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INTELLIGENCE AND INTELLIGENCE AGENCIES IN MYANMAR SINCE THE 2021 COUP

Andrew Selth

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About this Publication

'Intelligence and intelligence agencies in Myanmar since the 2021 coup'

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

Lucian W. Pye
*The Spirit of Burmese Politics*¹



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Preface

In 2019, I published a short institutional history of Myanmar's intelligence agencies, from their beginnings under General Ne Win's socialist regime (1962–88) to the fall of General Khin Nyunt as Chief of Intelligence (CI) in 2004.² The book ventured a little beyond that date, but its aim was mainly to update a study of Myanmar's intelligence apparatus which had first appeared in 1997 as a working paper by the Australian National University's Strategic and Defence Studies Centre (SDSC).³ A revised version was published in the academic journal *Intelligence and National Security* in 1998.⁴ The emphasis of the book was on the then current state of affairs and contemporary developments. As such, it did not look at the colonial antecedents of Myanmar's intelligence system, or go into very much detail about the socialist period. It was followed by several other pieces on this broad subject, notably a policy paper prepared for the Stimson Centre in Washington DC, and a chapter written for Bob de Graaf's edited book *Intelligence Communities and Cultures in Asia and the Middle East*.⁵ These and a few other projects permitted me to make some additional observations, for example about the survival and growth of Myanmar's national intelligence apparatus under the quasi-democratic government of Aung San Suu Kyi (2016–2020).⁶

Given the military coup in Myanmar on 1 February 2021, and the country's rapid descent into a bloody civil war, a strong case can be made for the revision and expansion of the 2019 book. Accordingly, it has been decided to add at least three chapters. The first will investigate the development of the state's coercive apparatus during the British colonial period, up to the outbreak of the Second World War in Asia (1824–1941). The intelligence systems that evolved under General Ne Win and later military regimes are in one sense *sui generis*, but it can be claimed that they have antecedents in the way that the British sought to watch closely over and control their new province and (after its formal separation from India in 1937) their new colony.⁷ Another new chapter will try to look at the ways in which intelligence, and the junta's intelligence agencies, have been used since the 2021 *coup d'état*. Also, the shadow National Unity Government (NUG) has at least four intelligence

agencies of its own. While they are still in their infancy, this suggests that, albeit from a markedly different perspective, the opposition movement accepts that Myanmar needs some kind of organised intelligence system at state level. This too warrants a new chapter in the second edition of the book.

Myanmar's intelligence apparatus during the British colonial period was examined in my GAI research paper *Coercion and Control in Colonial Burma: The Birth of an Intelligence State*.⁸ It suggested that, contrary to the conventional wisdom, the key player in this regard was not the army, but the police force. Despite the creation of a Burma Defence Bureau in 1937, the internal security of the province and, after separation, the colony, rested largely on the intelligence system operated through the Burma Police (BP), and in particular the BP's Special Branch (SB). The paper also suggested that, so vital and pervasive was this function, that Burma (as it was then known) could be described not as a police state, but as an intelligence state. In contrast, after 1948 the intelligence apparatus created by the newly independent Union of Burma was dominated by the armed forces (or *Tatmadaw*). Despite the almost complete destruction of the military intelligence organisation in 2004, this remains the case today.

This research paper briefly describes Myanmar's national intelligence system as it stood prior to the coup in 2021. It then examines (as far as possible, given the dearth of reliable information) the way in which intelligence has played a critical role in the bitter civil war that has been raging in Myanmar over the past two and a half years. For heuristic purposes, and to portray the picture more clearly, the paper has been divided into a number of chapters and sections, although many subject areas overlap. Detailed notes have been provided to help readers follow up specific issues and, if they wish, draw their own conclusions. For, as the American intelligence scholar Anthony Alcot has noted, the hyper abundance of open sources, even on a subject as obscure and specialised as this one, "makes the story much richer, but it also makes quite clear that this is a story, not *the* story".⁹

Acknowledgements

In researching and writing this paper, I was assisted by a number of colleagues and fellow Myanmar-watchers, notably Sayagyi David Steinberg, Bertil Lintner, Sean Turnell, Maung Aung Myoe and Rhys Thompson. The National Unity Government (NUG) representative in Canberra, Dr Tun Aung Shwe, was very generous with his time and resources. I am also grateful to the NUG officials based elsewhere who provided additional information. For various reasons, including the fear of reprisals at the hands of the military regime, others who assisted me did not wish to be named, but I owe them all my thanks. I am particularly indebted to one former Burmese official who comprehensively critiqued my 1998 academic article on Myanmar's intelligence apparatus and suggested a number of refinements.

Before his untimely death in 2016, I enjoyed several long discussions on this subject with Desmond Ball, who made his own intellectual excursions into Myanmar's shadowy intelligence world. At the Griffith Asia Institute, Jill Moriarty and Meegan Thorley performed their usual magic to see this paper through to publication. As always, the encouragement and support of my wife Pattie was invaluable. Needless to say, any errors of commission or omission are mine alone.

Finally, for the record, all my writings on intelligence and intelligence agencies in Myanmar draw only on open sources, represent my views alone and have no official status or endorsement.

Acronyms and abbreviations

ABSDF	All Burma Student Democratic Front	MI	Military Intelligence
AFP	Australian Federal Police	MIS	Military Intelligence Service
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations	MI6	(British) Secret Intelligence Service
ASEANAPOL	ASEAN Chiefs of National Police	MOIC-IC	Ministry of International Cooperation, Department of Intelligence Cooperation
BND	(German) Federal Intelligence Service	Mossad	(Israeli) Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations
BP	Burma Police	MP	Member of Parliament
BGEN	Brigadier (General)	MPF	Myanmar Police Force
BSI	Bureau of Special Investigation	MPT	Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications
C3C	Central Command and Coordination Committee	MRTV	Myanmar Radio and Television
CCTV	closed-circuit television	MSS	Ministry of State Security
CDM	Civil Disobedience Movement	NCSC	National Cyber Security Centre
CI	Chief of Intelligence	NGO	non-government organisation
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency	NIB	National Intelligence Board
CID	Criminal Investigation Department	NIB	National Intelligence Bureau
COIN	counter-insurgency	NLD	National League for Democracy
COL	Colonel	NSA	National Security Agency
COMINT	Communications Intelligence	NSCN	National Socialist Council of Nagaland
CRPH	Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw	NUG	National Unity Government
DC	District of Columbia	OCMAS	Office of the Chief of Military Affairs Security
DDSI	Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence	OCMI	Office of the Chief of Military Intelligence
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade	OCMSA	Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs
DIA	Defence Intelligence Agency	OR	Other Ranks
DMI	Department of Military Intelligence	OSINT	Open Source Intelligence
DSAC	Defence Services Attache Corps	OSS	Office of Strategic Studies
DSIB	Defence Services Intelligence Bureau	PDF	People's Defence Force
EAO	ethnic armed organisation	PDT	People's Defence Teams
ERO	ethnic revolutionary organisation	POW	Prisoner of War
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation	RAW	Research and Analysis Wing
FIU	Financial Intelligence Unit	RMC	Regional Military Command
GAD	General Administration Department	SAC	State Administration Council
GAI	Griffith Asia Institute	SB	Special Branch
GEOINT	Geospatial Intelligence	SDC	Security and Defence Council
GPS	global positioning system	SDSC	Strategic and Defence Studies Centre
HUMINT	Human Intelligence	SENGEN	Senior General
IED	improvised explosive device	SIGINT	Signals Intelligence
IMINT	Imagery Intelligence	SIM	subscriber identity module
INSCOM	(US Army) Intelligence and Security Command	SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
KGB	(Soviet) Committee for State Security	SMS	short message service
KIA	Kachin Independence Army	SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
KIO	Kachin Independence Organisation	UAV	unmanned aerial vehicle
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army	USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party
KNU	Karen National Union	UK	United Kingdom
LDF	Local Defence Forces	UN	United Nations
LID	Light Infantry Division	US	United States
LIG	lawful interception gateway	UWSA	United Wa State Army
LTGEN	Lieutenant General	VPN	virtual private networks
MAJGEN	Major General		



