

# Griffith Asia Institute

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## Regional Outlook

ALL GOING ACCORDING TO PLAN?  
THE ARMED FORCES AND GOVERNMENT IN  
MYANMAR

Andrew Selth

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## Executive Summary

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It has become the conventional wisdom that the transition from authoritarian rule to a more democratic form of government in Myanmar has taken place because of the tireless efforts of Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD), the pressures brought to bear on the military regime by the international community and the regime's belated recognition that Myanmar could not continue down the path of political, economic and technical isolation without becoming weaker and more vulnerable. This narrative suits most of the main actors in this drama, both within and outside Myanmar, many of whom have been quick to claim credit for a remarkable success story. However, it denies independent agency to the most important player, namely Myanmar's armed forces (Tatmadaw). Indeed, it can be argued that the democratic transition has taken place only because the country's military leadership permitted it to do so, according to a plan which they drew up some 15 years ago and are still in the process of executing.

In considering this alternative explanation for developments in Myanmar over the past decade or so, the Tatmadaw's current political role, and the possibility of a return to direct military rule, four key points need to be kept in mind.

First, Myanmar's military leaders did not have to give up direct power and launch a transition to what they called a 'disciplined democracy'. They were not forced to do so by military defeat, external pressure, internal unrest or the efforts of Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD. Indeed, when President Thein Sein's new administration took office in 2011 the military regime was stronger than at any time since the 1962 coup and, albeit not without cost, it probably could have remained in power for years.

Second, the current political arrangements, under which the Tatmadaw occupies a privileged position in the government, is the result of a detailed plan devised by the armed forces leadership. The basic components of this plan were set out in a seven-step 'roadmap' to 'a modern, developed and democratic state' announced by Prime Minister Khin Nyunt in 2003. Critically, it includes the 2008 constitution, which is heavily weighted in favour of the armed forces and envisages a coalition government including both elected civilians and members of the Tatmadaw.

Third, in considering and implementing this plan, the armed forces leadership must have anticipated, and accepted, the broad outcomes which can be seen today. If that was not the case, it could have manipulated or halted the process at any time. The scope of Thein Sein's reforms and the legislature's relative independence may not have been foreseen, and the creation of the State Counsellor's position was unexpected, but the NLD's electoral landslide in 2015 and Aung San Suu Kyi's continuing leadership of the party would not have come as a surprise.

Fourth, the Tatmadaw remains the most powerful institution in Myanmar. The constitution guarantees it a central role in national life, including the right to act independently from the civilian administration in all matters relating to security. It controls the means of exerting state force. Both directly and indirectly, there are many ways in which the generals can influence political, economic and social developments in the country without resorting to anything as drastic as direct military intervention.

Given the enormous effort made since 2003 to establish the current political landscape, and to safeguard the Tatmadaw's strong position within it, it defies logic that the generals would now seek to weaken its fundamental structure, let alone overthrow it, as

is occasionally predicted. Indeed, in many respects, the generals want the new government to succeed. Clearly, there are areas of disagreement, such as the biased 2008 constitution, but the Tatmadaw and NLD share many of the same goals.

As long as the Tatmadaw's position, as guaranteed by the constitution, is not seriously threatened, and the generals do not perceive any critical threats to Myanmar's unity, stability and sovereignty (the former regime's three 'national causes', now enshrined in the 2008 constitution) then they are unlikely to try and take back direct control of the government. They will vigorously protect their own interests but will let the NLD administration see out its first term, however poorly it might perform. It is difficult to predict what will happen after the general elections due in 2020, but much will depend on the Tatmadaw's opinion of the next elected government and the latter's willingness to accept the constraints imposed upon it by the constitution.

The armed forces will remain the ultimate arbiters of power in Myanmar and, as far as can be judged, the generals do not envisage the advent of a genuine democracy in the foreseeable future.

## Author's Note

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After the Myanmar armed forces crushed a nation-wide pro-democracy uprising in September 1988, the country's official name (in English) was changed from its post-1974 form, the 'Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma', back to the 'Union of Burma', which had been adopted when Myanmar regained its independence from the United Kingdom (UK) in January 1948. In July 1989 the new military government changed the country's name once again, this time to the 'Union of Myanmar'. At the same time, a number of other place names were changed to conform more closely to their original pronunciation in the Burmese language. In 2008, after promulgation of a new national constitution, the country's official name was changed yet again, this time to the 'Republic of the Union of Myanmar'.

The new names have been accepted by almost all countries, the United Nations and other major international organisations. A few governments, activist groups and news media outlets, however, still cling to the old forms, apparently as a protest against the former military regime's human rights abuses and its refusal to introduce a genuinely democratic system of government. The old names were also believed to be the strong preference of then opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who was held under house arrest by the military regime for almost 15 years. Questioned about the official name of the country soon after her party took office in 2016, the State Counsellor stated her continuing preference for the colonial-era term 'Burma', but said that both names were acceptable.<sup>1</sup> In this paper the official names have been used, although 'Burmese' has been retained to describe the dominant language of the country. Such usage does not carry any political connotations.

The armed forces effectively ruled Myanmar from the 1962 coup but, from 1974 to 1988, they exercised power through an ostensibly elected 'civilian' parliament. On taking back direct control of the country in September 1988, the armed forces abolished the old government structure and created the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which ruled by decree. In November 1997, apparently on the advice of a United States-based public relations firm, the regime changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), but continued to rule through executive fiat. In 2008, it held a constitutional referendum, which was followed by carefully managed elections on 7 November 2010. The resulting national parliament, consisting of both elected officials and non-elected military officers, met in January 2011. A new government was installed under President Thein Sein in March that year.

On 8 November 2015, a new general election was held which, by most accounts, was reasonably free and fair. The result was a landslide for the NLD, which secured 390 of the 491 seats (or 79.4%) contested at the Union level. It secured 255 seats in the 440-seat lower house (*Pyitthu Hluttaw*) and 135 seats in the 224-seat upper house (*Amyotha Hluttaw*). The armed forces are allocated 25% of the seats in both houses, but this gave the NLD a majority in the combined Union Assembly (*Pyidaungsu Hluttaw*). As a result, it was able to elect a new president in 2016 and pass a law creating the position of State Counsellor for Aung San Suu Kyi (who under the 2008 constitution is unable to become president).<sup>2</sup> The national charter states that the president 'takes precedence over all other persons' in Myanmar but, even before the elections, Aung San Suu Kyi had made it clear that she was going to be 'above the president' and act as the country's de facto leader.

