169] As a result of the tight surveillance of the DDSI, plots and conspiracies among aggrieved soldiers, as well as senior officers, are immediately dealt with. Furthermore, DDSI has tracked records of military personnel involvement in formal and informal economic activities, since many of these activities are of marginal legality. Thus,

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168 Desmond Ball, *Burma's Military Secret: Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) from 1941 to Cyber Warfare*, (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1995), Chapter 5-13.

169 Ibid., p. 89.

through these means, the DDSI maintains great influence in ensuring continued obedience of the military.

3. Among the officer corps, an "us-vs them" mentality has been embedded in which the military ("us") has always done the right thing and the masses ("them") has often been dangerously misguided, as in the 1988 uprising. Additionally, propaganda campaigns boosting the military's spirit can be found in government-sponsored magazines and television. The slogan aired during television commercials reminds the masses that anyone who tries to break up the *Tatmadaw* is the enemy and "No matter who tries to divide us (*Tatmadaw*) we will always remain united".[170]

The loyalty-patronage, close observation and siege mentality does not guarantee a long-term cohesion for the armed forces. This is why there has been a great expansion of intelligence gathering inside the forces as the *Tatmadaw* leadership is worried about intra-military threats. Additionally, the drastic increase in the recruitment of army personnel since the end of 1988 from 45,000 to 195,000 has created an organizational nightmare for anyone who may aspire to challenge the army leadership.[171] Army units are being positioned throughout the country in a way reminding not only the masses, but also those unhappy officers that the military establishment is ready to act if and when it is threatened.

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[170] Callahan, "Junta Dreams or Nightmare? Observations of Burma's Military Since 1988," p. 19.

[171] Bertil Lintner, "Lock and Load," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, September 1990, p. 28.

The other sign of the regime's nervousness rests in the expanding activities of the military intelligence Office of Strategic Studies (OSS); an organization that lately has been bestowed unlimited powers.[172] The OSS department seems to have taken responsibility for coordinating, and perhaps even initiating, policies in areas as significant as the drug trade, the economy, ethnic affairs and foreign affairs.[173] OSS even took charge of the Pondaung Primate Fossil Exploration archaeological project, in which they themselves declare they have no expertise. The exploration has produced false claims that fossils found in the Pondaung region prove that "human civilization began in our motherland"[174] and that "harmony among all ethnic groups existed in Burma all the way back to the Neolithic period".[175] As argued by Callahan, it is important to remember that OSS would not make such dubious claims unless senior military officials perceived a need to demonstrate a sacred past to justify their stranglehold over a shakier present.[176]

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172 Bertil Lintner, "Velvet Glove," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 7 May 1988.

173 Ibid.

174 May Maung Aung, "National Museum, the Symbol of Myanmar Pride and Honor", Myanmar Information Sheet, 29 December 1997. Available at http:/homepage.go.com/~myanmarinfosheet/1997/1997.htm, accessed on December 1999.

175 Callahan, "Junta Dreams or Nightmare? Observations of Burma's Military Since 1988," p. 23.

176 Ibid.

E. CONCLUSION

Although in most cases when dealing with the civilian, the *Tatmadaw* appear united, but in actual fact there exist cracks within the institution. The most serious are the center-periphery disputes between the regional commanders and the inter-generational tension. Thus, it can be argued that the SPDC is confronted with two major problems; the rise of people's power demanding democracy and an end to military rule, and preventing its own institution from cracking.

VI. CONCLUSION

A. WHY TATMADAW IS ABLE TO SUSTAIN ITS RULE

The question of why the *Tatmadaw* has been able to sustain its rule until today has been a mystery to most people. The survival of the military regime in Burma continues as one of the surprises of politics in Southeast Asia, especially, after the 1998 downfall of Suharto and the military rule in Indonesia. The evidence is overwhelming that the military is determined to maintain strict control over all-important sources of power in the society. The regime ruled by military decree (which was the pattern between 1962-1974) and then through a civilianized regime essentially hostage to the *Tatmadaw* under a new planned constitution drafted by the military, thus, mandating military control over a unitary state.

Based on the findings contained herein on the phases of Burma's military rule, it can be argued that the military has played an important role in Burmese politics since the Japanese occupation in 1942, i.e. with the emergence of the Burma Independence Army (BIA). From that period onwards, there was no turning back as the military began to influence the history of Burma politically, socially and economically until today. The military has portrayed itself, and would like to appear to be, the nexus of power and the sole protector of the state against external enemies, although there are no credible external threats to national unity that require massive military power.

Invoking the legend of its noble origin and victorious campaigns against the imperialists before Burma gained its independence, the *Tatmadaw* assumed a self-defined concept of being the "savior of the nation", claiming to be the only "untainted" institution forming the bulwark of the nation's independence and sovereignty. As such, the military interpreted its role as an autonomous institution dedicated to preserving the unitary character of the state against centrifugal tendencies brought about by the follies of self-serving politicians. The *Tatmadaw* perception of its role can be exemplified through all the phases of its rule, beginning with the "caretaker" government when it took over the civilian government, until today.

One can also argue that the weakness of the civilian government after Burma gained its independence in 1948 contributed to the beginning of the military's active participation in politics. The failure of the civilian leadership to construct a stable order provided a context for the military to invoke security imperatives as a legitimate excuse for direct intervention. This can be exemplified by the inefficient U Nu's government of 1948 during the first phase of civilian government, which led to the formation of the military "caretaker" government. Whilst the second phase of the civilian rule (1960 to 1962) saw the split in the AFPFL (the ruling party) which led to a coup of 1962. Furthermore, the Tatmadaw's influenced was enhanced with the ambitious General Ne Win who took the opportunity to embark upon his political career under the cloak of military professionalism. Although Ne Win does not hold a political post any

longer and has removed himself from the limelight of Burma's politics, many critics assume that he still plays an important role in the political decisions of the *Tatmadaw*. Furthermore, most of the high-ranking officers today are his loyal subjects.