Parliament building in Myanmar. (United Nations)

Protocols and politics

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

Confucius
*The Analects*¹⁰

Protocols

After Myanmar's armed forces crushed a nation-wide pro-democracy uprising in September 1988, the country's official name (in English) was changed from its post-1974 form, the "Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma", back to the "Union of Burma", which had been adopted when Myanmar regained its independence from the United Kingdom (UK) in January 1948. In July 1989, the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) changed the country's name once again, this time to the "Union of Myanmar", which had long been the vernacular version (in the literary register, at least). In the formal declaration of the country's independence, for example, it was called the Union of Burma in the English version and the Union of Myanmar (or "Myanma") in the Burmese version. In 2011, after formal promulgation of the 2008 national constitution, the country's official name was changed yet again, this time to the "Republic of the Union of Myanmar". This name is used by the shadow National Unity Government, but on its website the NUG refers to the "Federal Union of Myanmar", the goal at the end of the shadow government's twelve-point roadmap to national renewal.¹¹

Also, in July 1989 a number of other place names were changed by the military government to conform more closely to their original pronunciation in the Burmese language. For example, Arakan State became Rakhine State and Tenasserim Division became Tanintharyi Division (later changed to Tanintharyi Region).¹² The Mergui Archipelago became the Myeik Archipelago, the Irrawaddy River became the Ayeyarwady River and the Salween River became the Thanlwin River. The city of Rangoon became Yangon, Moulmein became Mawlamyine, Akyab reverted to Sittwe and Maymyo became Pyin Oo Lwin.¹³ The ethno-linguistic groups formerly known as the Burmans and the Karen are now called the Bamar and the Kayin.¹⁴ The people of Kayah State are widely known as Karenni (Red Karen), the state's name until it was changed by the Burmese government in 1952.¹⁵

The new names have been accepted by most countries, the United Nations (UN) and other major international organisations. A few governments, activist groups and news media outlets, however, still cling to "Burma" as the name of the country, apparently as a protest against the former military regime's refusal to put the question of a name change to the people of Myanmar.¹⁶ The old name was also believed to be the preference of then opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who was held under house arrest by the military regime for periods totaling almost 15 years.¹⁷ Failure to acknowledge and use the new name has prompted complaints by successive Myanmar administrations, mainly to the United States (US) government which even now, nearly 35 years later, insists on using "Burma" in official correspondence and Congressional documents.¹⁸ All US

laws and regulations levelling sanctions against Myanmar refer specifically to "Burma".¹⁹ Questioned about the official name of the country soon after her party took office in 2016, Aung San Suu Kyi stated her continuing preference for the colonial-era term "Burma" but said that both names were now acceptable.²⁰

After the UK dispatched troops to the royal capital of Mandalay and completed its three-stage conquest of Burma (as it was then called) in January 1886, Yangon (then known as Rangoon) was confirmed as the administrative capital of the country. It remains the commercial capital, but in November 2005 the ruling military council formally designated the newly-built city of Naypyidaw (or Nay Pyi Taw), 327 kilometres (203 miles) north of Yangon, as the seat of Myanmar's government.²¹ The terms "Rangoon regime", "Yangon regime", or in some cases simply "Rangoon" or "Yangon", have been used by some authors and commentators as shorthand terms for the central government, including the military government that was created in 1962 and re-invented in 1974, 1988 and 1997. The government after 2005 was sometimes referred to as the "Naypyidaw regime", or "Naypyidaw", to reflect the administrative change that took place that year.

Another common term is *Tatmadaw*. It is usually translated as "royal force", but the honorific *daw* no longer refers to the monarchy. Since 1948, the name has been the vernacular term for Myanmar's tri-service (army, navy and air force) armed forces. In recent years, it has gained wide currency in English-language and other publications on Myanmar.²² Sometimes, the *Tatmadaw* is referred to simply as "the army", reflecting that service arm's overwhelming size and influence, compared with the other two. While the term "Defence Services" usually refers only to the armed forces, it is sometimes used in a wider context to refer collectively to the armed forces, the Myanmar Police Force (MPF), the "People's Militias" (*Pyithu Sit*), border guard forces and sundry other state-endorsed paramilitary units.²³ On occasion, the Myanmar Fire Services Department and Myanmar Red Cross have also been included in this category. As the 2008 constitution decrees that "all the armed forces in the Union shall be under the command of the Defence Services", the formal title (in English) of the *Tatmadaw*'s most senior officer is Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services.²⁴

Over the years, some components of Myanmar's national intelligence apparatus have changed their formal titles several times. The military intelligence organisation, for example, has periodically been renamed, usually to coincide with structural and personnel changes in the armed forces. These adjustments have not always been known to, or recognised by, foreign observers. Also, Burmese language titles have been translated into English in different ways. For example, the title "Office of the

Chief of Military Security Affairs" (OCMSA) has sometimes been written as the "Office of the Chief of Military Affairs Security" (OCMAS), or simply "Military Affairs Security".²⁵ The use of popular names has added another complication. For example, ever since 1948 the Tatmadaw's intelligence arm has been widely known as the Military Intelligence Service (MIS), or simply the "MI" ("em-eye"). Similarly, the Police Force's Intelligence Bureau, and later Special Intelligence Department (or, strictly translated, the "Information Police"), has long been known as Special Branch, or "SB".²⁶ All this has meant that in the literature some agencies have been called by several different names, and not always accurately.

Since the 2021 coup, many activist groups and commentators have refused to call the new military regime by its adopted title, the State Administration Council (SAC), which on 1 August that year branded itself a "caretaker government". They refer simply to "the junta" or "the military regime", names rejected by the military leadership. Senior General (SENGEN) Min Aung Hlaing has been denied any official status, being widely known as "the junta chief" or "Ma Ah La", the Burmese acronym for his name.²⁷ It is no coincidence that "Ma Ah La", with a slight tonal shift, can also be translated as "mother-fucker". The same critics have also objected to calling Myanmar's armed forces the Tatmadaw, on the grounds that they do not deserve the status and prestige that has historically been associated with that title. The opposition movement and its supporters prefer the description *sit-tat*, which in the Burmese language means "military", or "army".²⁸ This is despite the fact that "Tatmadaw" occurs in the official name of the opposition People's Defence Force (*Pyithu Kakweye Tatmadaw*, or PDF). Some governments, like that of the United States, avoid such diplomatic conundrums by simply referring in public to "the Burmese military".²⁹

Controversy also surrounds the term used to describe those ethnically-based armed groups that have been waging war against Myanmar's central government, some of them for decades. The Karen struggle, for example, has been described as the longest insurgency in the world, dating from Myanmar's independence in 1948.³⁰ For many years, these groups have been known as "ethnic armed organisations" (EAO), or variations thereof. Although it is widely used, they dislike the term "rebels", as it suggests a lack of legitimacy, both for the groups themselves and their struggles for independence, autonomy or other goals. Since the 2021 coup, not all EAOs have declared their support for the opposition movement but those that have, and are loosely allied with the NUG and PDF, are increasingly being referred to as "ethnic resistance organisations" (ERO).³¹ An alternative meaning of ERO found in some sources is "ethnic revolutionary organisations". This follows moves by some activists and academic observers to describe the current armed conflict as a "revolution" and not a "civil war" (the more common

term). This view is based on the nature of the armed struggle, the boldness of the opposition's aims and the number of people in Myanmar who appear to support them.³²

All Burmese personal names are particular. Most people do not have surnames or forenames in the Western sense.³³ Names may be one to four syllables long, and are usually chosen depending on the day of the week that a child is born (which is why many people in Myanmar share the same names). Sometimes, however, a child's name may derive from those of their parents, as is the case with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.³⁴ Also, among the majority Bamar ethnic group names are usually preceded by an honorific, such as "U", literally meaning "uncle", or "Daw", meaning "aunt". "U" can also form a part of a man's name, as in U Tin U. The titles "Maung", "Ko" ("brother") and "Ma" ("sister"), usually given to younger men and women, are also found in personal names, as in Maung Maung Aye, Ko Ko Gyi and Ma Ma Lay. To all such rules, however, there are exceptions. Some of Myanmar's ethnic minorities, like the Kachin, have family or clan names, which are placed before their given names, as in a case like Maran Brang Seng, where "Maran" is the name of a clan.³⁵ Other ethnic minorities, such as the Shan, Karen and Chin, have their own systems of honorifics and naming conventions.