After the UK dispatched troops to the royal capital of Mandalay and completed its three-stage conquest of Burma (as it was then called) in December 1885, Yangon

(formerly Rangoon) was confirmed as the administrative capital of the country. It remains the commercial capital, but in October 2005 the SPDC formally designated the newly built city of Naypyidaw (or Nay Pyi Taw), 327 kilometres north of Yangon, as the seat of Myanmar's government. Where they appear in this paper, the terms 'Yangon regime', or in some cases simply 'Yangon', are used as shorthand for the central government, including the military government that was created in 1962 and re-invented in 1974, 1988 and 1997. The government after 2005 is referred to as the 'Naypyidaw regime', or 'Naypyidaw', to reflect the administrative change that took place that year.

Another term used in this paper is *Tatmadaw* (literally 'royal force'), the vernacular name for Myanmar's tri-Service (ie army, navy and air force) armed forces. In recent years, this term has gained wide currency in English-language publications on Myanmar. Sometimes, the Tatmadaw is referred to simply as 'the army', reflecting that Service's overwhelming size and influence, compared with the other two. While the term 'Defence Services' usually refers only to the armed forces, it is sometimes used in a wider context to refer to the armed forces, the Myanmar Police Force, the 'people's militia' and sundry other paramilitary forces. On occasion, the Myanmar Fire Services Department and Myanmar Red Cross have also been included in this category.

This Regional Outlook draws on a presentation given at the Australian National University in Canberra on 19 March 2017. It also reflects judgements made in a number of short articles that have been published over the past year or so. References are given where appropriate in the paper, but three articles in particular are relevant. One was posted on the *New Mandala* website on 16 November 2015, under the title 'The realities of power in Myanmar'.<sup>3</sup> Another was published in the *Nikkei Asian Review* on 8 May 2017 under the title 'Why Myanmar's military is not plotting a coup'.<sup>4</sup> The third was posted on *Australian Outlook* on 3 June 2017 under the title 'Aung San Suu Kyi and the Tatmadaw'.<sup>5</sup>



# 1. Introduction

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*After the first democracy government led by President U Thein Sein, it has now been the second democracy government led by President U Htin Kyaw. After the state authority was peacefully handed over by the former government, it is the stand of the army to keep the national tranquillity, solidarity and development to support the multi-party democracy system selected by the people.*

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing  
72<sup>nd</sup> Anniversary of the Armed Forces Day  
27 March 2017<sup>6</sup>

It has become the conventional wisdom in the Western democracies and elsewhere that the transition from authoritarian rule to a more democratic form of government in Myanmar has taken place because of the tireless efforts of Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD), the various pressures brought to bear on the military regime by the international community and belated recognition by the generals that Myanmar could not continue down the path of political, economic and technical isolation without becoming weaker and more vulnerable.<sup>7</sup> This narrative suits most of the key actors in this drama, in particular Aung San Suu Kyi supporters, activists and human rights campaigners. Indeed, many of them have been quick to take credit for what appears to be a remarkable – and, considering the failed democratic transitions elsewhere, rare – success story.<sup>8</sup> This interpretation of events is not entirely incorrect. However, it denies independent agency to the most important player in this drama, namely Myanmar’s armed forces (Tatmadaw).

There is another way of looking at the extraordinary paradigm shift which has occurred in Myanmar’s political landscape over the past decade or so. That is, by recognizing the key developments during this period as steps in a long term plan drawn up some 15 years ago by the country’s military leadership, which willingly surrendered absolute power in order to achieve a number of specific ends. If this explanation of the democratic transition in Myanmar is accepted, then it throws a different light on Aung San Suu Kyi’s NLD government and its relations with the Tatmadaw. It also suggests that the international community can only play a limited role in determining the future course of the country’s transition from a ‘disciplined democracy’ to a genuine democracy. As in the past, that process will be decided mainly by actors within Myanmar, not least the armed forces.

## 2. Stepping Back

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Despite their dominance of Myanmar's national life for over half a century, the country's armed forces remain something of a mystery.<sup>9</sup> There have been occasional glimpses into their closed world, and a few Myanmar-watchers have attempted to describe their organizational structure, order of battle and capabilities.<sup>10</sup> However, little is reliably known about their inner workings and the thinking of the military high command.<sup>11</sup> The reasons behind certain decisions made by the generals have defied investigation. Such gaps in the public record have tended to be filled by anecdotes, rumours and speculation. Since the armed forces stepped back from day-to-day government in 2011 and launched a 'genuine, disciplined, multi-party democratic system' under President Thein Sein, Myanmar-watchers have shown a particular interest in the Tatmadaw's political role.<sup>12</sup> Some of them have also explored the possibility that, under certain circumstances, the generals might re-exert their power and take back direct control of the country.

Conspiracy theorists have gone further and argued that the generals already have a secret plan to bring down Aung San Suu Kyi's government and install a new military regime. In their view, ever since the NLD took office in early 2016 the armed forces have deliberately played a spoiling role, both to deny the fledgling quasi-civilian government a chance to establish itself, and to persuade the Myanmar population that only a strong military regime can deliver the stability, predictability and economic growth that they all want.<sup>13</sup> These pundits believe that the generals are waiting for the NLD government to collapse, and are even manufacturing security crises of various kinds to nudge it in that direction.<sup>14</sup> According to this thesis, which seems to draw on Samuel P. Huntington's 1968 book *Political Order in Changing Societies*, when the government starts to fail the Tatmadaw will step in and take back control of the country, this time with support from a population that prefers order and decisiveness over instability and inefficiency.<sup>15</sup>

In considering this theory, and similar ideas that have surfaced from time to time, it is important to bear in mind four inescapable facts about the Tatmadaw in Myanmar and its role in national politics. First, it did not have to give up power in 2011 and allow a transition to a 'disciplined democracy'. Second, it managed this process from an early stage, through a carefully considered and detailed master plan. Third, it must have anticipated - and accepted - the outcome of this process, give or take a few surprises. Fourth, the Tatmadaw is still the most powerful political institution in Myanmar and, notwithstanding attempts by Aung San Suu Kyi's government to outmanoeuvre the generals, they still exercise enormous influence over developments in the country. In those circumstances, the question has to be asked: why would the armed forces leadership want to mount a coup, when it is not necessary and would defeat the purpose of its efforts over the past decade or more to set the scene for a civilian-military coalition government.