For the past thirty-seven years (1962-1999), since the *Tatmadaw* took over the country, it can be said that Burma has had a distinct two-class society; the privileged military elite and the masses. Fear surrounds the *Tatmadaw* that should a civilian government come to power in Rangoon, the military will not only lose the privileges and standard of living they have enjoyed, they will also be held accountable for their past atrocities. Therefore, to ensure that they still hold power, in order to safeguard their interest, the *Tatmadaw* embarked upon various policies and tactics of suppressing its rivals.

The ethnic minorities, which comprise at least a third of the country's population, have been in conflict with Rangoon since independence was gained in 1948. Additionally, these ethnic minorities are also in conflict among each other, thus giving the *Tatmadaw* an upper hand when dealing with the minorities. Although there have been seventeen cease-fire agreements between the SLORC and the insurgent leaders since April 1989, none of the fundamental political and constitutional issues have been addressed.[177] As one of the leading foreign experts on Burma's minorities, Martin Smith, has put it, "post-colonial

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177 Peter Carey, "From Burma to Myanmar: Military Rule and the Struggle for Democracy," *Conflict Studies 304*, Research Institute for the Study of Conflict and Terrorism, 1997, p. 8.

Burma has yet to find a cohesive national and political identity, which will both bring lasting peace and allow the country to take its proper place in the internal community of nations".[178]

The failure to seek national identity based on shared political interest, as adhered to by the founder of modern Burma, General Aung San, through the Panglong agreement of February 12, 1947, with the Chin, Kachin, and Shan minorities, has caused a continuous cycle of agony in Burma which threatens the neighboring states.

Furthermore, those who oppose military rule are unable to unite, either on goals or tactics, to mount a major challenge to the *Tatmadaw*. The government has never really been challenged because the *Tatmadaw* leaders control the means of violence; they remain a cohesive unit while the oppositions remain divided.

As long as extreme military repression remains the regime's ultimate sanction, it is difficult to predict the future of Burma. The military junta has looked upon the opposition leaders as threatening its authoritarian rule. As a result, the SLORC took precaution by enhancing its legal armory against the democratic opposition by enacting Law No. 5/96 of June 7, 1996, which threatens a twenty-year prison sentence against anyone expressing their political views publicly.[179] Thus, the widespread repression and threats of the *Tatmadaw* especially to the

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[178] Ibid., p. 9.

[179] Ibid., p. 20.

democratic opposition party NLD leaders Aung San Su Kyi made it more difficult to continue to function as a political leader.

Carey argues that democracy is still a living force in Burma and one which cannot be manipulated out of existence through the machinations of current National Convention or a military dominated constitution with its spurious multi-party system.[180]

Although world reaction to SLORC'S oppression was strongly critical, the military continues to jail opposition leaders and dominate every facet of the society. It looks like democracy and pluralistic, liberal civil-military relations in Burma still have a long way to go.

General Aung San's warning, before his untimely death, that the *Tatmadaw* should never become separate from the people, but should be their refuge and protector, does not seem to hold truth.

B. THE FUTURE OF BURMA

It can be argued that the *Tatmadaw* leadership is now held together because the members need each other to survive and to retain the prerequisites of their commanding positions. However, based on this case study, there seems to be serious cracks in the *Tatmadaw* institution.

General Ne Win can be said to be the man responsible for holding the *Tatmadaw* together. He has been an important figure since Burma's

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[180] Ibid., p. 8.

independence in 1948, an autocratic leader since the coup of 1962, and the strongest personality in the country. His influence on Burma's military today has been a question to most observers. Some argue that he is the man behind all *Tatmadaw* major decisions, but his mere presence may be a source of both fear and respect. General Ne Win's (he is eighty-four years old) death may change the path of the *Tatmadaw* and Burma in particular, and may effect those active military personnel closely associated to him.

C. CONCLUSION

The argument of Nordlinger, based on his book *Soldiers in Politics: Military Coups and Government* proved to be well suited in the analysis of Burma's military involvement in the socio-political sphere, providing a balanced road map in looking at why the *Tatmadaw* intervened in Burma and how it is able to sustain its rule through the present. Based on the case study of the *Tatmadaw*, it can be deduced that Nordlinger's hypothesis on why the military intervened in Burma holds truth. Nordlinger's argument of economic difficulties, social fragmentations and political instability as reasons for military intervention are well suited to describe military intervention in Burma. As proven based on this historical case study, the weakness of the civilian government led by U Nu in 1948 onwards and the social fragmentation, led to military intervention, thus allowing the *Tatmadaw* to portray itself as the "savior of the nation".

This thesis has traced the development of the *Tatmadaw* socio-political role from the beginning of its existence with the Burma Independence Army until

today. The *Tatmadaw* direct involvement in the economy, is not likely to effect its willingness to relinquish its powers to the cry's of the pro-democracy movement led by charismatic leader, Aung Sun Suu Kyi, and the demand of the outside world. However, with the present cracks in its institution, it is difficult to predict Burma's future.

Lastly, it can be argued that formidable obstacles block the democratic forces from reclaiming Burma. However, who could have anticipated the sudden changes that prevailed in Indonesia which brought about the sudden fall of Suharto and military rule? Perhaps Burma will be next.

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