In Myanmar, names can be changed relatively easily, often without seeking official permission or requiring formal registration. This situation is further complicated by the frequent use of nicknames and other sobriquets as identifiers, such as "Myanaung" (the town) U Tin, "Tekkatho" (university) Phone Naing, or "Guardian" (the magazine) Sein Win. Pen-names, *noms-de guerre* and pseudonyms also have a long history in Myanmar.³⁶ For example, the birth name of General Ne Win, who effectively ruled the country from 1962 to 1988, was Shu Maung. Ne Win, which means "bright sun" in Burmese, was a *nom de guerre* he adopted in 1941 and retained after the Second World War, probably to hide his Chinese heritage.³⁷ Some Myanmar citizens were given or have adopted Western names, including those who attended Christian missionary schools in their youth. Others use only one part of their name for convenience, for example when travelling abroad or dealing with foreigners who are unfamiliar with the Burmese naming system. It is not uncommon for an obituary to list more than one name by which the deceased was known.

In this paper, all the formal names and titles are used, except when they specifically relate to periods, events or institutions before 1989. This includes those names adopted after the coup by the opposition movement, such as the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), which in April 2021 created the shadow National Unity Government. This practice does not signify support for any particular party, faction or group. It simply reflects the reality of the current

political scene in Myanmar in a way that makes the identification of various periods, groups and institutions easier for everyone.

Finally, a word of warning about statistics is required. As any serious Myanmar-watcher would know, considerable care needs to be taken in citing any numbers.³⁸ In British Burma, a major effort was made by the colonial government to produce accurate records. Census and economic statistics were usually reliable, but police strengths and troop numbers were constantly shifting and changing, meaning that a definitive figure is often difficult to identify.³⁹ Most statistics released by the military governments between 1962 and 2015 were either based on unreliable sources, or were deliberately distorted to convey a rosier picture than was actually the case. Even statistics published by reputable organisations like the World Bank or United Nations need careful handling, as they often rely on base data provided by the Myanmar government, which can rarely be independently verified. Thus, in many modern sources, different numbers are cited by different authors, leaving researchers scratching their heads and wondering where the truth lies. In this paper, the most accurate figures available have been used, and relevant dates given, but inevitably there will still be discrepancies.

Politics

This research paper looks mainly at intelligence agencies and the use of intelligence in Myanmar since the 2021 coup. However, at the risk of repetition, it may be helpful also to sketch out some recent political developments, and to note the names of some key institutions and positions.

The armed forces effectively ruled Myanmar for half a century, since Ne Win's coup d'etat in March 1962, when he formed a 17-member Revolutionary Council.⁴⁰ From 1974 to 1988, the armed forces exercised power through an ostensibly elected "civilian" parliament called the *Pyitthu Hluttaw*, dominated by the Burma Socialist Programme Party, the country's only legal political organisation. On taking back direct control of the country in September 1988, after an abortive pro-democracy uprising, the armed forces created the State Law and Order Restoration Council, which ruled by decree. In November 1997, apparently on the advice of an American public relations firm, the regime changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), but continued to rule through executive fiat.⁴¹ In May 2008, the SPDC held a carefully contrived constitutional referendum, with predictable results.⁴² This was followed by closely managed elections on 7 November 2010. The resulting national parliament, consisting of 75 per cent elected officials and 25 per cent non-elected military officers, first met in January 2011. A new government was installed under

President Thein Sein (a former general) in March. The new constitution was promulgated the same year.

Continuing this process, by-elections were staged on 1 April 2012 to fill 48 seats left vacant after recently-elected Members of Parliament (MP) had resigned to take up ministerial appointments, or had died. The opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), which was re-registered for the elections in December 2011, claimed that fraud and rules violations were widespread, but the party still won 43 of the 45 seats available on the day. One successful candidate was the party's leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, who had been released from house arrest in November 2010.

On 8 November 2015, a new general election was held which, by most accounts, was reasonably free and fair.⁴³ The NLD received about 65.6 per cent of all votes cast, while the pro-military Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) received 27.5 per cent. Under Myanmar's "first past the post" electoral system, this gave the NLD 79.4 per cent of all the available seats.⁴⁴ It secured 255 in the 440-seat lower house (*Pyitthu Hluttaw* or House of Representatives), and 135 in the 224-seat upper house (*Amyotha Hluttaw* or House of Nationalities), a total of 390 of the 491 seats contested at the Union level.⁴⁵ Under the 2008 constitution, the armed forces are automatically allocated 25 per cent of the seats in both houses, but this gave the NLD a clear majority in the combined Union Assembly (*Pyidaungsu Hluttaw*). As a result, it was able to elect a new president in 2016 and pass a law creating the position of State Counsellor for Aung San Suu Kyi. (Under the new constitution she was unable to become president, as her two children were the citizens of a foreign country).⁴⁶

The national charter clearly stated that the president "takes precedence over all other persons" in Myanmar. However, even before the 2015 elections, Aung San Suu



The President of Myanmar, U Thein Sein meeting the President, Smt. Pratibha Devisingh Patil, at Rashtrapati Bhawan, in New Delhi on October 14, 2011. (President's Secretariat, Government of India)

Kyi had made it clear that, if her party won office, she intended to be "above the president" and act as the country's de facto leader.⁴⁷ Consequently, under the NLD the president was essentially a ceremonial head of state. For practical purposes, Aung San Su Kyi acted as head of the government, within the limits of the constitution, which ensured that considerable power was retained by the armed forces. Anomalous it may have been, but her new position was readily accepted by most other world leaders, as evidenced by her attendance at various meetings of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and (as State Counsellor) at the enthronement of the new Japanese emperor in October 2019.⁴⁸ Aung San Su Kyi was also Myanmar's Minister for Foreign Affairs and, formally at least, attended some international meetings in that capacity.⁴⁹

Another general election was held in November 2020, with an estimated voter turnout of more than 70 per cent. Despite "serious deficiencies in the legal framework" noted by neutral observers, voters were able "freely to express their wills".⁵⁰ The result was an even more emphatic victory for Aung San Su Kyi and the NLD. The party won 258 seats (58.6 per cent) in the *Pyithu Hluttaw* and 136 seats (61.6 per cent) in the *Amyotha Hluttaw*, or 83 per cent of the total.⁵¹ Having secured more than 322 of the 476 elected seats, the NLD was thus able to form a government and choose a new president. The USDP suffered dramatic losses all around the country, garnering only 33 seats in both houses. The NLD also dominated the elections for the 14 state and region assemblies, which were held at the same time. These results promised that, barring unforeseen problems, Aung San Su Kyi and the NLD would remain in office for another five years.⁵² Once again, they would govern in partnership with the armed forces which, under the 2008 constitution, were allocated three ministries (Defence, Home Affairs and Border Affairs), in addition to 25 per cent of all seats in both national and provincial assemblies.