To answer that question, and to appreciate the importance of the factors outlined above, they need to be examined in greater detail.

When Senior General Than Shwe and the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) held national elections in November 2010, and handed over government to President Thein Sein in March 2011, they were not forced to do so. As the most powerful armed force in the land, the Tatmadaw did not fear a major military defeat, or internal unrest. No insurgent group or political movement had the capacity seriously to threaten Naypyidaw. If they had chosen to do so, the generals could have continued to resist popular demands for political change, including by Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, albeit not without some difficulty. Nor, despite the claims made by some foreign politicians and activists, was the

regime overly concerned by the diplomatic pressures and economic sanctions that had been applied by the Western democracies and various international organisations since the 1988 pro-democracy uprising.<sup>16</sup> While some of these measures had a modest impact, the regime had successfully avoided them by cultivating relations with its fellow ASEAN members and major powers like China, India and Russia.

Granted, the ruling council was very unpopular and faced serious domestic problems, but when it handed over power to Thein Sein it was firmly entrenched in power. Indeed, in 2010 the military regime was stronger than it had been at any time since General Ne Win's coup in 1962. Its readiness to allow a more liberal form of government to evolve in Myanmar was not a sign of weakness and insecurity, but of strength and confidence.

As far as can be assessed, around 2002 the SPDC concluded that it was in Myanmar's best interests, and the Tatmadaw's, to embrace change.<sup>17</sup> In important ways, the country had fallen behind its regional neighbours and the rest of the world. In order to maintain its independence, security, economic growth and national prestige, it needed to become more open, more modern, more prosperous and more respected internationally. This was also seen as a way of letting some of the steam out of the pressure cooker that was Myanmar society, which for decades had been bottling up demands for greater personal freedoms, greater access to the outside world, and more imported consumer goods. At the same time, the Tatmadaw wanted to shed its responsibilities for the minutiae of government and to become truly professional (the Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) prefers the term 'a standard army'), armed with up-to-date weapons and equipment.<sup>18</sup> It hoped that it might once again be able to forge relationships with the armed forces of the Western democracies and, eventually, gain access to their superior technology.

To achieve all these ends, Myanmar had to make the transition from direct military rule to a more liberal form of government. The generals were not prepared to hand over power completely, as they did not trust an inexperienced and potentially hostile civilian administration. They were also acutely conscious of failed political transitions elsewhere in the world, and were determined that such crises would not occur in Myanmar. However, a limited, carefully controlled, top-down process of democratization promised to deliver the outcomes they sought. Accordingly, the armed forces leadership devised a seven-point 'roadmap' that envisaged the 'step-by-step and systematic' implementation of a transition to what was described as a 'discipline-flourishing democracy'. This plan was announced by Prime Minister Khin Nyunt in August 2003.<sup>19</sup>

As later outlined by the SPDC, the first step in this plan was the recall of the National Convention, which had been formed in 1992 to draft a new constitution, but suspended after the NLD representatives walked out in 1996.<sup>20</sup> The second step was the implementation of a scheme to introduce a 'genuine and disciplined' democratic system. The third step was the drafting of a new constitution in accordance with the 'basic' and 'detailed basic' principles laid down by the National Convention. The fourth step was the holding of a national referendum to endorse the draft constitution. The fifth step was the election of the legislative bodies (*Pyithu Hluttaws*) that were outlined in the new national charter. The sixth step was to convene the new provincial (ie State and Region) and national assemblies. The last step in the SPDC's roadmap was described as the construction of 'a modern, developed and democratic state' by elected representatives, the government and 'other central organs formed by the Hluttaw'.<sup>21</sup>

Setting aside questions raised by the nature of this process, and the final result, it can be argued that the military regime did precisely what it promised to do. Despite pressures to amend or abandon the roadmap, from both within and outside Myanmar, it was followed closely.<sup>22</sup> Military spokesmen emphasised that it was the only viable path to political reform. A new constitution, ostensibly drafted by the National Convention but clearly reflecting provisions pre-determined by the military regime, was put to a referendum in 2008.

According to figures later published by the SPDC, it was endorsed by 92.93% of the country's 4.58 million eligible voters.<sup>23</sup> Elections for both provincial and national legislative assemblies were held on 7 November 2010. In part because the NLD boycotted the poll, the result was a landslide victory for the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which won almost 80% of the seats contested at the national level. The new members of parliament were sworn in the following January, and in March 2011 the combined houses elected Thein Sein president.

Continuing this process, by-elections were staged on 1 April 2012 to fill 48 seats left vacant after MPs had died or resigned to take up ministerial appointments. The NLD, which was re-registered for the elections in December 2011, claimed that fraud and rules violations were widespread, but the party still won 43 of the 45 seats then available.<sup>24</sup> One successful candidate was the party's leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, who stood for the seat of Kawhmu Township, north of Yangon. On 8 November 2015, another general election for both provincial and national assemblies was held. By all accounts, it was reasonably free and fair. The result was a landslide for the NLD, which secured 390 of the 491 seats (or 79.4%) contested at the Union level. (The NLD also secured 476 of the 629 seats in the 14 State and Region assemblies).<sup>25</sup> Its majority in both houses ensured that it could elect the new president. Under the constitution, Suu Kyi could not take this position, as her two sons were foreign nationals, but the post of State Counsellor was created especially for her. Even before the elections she had made it plain that, if denied the top job, she would consider herself 'above the president', and act as Myanmar's de facto leader.<sup>26</sup>

Critical to the seven-step roadmap was the promulgation of a new constitution, which set out the basis for the Tatmadaw's continuing role in national politics. One quarter of the seats in all provincial and national assemblies were reserved for serving military officers. This gave the armed forces the power of veto over any proposed constitutional amendments. Three ministries, namely Defence, Home Affairs and Border Security, were reserved for senior military officers appointed by the C-in-C. This effectively meant that the military leadership not only controlled the armed forces but also the police force, the national bureaucracy and immigration policy. In addition, the Tatmadaw controlled the National Defence and Security Council (NDSC), a potentially powerful body through which states of emergency could be declared and control of the country could, in certain circumstances, be handed back to the armed forces. In its administration and operations, the Tatmadaw was made completely independent from the government. Also, members of the armed forces were granted special legal status.