On 1 February 2021, however, almost exactly a decade after the SPDC permitted the transition to a "disciplined democracy", those expectations were rudely dashed. Before the new parliament could meet that day, the Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, unexpectedly declared a one-year state of emergency and created a State Administration Council, made up of eight military officers and three civilians. They were later joined by six more civilians.⁵³ The SAC immediately detained Aung San Su Kyi and more than 50 other officials and activists. Many more arrests followed. A military spokesman stated that the Tatmadaw had been forced to seize power due to the NLD's failure to acknowledge massive fraud in the November 2020 elections.⁵⁴ Few

foreign observers (or indeed Burmese people) believed that that was the real reason for the coup but, despite widespread speculation in the news media and online, the thinking behind the takeover remained unknown.⁵⁵ To the people of Myanmar, however, one thing was clear. Once again, the country had an unelected military government, and faced an uncertain future.

Since February 2021, Myanmar has descended into a bitter civil war. On the one side is the junta, commanding the armed forces, the police force, the intelligence agencies, ad hoc militias, vigilante groups such as the *Pyusawhti* and death squads like the self-styled "Blood Comrades".⁵⁶ The latter two groups tend to be made up of ex-convicts, extreme Buddhist nationalists, unemployed youths and other pro-military elements.⁵⁷ USDP members, army veterans and the families of serving military personnel have also been called on to join the fight against the opposition movement. Facing them is a diverse coalition of anti-junta and pro-democracy groups. It includes the members of a nation-wide Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and followers of the shadow National Unity Government. Several ethnic armed organisations, now rebranded ethnic resistance organisations, have joined with units of the People's Defence Force to wage a guerrilla campaign against the junta.⁵⁸ Supporting them are over four hundred township-based Local Defence Forces (LDF) and hundreds of so-called People's Defence Teams (PDT).⁵⁹ The latter two categories seem to include most of the small resistance cells responsible for the "targeted killings" and bombings that have punctuated Myanmar life, mainly in urban areas, since 2021.⁶⁰

Indications are that the current political and military stalemate will continue for some time, possibly even years. The picture would of course change if there was a significant shift in the strategic environment, say if a major Tatmadaw combat unit mutinied, or if a foreign government broke ranks and (secretly or otherwise) provided the PDF with modern arms, like shoulder-fired missiles.⁶¹ The NUG has also called for the imposition of a foreign-enforced no-fly zone over Myanmar to deny the junta use of its air power.⁶² However, at this stage, such scenarios remain hypothetical. The international community does not seem prepared directly to intervene in the war. Also, neither side is in a mood to compromise. The junta has vowed to "annihilate" the opposition movement, which it describes as a terrorist organisation.⁶³ The NUG has formally declared a "defensive war" against the military regime and rejected any suggestion of a negotiated settlement. As US Counsellor Derek Cholet said at the Shangri-la strategic dialogue in Singapore in June 2022, there is currently "no off-ramp".⁶⁴ For both sides, the goal is total victory, but such an outcome is likely to prove a chimera.⁶⁵



Burmese military intelligence officers at a 1997 press conference (EMMANUEL DUNAND / AFP)

Intelligence before the coup

Authoritarian intelligence systems are best understood as "Palace Guards" whose primary aim is to secure the authoritarian regime against threats emanating most importantly from their domestic population.

Joseph M. Hatfield
"Intelligence under democracy and authoritarianism"⁶⁶

Over the past 200 years, Myanmar has experienced almost every major system of government. After the Konbaung dynasty was conquered and the kingdom annexed in three stages by the British in the 19th century, it endured various forms of colonial rule and military administration before it regained its independence and became a parliamentary democracy in 1948. From 1958 to 1960, the country was managed by an unelected “caretaker” government, led by armed forces chief General Ne Win. A brief return to democratic government followed, but that experiment was soon shut down. The military dictatorship Ne Win installed in 1962 morphed into an authoritarian one-party state when a new constitution was promulgated by the Burma Socialist Programme Party in 1974. An abortive pro-democracy uprising in 1988 was followed by yet another military regime, led by the State Law and Order Restoration Council. In 1997, it reinvented itself as the State Peace and Development Council. Under a carefully managed seven-step road map, announced by the Prime Minister (and Chief of Intelligence) in 2003, a “discipline-flourishing democracy” was allowed to emerge in 2011.⁶⁷

A tailored constitution ensured that the armed forces (*Tatmadaw*) remained largely independent of the quasi-civilian government, in which it exercised considerable power through three reserved ministries. However, that was not enough to prevent a *coup d'état* on 1 February 2021, when the Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, once again put the country under direct military rule. The junta doubtless expected resistance to this move, as had occurred after past military interventions, but in what must be seen in hindsight as a massive intelligence failure the generals completely underestimated the strength of popular feeling on the matter.⁶⁸ A large proportion of the Burmese population immediately rose up against the new regime, in an extraordinary nationwide civil disobedience movement. The security forces' harsh response to this movement prompted the formation of a shadow National Unity Government, the creation of a People's Defence Force and the emergence of a myriad small armed resistance groups throughout the country. Myanmar was plunged into a bitter civil war that shows no sign of ending soon.

For almost all of this historical period, Myanmar's governments were supported by a powerful national intelligence apparatus. In keeping with the usual practice in its colonial possessions, between 1826 and 1941 the British created an extensive intelligence collection system in Burma (as it was then called), conducted in large part through the Burma Police and managed by the force's Special Branch. There was a military intelligence element attached to the locally-based British (and British Indian) armed forces but, despite the creation of a Burma Defence Bureau in 1937, it remained small, inwardly focused and relatively ineffective.⁶⁹ The advent of an independent Burmese state in 1948 saw this pattern dramatically reversed.

After Ne Win seized power, the police's intelligence function took a secondary position behind that of the *Tatmadaw*. Under Ne Win, the Military Intelligence Service and its successor organisations came to play a major role in national affairs. Indeed, rather than being “the textbook example of a police state”, as it was once described, Myanmar under military rule could more properly be described instead as a classic “intelligence state”.⁷⁰

By 2003, Myanmar was being described by the United States Council on Foreign Relations as “one of the most tightly controlled dictatorships in the world”.⁷¹ A number of factors contributed to this judgement, but the most obvious was the “pervasive intelligence apparatus” that had underpinned the ability of the armed forces to maintain a firm grip on the country for over 40 years.⁷² During this time, however, the intelligence system had evolved, changing not only in size and shape but also in its reach and influence. Initially under the overall guidance of a National Intelligence Board (NIB), but later as an independent agency, the renamed Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence (DDSI) and its associated Office of Strategic Studies (OSS) became increasingly powerful.⁷³ In 2002, the two organisations merged to become the Defence Services Intelligence Bureau (DSIB), better known as the Office of the Chief of Military Intelligence (OCMI). For 20 years, this apparatus was under the command of one man who, more than anyone else, was responsible for its development and impact on Myanmar society. That man was General Khin Nyunt.