Their position thus protected, the generals could step back from day-to-day government, confident that security and other critical aspects of Myanmar's internal affairs remained effectively under their control. These arrangements also meant that, despite the transition to a 'disciplined democracy', the Tatmadaw remained the most powerful political institution in Myanmar. It could not be weakened, or its role diminished, by a civilian administration without amending the constitution and that was not possible without the agreement of more than 75% of the Union parliament. As Robert Taylor wrote in 2015, 'Only the army can end its own role in Myanmar's politics, and that decision is dependent on its perception of the civilian political elite's ability to manage the future'.<sup>27</sup> He might have added, 'and protect the Tatmadaw as a national institution'.

### 3. Anticipating Change

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There were other factors involved, and in practice the process was not quite as smooth or straightforward as suggested by the brief outline given above. However, the fact remains that this remarkable transformation of Myanmar's political landscape in barely a decade occurred because the Tatmadaw's high command conceived it, planned it and managed it. If they had wanted to do so, the generals could have intervened at any stage of the process and made adjustments. For example, the 2015 elections were held, were relatively free and fair, and produced a reasonably accurate result, because the leaders of the armed forces permitted them to occur and did not interfere. It may not have been easy, or without certain consequences, but if they had wanted to they could have ensured that the elections were cancelled, postponed, or manipulated to give a different outcome. After all, the generals had interfered in polls before, either to ignore the final result, as occurred in 1990 after the NLD resoundingly won the elections that year, or to ensure they got the result they wanted, as seen in the 2008 constitutional referendum.

Given the wide geographical distribution of military bases in Myanmar, the Tatmadaw's extensive intelligence apparatus and the regime's control of the country's internal affairs through the General Administration Department (GAD), the armed forces high command would have known well in advance of the 2015 poll that a free and fair election would result in a decisive victory for Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD. The final statistics may have come as a bit of a surprise (before the poll some respected foreign analysts were questioning whether the party could achieve a landslide) but the outcome could not have been in doubt.<sup>28</sup> This being the case, it can be assumed that, well before the election took place, the army, probably in consultation with President Thein Sein and its key supporters, took a collective decision to accept the results. There is no tradition in Myanmar of sharing political power, but the generals must also have faced the prospect of negotiating responsibility for the future governance of the country with Aung San Suu Kyi, whether or not she became president.

This being the case, the high command knew in advance that it would have to strike a deal of some kind with the winning political party, for there to be a viable administration. The massive show of popular support for Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD on 8 November 2015 gave them enormous moral authority and a strong bargaining position, but it did not guarantee them a free hand to form a government and shape Myanmar's future. Under the arrangements put in place by the former military regime, that could only be done in cooperation with the armed forces. In that regard, both the Tatmadaw's leadership and Aung San Suu Kyi knew that they would not gain anything from a direct confrontation. That would only cause internal turmoil, hurt the Myanmar people and see Myanmar condemned internationally. If it got out of hand, such a clash of wills would inevitably slow down the democratic transition process. In certain circumstances, it could even halt it. That would benefit no-one, least of all Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD.

Aung San Suu Kyi is known to have held three meetings with the C-in-C in the months following the 2015 election. The subjects discussed at these meetings have not been revealed, but it can be assumed that they covered her wish to become president and future power sharing arrangements.<sup>29</sup> While her bid for the presidency was ruled out by the C-in-C, who doubtless cited the 2008 constitution, it would appear that a *modus vivendi* was reached between Aung San Suu Kyi and Senior General Min Aung Hlaing that allowed them both to move forward.<sup>30</sup> It was never going to be an equal or comfortable arrangement, but with both sides keeping to their main areas of responsibility it seems to have worked, after a fashion.<sup>31</sup> It is hard to escape the conclusion, however, that the

armed forces have successfully retained the whip hand. After the NLD had been in office for a year one observer wrote that 'The most disappointing feature of the NLD government is that it time and time again appeared to align itself with military interest ... either through supportive statements or abject silence, without making clear any difference between their objectives and interest'.<sup>32</sup>

Even so, implementing this master plan carried certain risks. The generals could not foresee every eventuality. Once a process of democratic transition is set in train, it tends to develop a life of its own. As the French political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in his 1856 book *L'Ancien Regime et la Revolution*, 'The most dangerous moment for a bad government is when it begins to reform'.<sup>33</sup> In Myanmar's case, the generals probably did not expect Thein Sein's reform program to be as broad or to be implemented as quickly as it was. Under Speaker Thura Shwe Mann, the new legislature showed a surprising degree of independence. The creation of the State Counsellor's position in 2016 appears to have taken the generals by surprise. There was the possibility that, by allowing a more liberal administration to emerge, the population would demand even greater freedoms and take to the streets to obtain them. Also, the prospect of a more enlightened military regime could have encouraged the international community to apply even greater pressure for a full democracy, rather than welcome (with reservations) the advent of a controlled, top-down transition to a quasi-democracy, as in fact occurred.

## 4. Maintaining Control

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The NLD's majority in the national parliament opened up a range of possibilities, and gave it certain public relations benefits, but Aung San Suu Kyi's freedom of action and ability to work the levers of power were heavily circumscribed. The 2008 constitution could have been written with the current scenario in mind. The Tatmadaw chiefs clearly anticipated the possibility that the armed forces might one day be faced with a potentially hostile parliament. This was precisely why they built in various measures to protect the Tatmadaw's position and core interests, and to guarantee its central role in national affairs. That is also why the generals view the constitution as 'the main or mother law' of Myanmar, which they are determined to safeguard.<sup>34</sup> With this in mind, the armed forces have firmly opposed all moves by the NLD to amend the constitution, in particular those provisions that cover the presidency and the armed forces' guaranteed 25% of the seats in all assemblies.

Future amendments have not been ruled out entirely, but Tatmadaw spokesmen have consistently stated that changes to the 2008 constitution will only be permitted when Myanmar's democracy has 'matured'.<sup>35</sup> The generals will decide when that stage has been reached. Faced with that situation, the NLD has tried to find ways around the charter's more restrictive provisions. It is a long and detailed document, clearly written to cover all eventualities, but the NLD has managed to find some loopholes which it has been quick to exploit. The most notable example is the party's use of its parliamentary majority to create the State Counsellor's position, in the face of strong opposition from the military bloc.<sup>36</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi's claimed status 'above the president' is in direct violation of the constitution, which specifically states that the president 'takes precedence over all other persons' in Myanmar.<sup>37</sup> This may lead to a challenge in the Constitutional Tribunal, but the outcome is likely to favour Aung San Suu Kyi. The tribunal is elected proportionally by the president (who is an Aung San Suu Kyi loyalist), and the two houses of parliament, in both of which the NLD holds a majority.

Another way in which Aung San Suu Kyi has tried to outflank the Tatmadaw was to appoint her own National Security Advisor (NSA) in January 2017. The post, filled by a former diplomat, was created 'in order to advise the president and the Union Government on internal and external threats by assessing situations from a strategic point of view'.<sup>38</sup> The nature of these threats, and how the NSA would coordinate his advice with strategic intelligence assessments provided by the Tatmadaw and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was not specified.<sup>39</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi has also refused requests by the USDP and several of the smaller parties to convene a meeting of the NDSC, to discuss a range of internal security problems, not least the bitter conflicts in Myanmar's northern and western provinces.<sup>40</sup> Her refusal appears to stem from a suspicion that, given the Council's predominantly military membership, the C-in-C could use such a meeting to pursue his own agenda. There is some debate over the respective powers of the president and the Commander-in-Chief but, under the 2008 constitution, the latter can declare a partial or national emergency.<sup>41</sup>

If the Tatmadaw was seriously concerned about any of the NLD's policies, however, and wanted to change them, it does not need to intervene directly, or resort to anything as drastic as a coup. There are many other ways in which it can influence developments and exert pressure on Aung San Suu Kyi's government, if it wished to do so.

There are 15 governments in Myanmar, 14 State and Region assemblies and the national government in Naypyidaw. There are also a number of special administrative zones, covering small ethnic groups like the Wa and Naga. However, in practice the

administration of Myanmar is highly centralised. The constitution was designed to keep control of the country in the hands of a small number of officials. For example, the States and Regions elect their own assemblies but all Chief Ministers are appointed by the president. The constitution also gives wide-ranging powers to the C-in-C. As noted above, he appoints the ministers of Defence, Home Affairs and Border Affairs. Also, through the GAD, which was created in 1972 by General Ne Win, the C-in-C has direct, centralised control over government administration down to the lowest level. All State and Region civil services are also under GAD management. This situation gives the Tatmadaw considerable scope to influence government policies and actions.<sup>42</sup>

As Robert Taylor has pointed out, the civil service has long been ineffective.<sup>43</sup> Many officials lack managerial expertise, and are used to operating through personal relationships rather than established bureaucratic procedures. After decades of a hierarchical command culture, answering to an authoritarian government, there is no tradition of public officials taking the initiative, challenging decisions or reporting failures. Corruption is rife. Also, when the NLD took office, over 80% of senior civil service positions were occupied by former servicemen and women, raising the prospect of divided loyalties.<sup>44</sup> As Renaud Egretteau has written, over decades the officer corps has been socialized into believing that the Tatmadaw is the sole and uncontested embodiment of the state.<sup>45</sup> After the 2015 elections, the senior ranks of the civil service pledged support for the NLD government, and a few officials have even been appointed to ministerial positions. However, there is still resistance to change in the bureaucracy and considerable potential for its manipulation by the armed forces.

The NLD has continued to allocate a large percentage of the national budget to Defence (around 14% in 2016).<sup>46</sup> The Tatmadaw also receives funds from a range of off-budget sources and, under a 2011 law, is permitted to use other means to find the resources it needs to meet its responsibilities. Should the NLD try to put pressure on the Tatmadaw by reducing its share of central government expenditures, however, there is bound to be strong pushback from the generals on the grounds that they have a duty to ensure the country's unity, stability and sovereignty. The campaigns being conducted in Myanmar's west and north, for example, have already incurred serious operational costs. The role of the armed forces in the national economy has been gradually declining since 2011, as the Tatmadaw has given up some of its monopolies and its two main conglomerates, the Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd and Myanmar Economic Corporation, have begun paying taxes. Should it wish to do so, however, the armed forces and their 'capitalist cronies' (who occupy influential positions) could also exert pressure on the government by exercising their considerable economic power.<sup>47</sup>

Being independent in national security matters, the Tatmadaw has another powerful lever with which to exert pressure on the NLD government, and that is through its combat operations. One of the government's highest priorities is what Aung San Suu Kyi has dubbed the "21<sup>st</sup> Century Panglong" peace process, aimed at achieving a comprehensive settlement with about 20 ethnic armed groups. Yet, there is no hope of a ceasefire agreement, let alone a nation-wide peace settlement, without the full cooperation and support of the armed forces. Over the past year, the Tatmadaw has launched or renewed counter-insurgency campaigns against several ethnic armed groups in northern and eastern Myanmar. This heightened military activity has complicated relations between the NLD government and the ethnic minorities.<sup>48</sup> The C-in-C has also taken a hard line on issues like disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration and security sector reform.<sup>49</sup> The armed forces cannot control the peace process, which involves many players at different levels, but they can certainly affect its progress and possible outcomes.

The NLD is also hostage to the Tatmadaw's activities in Rakhine State. After attacks by Muslim militants against three border guard posts in October 2016, army and police units have conducted "area clearing operations" against Rohingya communities. There



have been hundreds if not thousands of casualties and an estimated 70,000 refugees have fled into Bangladesh.<sup>50</sup> The brutal tactics employed by the security forces have left Aung San Suu Kyi and her government looking weak and ineffectual, if not actually complicit in human rights violations. They have also been exposed to scathing international criticism. Even Aung San Suu Kyi's fellow Nobel laureates have accused her of failing the most fundamental test of humanity.<sup>51</sup> To answer these charges, and to protect her government's reputation, the State Counsellor is largely dependent on the willingness of the Tatmadaw to moderate its behaviour. The generals' influence over her government can be gauged by the fact that she has repeatedly declined invitations to criticise the security forces. Indeed, she has protected them, for example by refusing to permit a United Nations fact-finding mission to visit Myanmar and investigate charges of widespread human rights abuses.<sup>52</sup>

Last but not least (and the country's non-state armed groups aside), the Tatmadaw enjoys a monopoly of the means of applying force in Myanmar. The C-in-C commands the estimated 350,000-strong army, navy and air force.<sup>53</sup> In recent years, all three Services have been strengthened with modern arms and equipment. They have become more proficient at conducting conventional warfare, including joint operations. Also, through the Home Affairs Minister, a senior army officer who he appoints, the C-in-C can deploy the estimated 85,000 strong Myanmar Police Force, which has over 30 well-armed security battalions.<sup>54</sup> Many of these units are made up of former soldiers and are combat trained. In extremis, the C-in-C can also call upon other elements of the so-called 'Defence Services', which interpreted broadly include militia units and other paramilitary forces, the Fire Services and the Myanmar Red Cross. Should he ever choose to exercise it, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing thus commands the ultimate sanction against any political leader or government that challenges the Tatmadaw's self-appointed role.