In 1983, after an extensive purge of its personnel, Myanmar's intelligence system had, in the words of a later president, “collapsed entirely”.⁷⁴ One apparent result was that, in October that year, a team of three North Korean agents was able secretly to enter the country and stage a bomb attack in Yangon (then known as Rangoon) against the visiting South Korean president, Chun Doo Hwan.⁷⁵ This incident deeply shocked and angered paramount leader Ne Win, who decided to revamp the country's security agencies. He recalled the then relatively unknown Colonel Khin Nyunt from a posting to 44 Light Infantry Division (LID) and on 30 December 1983 appointed him Chief of Intelligence.⁷⁶ Under Khin Nyunt's direction, the national intelligence apparatus was steadily rebuilt. Over the next two decades, it expanded in size, developed new capabilities and created new systems to manage information flows. As time passed, it extended its reach well beyond its traditional roles to embrace a wide range of important policy functions. In 1997, Thailand's National Security Council was reportedly told that Myanmar was spending 20 per cent to 30 per cent of its “military development” budget on intelligence.⁷⁷

Inside Myanmar, the DDSI/OSS/OCMI apparatus collected and analysed strategic, operational and tactical intelligence for the armed forces. Assisted by a

number of civilian agencies and investigative units, notably Special Branch of the Myanmar Police Force and the Home Affairs Ministry's Bureau of Special Investigation (BSI), it also rooted out dissidents and corrupt officials in the public service, monitored the security forces for signs of disloyalty, and conducted counter-espionage operations against suspected foreign agents.⁷⁸ Diplomats and diplomatic missions were closely watched.⁷⁹ With the help of other government bodies, like the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (MPT), the intelligence agencies routinely intercepted radio traffic, listened to domestic and overseas telephone calls, recorded private conversations and opened mail.⁸⁰ As the US Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) observed in 1973;

*DDSI combines the functions and powers of the DIA, CIA and the FBI and all the state and local police forces to include operating the prisons.*⁸¹

From the mid-1990s, DDSI also kept a watchful eye on computer activity in Myanmar, monitored email traffic and social media accounts, and engaged in information warfare. As far as their resources allowed, a few agencies exploited aerial photography of different kinds and, after it became available and affordable, commercial satellite imagery.⁸²

At the same time, Myanmar's civilian population was monitored through an extensive and multi-faceted surveillance network, consisting of both trained agents and unpaid informers. As early as 1973, the US government believed that DDSI had "plain clothes operations in every city and village".⁸³ Christina Fink has described the situation as it existed in the country's larger population centres after 1997:

*In Rangoon and Mandalay, each township was overseen by a middle-ranking intelligence officer, with one lower-ranking intelligence agent assigned to each ward. These agents then recruited five informers from each ward, with the job of the fifth informer being to monitor the other four informers. The ward peace and development council also monitored citizens through local informers, with one informer per street. Military intelligence agents consulted with the head of the ward development council to see whether the information both sides were getting matched.*⁸⁴

Through various devious means, intelligence agents were also able to plant listening devices in places like mosques, businesses and even private homes. It was a system that created widespread suspicion and put everyone, including military personnel, under pressure to guard their speech and behaviour. After the collapse of OCMI in 2004, responsibility for the maintenance of this system fell mainly on the police force.

Outside Myanmar, the government maintained a string of spies and informers, mainly in neighbouring countries. The number of agents sent abroad is

unknown, and in any case must have fluctuated, but in the late 1990s the Thai government was convinced that there were "thousands of MIS spies" in Thailand, scattered all around the country, in many different guises.⁸⁵ Together with the diplomats and defence staff posted to Myanmar's embassies, agents and regime sympathisers reported on the activities of ethnic insurgents, black marketeers, narcotics and people traffickers, refugees and expatriates, including political activists and exile communities.⁸⁶ They also kept an eye on military developments in border areas that might affect Myanmar's security. The activities of international organisations like the UN and non-government organisations (NGO) with an interest in Myanmar were monitored, as were the activities of selected foreign academics and journalists. A blacklist was maintained, identifying thousands of so-called "enemies of the state". The names of both foreigners and Myanmar citizens were included, ranging from genuine activists to people who had simply been critical of the military regime.⁸⁷

At different levels, and in different ways, liaison relationships were developed between components of Myanmar's intelligence system and their counterpart agencies in South Asia, China and the ASEAN member states.⁸⁸ There were also reported to be cooperative intelligence arrangements between Myanmar and friendly countries, like Israel.⁸⁹ Ad hoc and informal exchanges took place with other security services.

As Myanmar's intelligence apparatus grew, so did its reputation. By the early 1990s, an experienced Myanmar-watcher could compare it to other official organisations in the country, and pronounce it "highly efficient".⁹⁰ A Thai observer described it in 1994 as "one of Asia's most efficient secret police forces".⁹¹ In 1997, another went even further, calling Myanmar's "military intelligence network" the "fourth most efficient in the world", employing techniques used by well-known services like Israel's Mossad, the United Kingdom's Secret Intelligence Service (also known as MI6), the US's Central Intelligence Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Soviet Union's KGB.⁹² This kind of hyperbole, added to the sensational stories that constantly circulated inside the country, helped give Myanmar's military intelligence organisation (popularly known as "the MI") a cachet that it did not always deserve. However, it remained the case that intelligence was one of the most powerful weapons in the military government's arsenal, helping to perpetuate its rule by rooting out and crushing its opponents, and performing a wide range of other functions.

In 2003, just before General Khin Nyunt's removal by jealous rivals, and OCMI's evisceration by the military hierarchy, Myanmar's intelligence apparatus was being described by both local and foreign observers as "an invisible government" and a "state within the state".⁹³

Despite the election of a NLD government in 2015, little seems to have been done by the new administration to curb the role and activities of the state's intelligence apparatus. There was an attempt to "civilianise" the MPF, and inter alia place greater controls on its Special Branch, which performed various political intelligence functions.⁹⁴ Also, in 2018 the powerful General Administration Department (GAD) was moved from the military-run Ministry of Home Affairs and placed under the NLD's direct control.⁹⁵ However, these efforts do not seem to have made much difference. As for the military intelligence apparatus, the new Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs gradually recovered from the purge of 2004 and was given increasing power and responsibility. It was still answerable to the Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services and thus remained outside civilian control. The so-called "area clearance operations" conducted by the police and armed forces against the Muslim Rohingya community in Rhakine State in 2016 and 2017 were a reminder (to the security forces, at least) of the need for actionable intelligence.⁹⁶ These operations encouraged the further growth of the Tatmadaw's and MPF's intelligence capabilities, unhindered by any constraints imposed by the NLD.⁹⁷

As indicated below, little is known about the development of the junta's intelligence capabilities since the 2021 coup, but from all indications a considerable effort is being made to meet the diverse challenges posed by the civil disobedience movement and the civil war. In particular, the tactics adopted by the ethnic armed organisations (now called ethnic

resistance organisations) and PDF units in the countryside, and by the LDFs, PDTs and independent resistance cells in the towns and cities, place a premium on accurate and timely intelligence advice. Thanks to Myanmar's troubled past, the junta is experienced in waging such unconventional military campaigns. The generals well know, as the British strategist Julian Paget once observed, that "good intelligence is undoubtedly one of the greatest battle-winning factors in counter-insurgency warfare".⁹⁸ For their part, the intrinsic weaknesses of the resistance forces make it imperative for them to know the locations, capabilities and plans of their enemies, both to undermine their morale through political action and to mount military operations against them. In such a bitter contest, neither side can afford to fight blind.