Through all these means, the armed forces are able to exercise a powerful influence over Myanmar's political, economic and social affairs, short of direct intervention. In conducting government, and considering the country's immediate future, Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD need to make due allowance for this reality, and to maintain some kind of working relationship with the military leadership. To reject such a course of action would have dire consequences.<sup>55</sup> As Maung Aung Myoe has observed, 'the 2008 constitution is essentially designed by the military to find its ruling partner in Myanmar politics'. It was never designed to cede complete control of the government, let alone the country, to civilian politicians.<sup>56</sup> To be effective, the current government must therefore operate in a coalition comprising both military and civilian elements. Also, as Aung San Suu Kyi has acknowledged, a genuinely democratic system of government cannot be introduced into Myanmar without the Tatmadaw's full agreement and active cooperation.<sup>57</sup>

## 5. Coup Rumours

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Given the Tatmadaw's privileged position at the centre of Myanmar's political life, the enormous influence that it can wield, and the hold that the C-in-C appears to have over Aung San Suu Kyi and her government, a military takeover in the foreseeable future seems highly unlikely. Even so, reports of an impending coup surface from time to time, exciting commentators both inside and outside the country.

In recent years, professional Myanmar-watchers have been sceptical that the C-in-C harbours any intentions to seize power, but they have considered the possibility.<sup>58</sup> In 2013, for example, a few analysts put the likelihood of a coup occurring over the next five years as high as 20%. Others believed that the odds were much lower, but felt that a coup was still possible.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, some observers argued that, notwithstanding President Thein Sein's surprisingly independent stance and broad-based reform program, the country was still effectively under military control, so the question of a coup did not arise. To them, Thein Sein's administration was a sham. They felt that the 2008 charter – like the 1974 socialist constitution before it – was simply a political device that permitted the Tatmadaw to continue running Myanmar behind the façade of a quasi-civilian government.<sup>60</sup> In those circumstances, there would be no need for a coup, as the military leadership could simply manipulate the current system to get whatever it wanted.

This argument underestimated the extent of the political changes occurring in Myanmar at the time. It also failed to take full account of the independence shown by both President Thein Sein and *Pyitthu Hluttaw* Speaker Thura Shwe Mann. That said, given the military backgrounds of these two officials, and many others in the new administration, not to mention the USDP's dominance of the parliament, such a view was not without some justification. Since Aung San Suu Kyi, President Htin Kyaw and the NLD took office in early 2016, the claim that the government is simply a front for the Tatmadaw is no longer tenable. The political landscape is now much more complicated. The advent of an elected semi-civilian administration, however, has increased fears of a military takeover. Indeed, as the government has faced mounting criticism over its poor performance, tensions within the NLD have risen and the working relationship between Aung San Suu Kyi and the C-in-C has shown signs of strain, such stories are being heard more often.

Over the past year, coup rumours have been triggered by several developments. In November 2016, for example, after the C-in-C made a public reference to the provisions of the constitution covering states of emergency, this was interpreted as a veiled reference to an impending coup. Similar concerns were raised when the C-in-C described the Tatmadaw's political role to a gathering of European Union military chiefs, and told a National Defence College group that the Tatmadaw would always have a role to play in Myanmar's national political life.<sup>61</sup> When the USDP, together with 12 other minor parties, called upon President Htin Kyaw to call a meeting of the NDSC, also in November 2016, some observers saw the request as a sign that a military takeover was in the offing.<sup>62</sup> Three non-lethal bomb blasts in Yangon in November 2016, and reports of an increase in the national crime rate, also prompted stories that the armed forces might step in to restore law and order. According to yet another report, the government's unwillingness, or inability, to protect civilians displaced by the military campaigns in northern Myanmar has also heightened concerns about a coup.

One particular incident that prompted a spate of coup rumours was the murder of prominent NLD lawyer and constitutional reformist Ko Ni in January 2017. This incident is still shrouded in mystery, but it prompted several commentators to suggest that there were elements associated with Myanmar's armed forces prepared to take extreme measures to prevent any challenges to the 2008 constitution and to subvert Aung San Suu Kyi's government. To back up this claim, these pundits pointed to the fact that a number of the suspects in the

murder conspiracy had military backgrounds. Shortly after this incident, Larry Jagan alluded to Naypyidaw's failure to meet popular expectations and wrote that 'many analysts and foreign businessmen fear that recent events in Myanmar have pushed the country to the verge of implosion'.<sup>63</sup> He continued 'And it has once again brought the possibility of a military coup to the fore'. A few months later, Jagan opined that 'Myanmar's military leaders are planning a coup ...'.<sup>64</sup> He said that 'There is no doubt that the military top brass have prepared contingency plans to take over power, as they can under the constitution, if they deem it necessary'.<sup>65</sup>

Conspiracy theorists have gone further and argued that the generals have a secret plan to bring down Aung San Suu Kyi's government and install a new military regime. A few have even suggested that this was always the generals' intention. In their view, ever since the NLD took office the armed forces have deliberately played a spoiling role in order to deny the new government a chance to establish itself, and to persuade the Myanmar people that only a strong military regime can deliver the stability, reforms and economic growth they all want.<sup>66</sup> According to this thesis, the generals are waiting for the government to collapse, and may even be manufacturing security crises (for example, by mounting aggressive military campaigns in northern Myanmar and assassinating Ko Ni) to tip it in that direction. Some senior government figures seem to share this view. For example, one has openly accused the Tatmadaw of spreading false rumours (in this case, that President Htin Kyaw was about to resign) in order to destabilise the NLD administration.<sup>67</sup> The more incompetent the civilian government looks, the conspiracy theory goes, the greater will be the demand for a more decisive and efficient regime.<sup>68</sup>

Such arguments, however, are unconvincing. They fail to recognize that the NLD inherited a host of difficult problems when it took office, problems that the generals know from their own experience defy easy solutions. Also, the NLD has been responsible for many of its own failings. It was ill-prepared to take power in 2016, and since then has not performed well. Aung San Suu Kyi's imperious leadership style and tendency to micro-manage government business has contributed to its inability to make significant progress. In any case, any attempt to disrupt the government could backfire on the Tatmadaw. It would sully their name and raise doubts about their commitment to security and stability. They would gain little from assassinating Ko Ni. Indeed, that incident has already raised questions about the competence of the country's police and intelligence agencies, which fall under the military-led Home Affairs Ministry.<sup>69</sup> The C-in-C has already emphasised the fundamental importance of the 2008 constitution. He does not need to underline the point with a highly provocative and public act of murder.