Chiefs of Intelligence

Lists of Myanmar's Chiefs of Intelligence are misleading, in that they often fail to take into account such things as changes in names and organisational structures, shifting power relationships and allegiances, and differing personal goals and levels of influence on the part of each incumbent.⁹⁹ There has also been some confusion between the most senior military intelligence officer and the Secretary of the National Intelligence Board, after 1974 the Director General of the National Intelligence Bureau. However, the following list of officers who have held the top position over the past 65 years has been widely accepted and serves as a useful guide.¹⁰⁰

Organisation	Head	Term
Directorate of Military Intelligence	COL Lwin	1959-1969
Directorate of Military Intelligence	COL Chit Khin	1969-1972
Directorate of Military Intelligence	BGEN Tin Oo	1972-1978 ¹⁰¹
Directorate of Military Intelligence	COL Aung Htay	1978-1980
Directorate of Military Intelligence	COL Myo Aung	1980-1982
Directorate of Military Intelligence	COL Kan Nyunt	1982-May 1983
Directorate of Military Intelligence	COL Aung Koe	May-Sept.1983
Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence and Office of Strategic Studies	COL/MAJGEN Khin Nyunt	Dec.1983-2001
Office of the Chief of Military Intelligence	LTGEN Khin Nyunt	2001-Oct.2004
Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs	LTGEN Myint Swe	2004-2005
Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs	LTGEN Ye Myint	2005-2010
Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs	LTGEN Kyaw Swe	2010-2014
Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs	LTGEN Mya Tun Oo	2014-2016
Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs	LTGEN Soe Htut	2016-2020
Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs	LTGEN Ye Win Oo	2020-present



Junta leaders on a vinyl flyer photographed on sidewalk during 2021 protest movement in Myanmar (Wikimedia Commons)

Intelligence and the junta

In no class of warfare is a well organised and well served intelligence department more essential than in that against guerrillas.

Charles Callwell
Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice¹⁰²

Before the 1 February 2021 coup, a large number of articles, commentaries and op-eds were published about intelligence operations in Myanmar, but few were based on verifiable information.¹⁰³ Many of the stories that appeared relied heavily on rumours, gossip and speculation. When they did reflect hard facts, as some certainly did, they tended to be descriptive and anecdotal rather than analytical. Also, as David Scott Mathieson has trenchantly observed, Myanmar “has produced a minor canon of self-promotional reportage that has had some hand in shaping international perspectives”.¹⁰⁴ Some foreigners visiting Myanmar seemed to feel that being followed by “the MI” or black-listed by the former military regime conveyed certain bragging rights.¹⁰⁵ In an apparent attempt to boost their own reputations, they exaggerated that of the local intelligence machinery. Also, the agencies themselves clouded the picture through crude propaganda and disinformation campaigns. All this posed problems for professional observers and others keen to acquire an accurate and balanced picture of Myanmar’s intelligence agencies, their priorities, capabilities and activities.

The 2021 military coup, and the outpouring of politically weighted and emotive reporting that has followed, has complicated this picture even further.

That said, by carefully sifting through the many news stories and reports published since the takeover, and talking to various participants, it is possible to put together a rough picture of developments in this field over the past two and a half years. It is also possible selectively to apply to the current civil war the intelligence lessons learned from past conflicts of this kind, in other parts of the world, and to draw some judicious conclusions. For example, given the nature of the civil war, the makeup of the opposition movement and the junta’s clear reliance on intelligence to direct its efforts, it seems a safe bet to say that the country’s intelligence apparatus has been allocated more manpower, been granted additional funding and acquired new technology. How those resources have been expended, the way in which old counter-insurgency (COIN) strategies have been resurrected and new capabilities have been exploited are all indicators of how the junta has gone about utilising the power and reach of the country’s intelligence apparatus to defeat those challenging its claim to rule Myanmar.

Organisation and funding

Myanmar’s intelligence apparatus was already being transformed before 2021, as it emerged from the ashes of the 2004 purge. Even under the NLD government, it acquired a range of new capabilities, some of which clearly threatened to undermine the rights of Myanmar’s citizens.¹⁰⁶ However, since the coup it has grown even stronger. Intelligence is now a critical part of the junta’s efforts to overcome the widespread

opposition to its rule, both armed and unarmed. It was not by accident that the head of the Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs, Lieutenant General Ye Win Oo, was appointed a founding member of the State Administration Council. It is relevant too that Lieutenant General Mya Htun Oo, the Chief of Staff of the Army and another founding member of the SAC, is a former Chief of OCMSA. In another indication of the importance placed on intelligence by the junta, and its central role in contemporary affairs, retired Lieutenant General Myint Swe, who currently serves as the regime’s acting president (and was a vice-president under the overthrown NLD government), is also a former chief of OCMSA.¹⁰⁷

There does not appear to be any move to restore the Chief of Intelligence’s position to the same level of prominence, independence and influence that it enjoyed under General Khin Nyunt, but the importance of the intelligence function has clearly been recognised, and restored to its former status as a critical component of military rule. Former CIs are being appointed to the highest positions in the military hierarchy.

Since the coup, OCMSA has reportedly been divided into two divisions, one responsible for Upper Myanmar and the other for Lower Myanmar. The first is headed by the former Adjutant General, Major General Aung Kyaw Kyaw, and the second by Major General Kyaw Kyaw Lwin, who was formerly a Brigadier General (BGEN) with OCMSA. Until earlier this year, they both reported to Lieutenant General (LTGEN) Ye Win Oo through his deputy, Major General (MAJGEN) Toe Yi.¹⁰⁸ As Major Generals, these three officers were at the same rank as most Regional Military Commanders, another sign of the elevation of the military intelligence apparatus vis a vis these key combat commands.¹⁰⁹ At the same time, it appears that the OCMSA has been expanded, in terms of its personnel, powers and responsibilities, to protect the junta and shore up its position. The days of its disgrace after the fall of General Khin Nyunt are long gone, with OCMSA operatives now active in a wide range of fields. Also, OCMSA works closely with the other members of Myanmar’s coercive state apparatus, notably Special Branch, the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and BSI, but once again it seems to be in a dominant position.

As CI, Ye Win Oo is also responsible for monitoring the mood of the armed forces and forestalling any attempt to mount a revolt against the Commander-in-Chief, SENGEN Min Aung Hlaing.¹¹⁰ Lacking any popular mandate, the generals depend almost entirely on the loyalty and cohesion of the armed forces to remain in power. Any coordinated opposition in the Tatmadaw to their seizure of power, or a mutiny in a major combat unit, would seriously threaten their continued rule. Accordingly, a high priority is given to ensuring that the officer corps remains trustworthy and the rank and file does not stray. This task falls in large part to OCMSA.¹¹¹ Through a range of measures, the members of the

Tatmadaw and their families are closely monitored for any signs of dissidence or low morale. Various measures are taken to keep them ignorant of any developments that might weaken their resolve to keep fighting the anti-junta movement. This is not new. Under the SLORC, for example, there was reputed to be one "spy" (a category that probably included informers) for every ten servicemen.¹¹² This level of surveillance is unlikely to have been reduced since 2021, and has probably increased.

One new addition to the junta's intelligence-related control mechanisms is an 11-member committee to stem the flow of funds to the opposition movement. According to *Burma News International*, the group comprises representatives from the National Security Agency, Bureau of Special Investigations, Ministry of Home Affairs, Criminal Investigation Department, Ministry of Legal Affairs, Ministry of Transport and Communications, Ministry of Immigration and Population, the Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) and the Central Bank.¹¹³ At the same time, a "mobile money investigation team" has been formed, consisting of representatives from the Central Bank (as chairman), OCMSA (as Secretary), the CID and the BSI. Its main task is to examine the KBZPay and WavePay accounts used by many people in Myanmar to transfer funds electronically.¹¹⁴ OCMSA, CID and the FIU have been charged with investigating, tracing and arresting unauthorised users and confiscating their assets. Those found to have made financial transfers to the opposition have been sentenced to long prison sentences and, in a few cases, even to death.¹¹⁵ It is believed that the team was suggested to SENGEN Min Aung Hlaing by former CI Khin Nyunt.