As Mary Callahan has pointed out, rumours of a coup have been greatly exaggerated.<sup>70</sup> The various statements made by the C-in-C can be viewed 'as less a pretext for a return to military control than the expression of a fundamental commitment by the military and its allies to the constitution that put the NLD in power and protects its position there'.<sup>71</sup> In addition, as Callahan states, there is little chance that the armed forces would contemplate a takeover of the government while it is fighting a new insurgency in the country's west and a full-fledged war against an alliance of armed ethnic groups in the north. Besides, the question has to be asked: why would the generals willingly burden themselves once again with the suite of complex political, economic, social and foreign policy problems that Aung San Suu Kyi and her government are currently having to grapple with. The Tatmadaw probably has contingency plans to use in the event of a breakdown in law and order, but that would only be prudent, given the poor performance of the NLD government and the record of failed political transitions elsewhere.

That is not to say, however, that there are no issues that might prompt the Tatmadaw to intervene more directly in Myanmar's internal affairs. The reasons why it might do this can be examined at the national, institutional and personal levels.

## 6. Intervention Triggers

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At the national level, the armed forces are deeply committed to Myanmar's sovereignty, unity and internal stability, as they judge such matters. These goals were encapsulated in the former government's three 'national causes' and have been enshrined in the 2008 constitution. Any developments which threaten the country in these ways would greatly concern the military leadership and raise the possibility of intervention of some kind. The perceived external threat to Myanmar has greatly diminished since 2011, when the international community more or less embraced President Thein Sein and his reform program.<sup>72</sup> The NLD's election in 2015 was widely welcomed and further reduced the perceived threat from abroad. However, there are still up to 100,000 armed men and women in the country who do not, or only begrudgingly, recognise Naypyidaw's authority. Some are actively waging guerrilla wars, while others remain armed and potentially dangerous.<sup>73</sup> A number have been designated Border Guard Forces and placed under the Tatmadaw's technical control, but their reliability is suspect.

Also, civil unrest can suddenly erupt in Myanmar over a wide range of issues. Further religious violence, fanned by Buddhist extremists, remains a strong possibility.<sup>74</sup> There have also been protests against the government and local businesses over contentious issues such as land ownership, law reform, press freedoms, low wages, union membership, working conditions and the increased cost of living.<sup>75</sup> Encouraged by a greater awareness of the situation in other countries, thanks to satellite television and the Internet, and the relaxation of various laws since the demise of the military government, strikes and public demonstrations have increased.<sup>76</sup> Dissatisfaction with the government is growing. These tensions have been exacerbated by declining international confidence in the NLD government. Foreign direct investment is slipping, and with it the rate of economic growth. According to one observer, 'the military top brass are convinced that they will have to take over control of the country to prevent it imploding. They are convinced that Aung San Suu Kyi's government is failing, and it is only a matter of time when they will have to be the saviours'.<sup>77</sup>

At the institutional level, the armed forces would be concerned at any attempts to deny them their special place in national affairs. This is not only spelt out in the constitution, but has been reaffirmed by the Commander-in-Chief on numerous occasions.<sup>78</sup> Most military officers are intensely nationalistic and take seriously their perceived role as guardians of the country, with the responsibility to step in and 'save' Myanmar, if that was believed necessary. The military leadership is also likely to act if the Tatmadaw itself was under threat. For example, should the government or parliament drastically reduce the defence budget, or seriously try to restrict the armed forces' sources of off-budget income, there is likely to be trouble.<sup>79</sup> The Tatmadaw would be particularly concerned if it felt it was being denied the men and materiel necessary to fulfil its duty to 'safeguard the constitution'. The armed forces high command is unlikely to have been behind the murder of Ko Ni, but the accusations levelled at it were based on the widely-held belief that any attempts to weaken the Tatmadaw's grip on power, for example by amending the constitution, would be answered by firm action.<sup>80</sup>

At the personal level, the Tatmadaw would be unhappy about any attempt to remove the clause in the constitution that effectively grants its personnel immunity from prosecution for human rights violations committed under the former military government. Aung San Suu Kyi has repeatedly expressed her support for the Tatmadaw as an institution. She has declined to dwell on past events or to seek retribution for past injuries, either to herself or others. However, if any NLD politicians, activists or members of the international community revived efforts to put Myanmar military personnel on trial for past crimes, that would prompt a strong reaction.<sup>81</sup> A few junior officers and

men may be sacrificed on the altar of public opinion from time to time, but any attempts to prosecute senior officers for human rights violations, for example against the Rohingya, would be resisted.<sup>82</sup> Another scenario that deserves at least passing mention is an attempt by a faction within the armed forces to slow down the reform process or to preserve certain perks and privileges.<sup>83</sup> It has been suggested, for example, that some younger officers resent the fact that current and proposed changes to Myanmar society may deny them the opportunities for personal enrichment enjoyed by their predecessors.

All that said, the Tatmadaw is not the institution it once was, and there are significant constraints on direct military intervention. There would inevitably be a strong reaction to a coup, both within the country and outside it. It could spark the internal unrest, and bring back the external threats, that the high command has been so keen to reduce through its guided democratic transition process. Also, given the 2015 election result, it would appear that Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD government enjoy considerable support in the ranks of the armed forces. The generals would need to weigh carefully the benefits of a takeover against the possibility that it could cause a serious breakdown in military discipline. There are doubtless some members of the armed forces who regret their loss of power, and take satisfaction from the NLD's current troubles. However, the high command seems content to leave the difficult and messy business of governing to the NLD, while keeping a watchful eye on key areas of interest and reaping the rewards on offer. These include increased foreign contacts, additional arms purchases and heightened economic opportunities.<sup>84</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

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One question often asked since 2011 has been: when will the Tatmadaw 'return to the barracks'? This reflects a widespread wish for a genuinely democratic and civilian government in Myanmar, but it misses a vital point. The Tatmadaw has never seen itself as having separate military and political roles, with the first naturally having primacy over the second. Rather, it is deeply imbued with the idea that, since the country regained its independence in 1948, the armed forces alone have been responsible for holding the Union together, defeating its enemies – both internal and external – and saving the country from chaos. This has given rise to an abiding belief, strengthened by training and indoctrination programs, of the importance of 'national politics', as opposed to 'party politics'. It has also led to the conviction that the Tatmadaw has both a right and duty to supersede other state institutions if circumstances demand. It was on this basis, for example, that the armed forces took power in 1962, and crushed the 1988 pro-democracy uprising.