Former Burmese prime minister and military intelligence chief Khin Nyunt, after his release from house arrest in 2012. (Htoo Tay Zar | Wikimedia Commons)

This raises an intriguing question when considering the expansion and reassertion of military intelligence in Myanmar's national affairs, and that is the extent to which Min Aung Hlaing and Ye Win Oo have called upon

the expertise of Khin Nyunt and his proteges in the old DDSI, OSS and OCMI. Given the severe restrictions placed on OCMSA staff and operations immediately following the 2004 purge, and the difficulties of recruiting new personnel in the current volatile climate, the knowledge and experience of former officers could be very useful. According to *The Irrawaddy* magazine;

*Snr-Gen Min Aung Hlaing has recalled former military intelligence officers to give him advice as his regime desperately needs intelligence to suppress the nationwide resistance movement.*¹¹⁶

Apparently, a number of former senior intelligence officers have advised the OCMSA on particular issues, including aspects of Myanmar's foreign relations. One is reportedly a "full-time consultant" for the military regime in Naypyidaw.¹¹⁷ In December 2022, SENGEN Min Aung Hlaing paid a well-publicised call on the 84-year-old Khin Nyunt, who currently suffers from Alzheimer's disease, at his Yangon home. The junta leader was reportedly accompanied by LTGEN Ye Win Oo.

Myanmar's military leadership has never revealed in its official budget papers the specific allocations made to different parts of the Tatmadaw. However, it can be assumed that the dramatic increases in military spending seen since February 2021 have included greater funding for OCMSA. In 2022-23, Min Aung Hlaing gave the armed forces a total of over 4 trillion kyats, as the Tatmadaw received an additional 440 billion kyats that November. For the 2023-24 financial year, the military budget is over 5.6 trillion kyats (around US\$2.7 billion), up 3.7 trillion kyats from the initial allocation the previous year and worth more than 25 per cent of Myanmar's national budget.¹¹⁸ These are only the formal budget figures, however, and do not reflect the actual funds available to the junta, which has numerous other sources of income, both official and unofficial.¹¹⁹ As the UN's Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar has suggested, a large proportion of these funds will be spent on acquiring and producing new arms and military equipment, and replenishing depleted ammunition stocks.¹²⁰ Funds will also need to be set aside for recurring expenditures such as salaries and the maintenance of Myanmar's extensive defence infrastructure.

However, all that said, in the current circumstances it would be surprising if a generous amount was not also allocated to meeting the Tatmadaw's critical need for operational intelligence.

Funds will also be required by the regime's other intelligence agencies, notably the Myanmar Police Force's Special Branch and CID. According to a recent US government report, the MPF "is primarily responsible for internal security".¹²¹ If this is still the case, despite developments since the coup, it probably reflects the decision made after General Khin Nyunt's fall in 2004 to increase the MPF's role, thus leaving the grievously weakened military intelligence organisation

to focus on matters of immediate concern to the armed forces.¹²² Since the country's rapid descent into civil war, internal security has become an abiding concern of the Tatmadaw, warranting increased resources, but the formal division of responsibilities may remain. If so, such a division of labour would probably be designed in part to relieve the armed forces of its self-appointed civil role and permit a greater focus on purely COIN operations.¹²³ In any case, as the US report noted, the MPF and the related Border Guard Police still fall under the Ministry of Home Affairs, led by an active-duty army officer and itself subordinate to the Tatmadaw High Command.¹²⁴

Human intelligence

Myanmar's security forces have long placed a heavy reliance on intelligence gathered by human sources, or HUMINT. For example, during the socialist period (1962–1988), the military government reportedly had tens of thousands of agents and unpaid informers in the field. At one stage, around the time of the 1974 U Thant riots in Yangon, it was estimated that on university and college campuses about twenty per cent of the student body were agents of the MIS.¹²⁵ Members of the teaching staff were also required to report any untoward activity to the authorities, on pain of dismissal. Domestic staff working for resident foreigners, and locally-engaged staff in foreign embassies, were paid, or forced through various means, to report back to SB and DDSI on the attitudes and activities of their employers.¹²⁶ This attempt at blanket surveillance of the entire population, including foreigners, meant that coverage was much wider than it was deep, and the collation and analysis of the many reports received from the field suffered from certain weaknesses. However, back in those days before the ubiquity of mobile phones and the high ownership of private motor vehicles, it was quite an effective system.¹²⁷

After the 1988 uprising, the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council continued to place considerable emphasis on HUMINT collection. Key targets for surveillance included opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and the then emerging National League for Democracy. Other anti-regime political organisations, like the 88 Generation Student Group, founded in 2005, were subject both to infiltration by regime spies and surveillance by the members of the various intelligence agencies.¹²⁸ Foreign visitors to Myanmar were often followed and their activities noted, particularly if they were suspected of being journalists or academics, and made contact with known critics of the regime.¹²⁹ Intelligence agents hung around tea shops, the offices of political parties and the homes of key personalities. As Rudyard Kipling wrote in his classic spy novel *Kim*, "The Game is so large that one sees but a little at a time".¹³⁰ However, at different times and in various ways observers could get a glimpse of the enormous effort

that was put into gathering information and compiling files on the activities of dissidents, insurgents, diplomats, foreign activists, journalists and their local interlocutors.¹³¹

After 2015, under Aung San Suu Kyi's quasi-civilian government, the harsher aspects of the intelligence state receded somewhat, including the level of surveillance by spies and informers. As Nick Davies noted the following year, "People can [now] move without being tracked, speak without being arrested".¹³² However, these threats never entirely disappeared. In terms of HUMINT, surveillance over the population may not have been as obvious, but it still occurred. For example, the UN's Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Yanghee Lee, could still report that;

*Human rights defenders informed the Special Rapporteur of regular surveillance through phone calls, and monitoring of and enquiries about their movements and activities.*¹³³

Typical was one report, in which a local activist described "Men on motorcycles tailing closely. The occasional phone call. The same, familiar faces at crowded street cafes".¹³⁴ Not entirely tongue in cheek, Emma Larkin raised the possibility of "bored spies" doing something to justify their existence during a period of political uncertainty and low operational tempo.¹³⁵ As Amitav Ghosh wrote in his 2001 novel *The Glass Palace*, "in Myanmar there are always spies, everywhere".¹³⁶

Since the 2021 coup, the level of surveillance has significantly increased. This includes the use of spies and informers. The junta places a high priority on the identification, location and removal of anyone deemed a threat to the new regime, a definition that has been given a very wide meaning.¹³⁷ The cheapest way of doing this is by recruiting, or forcing, members of Myanmar's population to report on their fellow citizens. How effective this campaign will be remains to be seen. There are groups like army veterans, nationalist Buddhist extremists, USDP supporters and civil servants who are prepared to support the junta, to the extent of acting as intelligence sources.¹³⁸ The regime has also recruited ad hoc militias which act as enforcers and inform on their local communities.¹³⁹ Despite these groups, however, support for the nation-wide civil disobedience movement which arose after the coup still seems to be strong. Also, even if they dislike some of the tactics adopted, many people remain sympathetic to those who have taken up arms against the junta, either by joining the People's Defence Force, or by supporting the many small resistance cells that have emerged in the population centres.

The junta has been assisted in its monitoring efforts by the transfer, in May 2021, of the GAD back to the Home Affairs Ministry. At the same time, neighbourhood surveillance networks that existed under previous

military regimes have been revived. For example, regulations under which households must register overnight visitors with the authorities, which were removed by the NLD in 2016, have been reintroduced in some cities, including Yangon.¹⁴⁰ This is an obvious attempt to restrict the freedom of movement of opposition figures and to deny activists safe refuge in the houses of friends and sympathisers. Strangers too now have to be reported. The GAD also supports the junta's security efforts in other ways, for example by "imposing bans on activities that pose a threat to law and stability, or suing people who commit arms-related crimes—while reporting relevant information back to Naypyitaw".¹⁴¹ At the same time, the junta has replaced popularly-elected ward and village officials with people appointed by township administrative councils, which are controlled by the junta.¹⁴² These hand-picked public servants are more likely to report anti-regime activities to the authorities.