As Robert Taylor has written, after the latter upheaval the Tatmadaw 'set out on its own to reunify or, as later termed "reconsolidate", the country in order to create the conditions for passing authority to a constitutional government'.<sup>85</sup>

A coup against Aung San Suu Kyi's government is highly unlikely. The generals do not want to run Myanmar – at least not directly. They are determined to protect the Tatmadaw, its prerogatives and central place in national life. For this, they will continue to rely on the 2008 constitution. They will also respond to any significant challenges (as they perceive them) to the country's unity, stability and sovereignty. The former regime's three 'national causes' were always more than mere slogans. They were reflections of a deep commitment by the highly nationalistic armed forces leadership to certain core policies and values. These causes will be cited to justify military operations against ethnic armed groups and, if considered necessary, the Rohingyas. They will also be used to explain the Tatmadaw's continuing political role. The modus vivendi between the civil and military authorities will not be an easy one, but broadly speaking the generals want the NLD government to succeed, as they share many of its goals. They too want Myanmar to be strong, modern, prosperous, stable, united, independent and respected.<sup>86</sup>

If the generals have a plan to cripple or even bring down the NLD government, as suggested by conspiracy theorists, then they have the means. However, the only plan for which there is any evidence is the one that helped the NLD take office. That has largely been implemented. The argument that the generals wanted to see the NLD win power so that they could see it fail, demonstrating the inability of civilians to govern Myanmar, and perhaps to reveal Aung San Suu Kyi's personal shortcomings, is unconvincing. So too is the argument that the generals have a second secret plan, which is deliberately to weaken the NLD government by creating security crises. That would defeat the purpose of the first plan. The generals can certainly be accused of playing a 'cunning game', but their main aim has been to step back from day to day government and allow a transition to a more democratic system, albeit one in which the Tatmadaw still exercises considerable influence.<sup>87</sup> The NLD government's poor performance to date has doubtless convinced the generals that they were right to be cautious, and to retain control over the process.

The Tatmadaw is never going to abandon a political role altogether, but the generals hope to be able to extricate themselves from the routine of government. This will take time. In 2003, when Prime Minister Khin Nyunt launched the seven-step roadmap, he did not specify a timeframe. However, he seemed to envisage a 15–20 year period

before Myanmar could become a guided democracy. This proved to be an accurate estimate. It may take a similar period of time before a genuine democracy is achieved, if indeed that ever proves possible. In his 2014 Armed Forces Day speech, for example, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing referred to the need for a 'gradual reduction' in the Tatmadaw's political role as the country 'matures in democracy'.<sup>88</sup> He has repeated this message on a number of occasions since the transfer of power to Aung San Suu Kyi's government in 2016. On other occasions, the C-in-C has suggested that it may take another one or two five-year parliamentary terms for Myanmar to reach the stage at which power could be completely handed over to an elected civilian administration.<sup>89</sup>

The criteria for the level of 'political maturity' sought by the Tatmadaw have never been spelt out, but clearly 'stability and reconciliation' will be paramount concerns. That includes a nation-wide peace settlement, but any agreement will need to satisfy the Tatmadaw's abiding concerns about unity, stability and sovereignty. At present, such an outcome seems a distant prospect. For example, the generals are sceptical about a federal state, or one that accommodates independent fiefdoms. They also insist that all non-state armed groups lay down their arms before negotiations begin in earnest. That is unacceptable to most ethnic groups. A collection of small military forces, under a rotating national leadership, as proposed by some of the groups, is anathema to the Tatmadaw high command. Apart from their conviction that Myanmar must have a strong central government, protected by a single national military organisation, the generals are conscious of the dangers – as demonstrated elsewhere in the world – of agreeing to any kind of handover of power before all internal conflicts are resolved.<sup>90</sup> That sets a very high bar for an enduring national peace settlement and, by extension, the transition to a full democracy.

The Tatmadaw has always seen itself as playing a balancing role between competing political parties.<sup>91</sup> In that regard, the C-in-C recently gave a clue to another measure that might be applied by the generals, before the transition to a full democracy can occur. According to a reliable source in Yangon, the Senior General was reported to have said in May 2017 that the Tatmadaw did not want to be directly engaged in politics, but felt it had no choice. He noted that, for there to be a stable democracy in Myanmar, there needed to be two independent political parties. At present, he said, there is a democratic party which was not independent, namely the pro-military USDP, and a party that is independent but not democratic, ie the NLD. Explaining this last remark, he is reported to have said that the country was currently being ruled by a 'democratic dictatorship'. This suggests that, in his view, the NLD is weak and divided, held together only by Aung San Suu Kyi's forceful personality. Some foreign observers share this view.<sup>92</sup> Referring to the democratic transition process, the C-in-C's final judgement was apparently 'We still have a while to go'.<sup>93</sup>

Myanmar always has the capacity to surprise, which makes it difficult to predict what the future may hold. However, the outlook for the next four years seems to be more of the same, with Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD government struggling to overcome their own weaknesses and the many other obstacles they face to deliver promised reforms. Some key policies, such as the negotiation of a nation-wide peace agreement with ethnic armed groups, will continue to encounter obstacles, not least the hard line favoured by the armed forces. Trust levels across the political spectrum will remain low. There is little chance that the government will go as far as the international community would like, in addressing the Rohingya problem. A scenario favoured by some Myanmar-watchers is for a revitalised and strengthened pro-military party, possibly led by a retired Min Aung Hlaing, to contest the next national elections in 2020.<sup>94</sup> Even then, the next government will most likely be another combination of civilian and military elements, governing in an uneasy coalition within the constraints of the 2008 constitution.

Whatever happens, the armed forces will remain the ultimate arbiter of power in Myanmar and, as far as can be judged, the generals do not envisage a full transition to a genuine democracy in the foreseeable future.



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