As so often happens in these circumstances, the competition between informers (popularly known as *dalan*) and those secretly working against the military regime has turned into a very nasty war within a war.¹⁴³ The resistance knows that informers pose perhaps the most serious threat to their lives and ability to continue their struggle. Like so many insurgents before them, and in so many different countries, they have retaliated against informers by a campaign of "targeted killings".¹⁴⁴ Many in the resistance appear to subscribe to the views of the legendary Irish guerrilla leader Michael Collins, who was reported to have said "There is no crime in detecting and destroying, in war-time, the spy and the informer".¹⁴⁵ Male and female, young and old, service and civilian, no-one has been spared. On occasion, resistance fighters have beheaded their victims and stuck their heads on poles in public places as object lessons to any others contemplating support for the junta.¹⁴⁶ Such displays have been condemned by the NUG, which promotes a strict code of conduct, but show no sign of stopping. The security forces, militia groups and other bands of pro-junta vigilantes have murdered known and suspected opposition members, some publicly displaying their bodies in a gruesome tit-for-tat response.¹⁴⁷

Surveillance is not the only role chosen for the junta's human intelligence assets. They have also been used for more dangerous clandestine assignments. In the current environment it is difficult to be precise, but there have been several cases reported in which the junta has apparently attempted to infiltrate the People's Defence Force and other resistance groups by using spies and fake defectors from the armed forces. Most defectors have been genuine and happy to share their experience and expertise with the PDF and other armed units, including the EROs. However, Myanmar's insurgent groups have long been concerned about spies being planted in their midst by the military regime. In 1968, for example, an MIS agent posing as an army defector assassinated a prominent guerrilla leader.¹⁴⁸ In 1992, suspicion of spies in their ranks led one insurgent student group to turn on itself, with tragic

consequences.¹⁴⁹ In April 2023, a PDF group led by a former Tatmadaw army officer was detained by the NUG and Kachin Independence Army (KIA) on suspicion of being junta spies.¹⁵⁰

These days, until the reliability of defectors and volunteers have been established, they are treated with reserve, and confined to rear echelon roles. The likelihood that some were OCMSA plants cannot be discounted. Where possible, background checks are made to establish their bona fides.

As a result of this treatment, a few defectors have gone back to the armed forces, claiming that the risks they took to escape, and the sacrifices they made, were not appreciated by the opposition.¹⁵¹ The junta has sought to encourage this trend by promising reduced jail sentences and cash rewards for any defectors and other resistance fighters who "return to the legal fold". According to announcements in the state-run newspapers, if they bring their arms and ammunition with them resistance fighters will be rewarded with up to 7.5 million kyats (US\$3,500). Up to 5 million kyats (\$2,400) would be paid for a drone.¹⁵² Home-made guns attract 500,000 kyats (\$240.00). In addition to weakening the morale of the PDF and EROs, defecting resistance fighters are seen as a potential source of intelligence. The junta has claimed that, since the coup, 502 members of the PDF have contacted the regime and surrendered.¹⁵³ However, this statement cannot be taken at face value. The junta's offer is unlikely to attract many returnees. Indeed, it betrays a profound misunderstanding of the reasons why most people joined the resistance, and in any case few of its members would trust the junta to keep its promises.

There are other grounds for the PDF's and EROs' fears of infiltration. In January 2023, for example, Burmese news outlets claimed that they had obtained a classified OCMSA briefing, consisting of 32 Power Point slides, outlining recent intelligence operations against the opposition movement.¹⁵⁴ According to these documents, the junta had managed to establish a "network of spies" among anti-regime forces.¹⁵⁵ This was done mainly by sending back to their units former PDF members who had been captured and, either willingly or under pressure, agreed to act as double agents. It was claimed that these spies monitored the activities of PDF and other opposition forces, made a note of their arms holdings and acquisitions, and advised the junta of the location of their camps. Smaller, more vulnerable PDF bases were said to be favoured as potential targets over the larger, more established and better protected bases of the EROs.¹⁵⁶ Again, according to these unconfirmed leaks, the junta's spies even distributed defective weapons and low-grade explosives to the PDF, to cause casualties and disrupt PDF operations. These weapons were reportedly manufactured by the junta's Directorate of Defence Industries, which has a well-deserved reputation for adaptation and improvisation.

These reports appeared around the same time as stories about two undercover OCMSA officers who had been executed by the PDF.¹⁵⁷ According to the online news magazine *Myanmar Now*, in January 2023 an army major and a sergeant were travelling by road in Bago Region when they were stopped by members of the PDF's Battalion 3501. The two were recognised as men who had been trying to buy weapons from resistance fighters in Yangon. The full story is yet to be told, but it seems that they were accompanied by two former PDF guerrillas who had switched sides and were acting as guides for the army men. In the ensuing gun battle, the two OCMSA officers were shot dead. The two former guerrillas were taken away by the PDF unit for questioning and later executed.¹⁵⁸ NUG press releases and members of the Bago Region PDF have since claimed that the two OCMSA officers had successfully identified a number of opposition members in Yangon and forced them to turn against their former comrades. The major was also said to have participated in the brutal interrogation of captured PDF personnel.

The leaked OCMSA documents also claimed that the junta had set up a number of fake pro-democracy militias with names like the "Human Rights Defenders" and "Generation Z Defence Forces". In what appears to be quite a sophisticated deception operation, these fake militias had reportedly pretended to stage attacks against Tatmadaw bases and MPF stations, in order to gain credibility with other anti-junta forces and win greater access to their inner councils. These mock attacks, by so-called "Special Task Forces", were apparently guided by OCMSA personnel, who acted as liaison officers. OCMSA agents have also been held responsible for a campaign of bombings in Myanmar's urban centres, apparently carried out to discredit the opposition movement.¹⁵⁹ The OCMSA documents reportedly also revealed that the junta's spy network was quite extensive, and even reached into the senior echelons of the opposition movement. According to the same news reports, the documents stated that information from the network had led to the arrest of Phyo Zeyar Thaw, a senior pro-democracy activist who was executed by the military regime, along with three others, in July 2022.¹⁶⁰

Junta agents also appear to have been sent on missions abroad, most often to neighbouring countries where there were sizeable refugee and activist communities. The US-based Committee to Protect Journalists, for example, has long believed that Burmese intelligence agents operated in Thai border towns and refugee camps, and spied on exiled journalists working and living there.¹⁶¹ They are probably correct. In May 2021, 25 suspected junta spies were executed by the Karen National Defence Organisation, one of the two military branches of the Karen National Union (KNU), near the Thai border.¹⁶² It has been claimed by Thai news sources that junta spies posing as Buddhist monks and nuns were among a number of people arrested in

Thailand in August 2022.¹⁶³ Also, a Thai NGO recently reported seeing Tatmadaw spies conducting surveillance operations against Myanmar refugees in Thailand.¹⁶⁴ In the past, Bangladesh and India have arrested Myanmar nationals for spying, and there is no reason to believe that these activities have ceased.¹⁶⁵ Indeed, given the increased flow of refugees and resistance fighters to the western border areas since 2021, they have most likely increased.

It is also likely that agents have been sent to, or expatriates have been recruited in, other places. The most obvious targets in this regard would be the eight countries in which the NUG has established representative offices, like Australia, Norway, the US and UK.¹⁶⁶ These countries also have relatively large Myanmar communities which are active in publicising the struggle against the junta, and lobbying for support from their host governments. Expatriate communities have also been active in soliciting funds for aid and humanitarian supplies for the NUG, as well as for the purchase of weapons and ammunition to assist in the PDF's armed struggle against the junta's security forces.¹⁶⁷ All these offshore activities would be of great interest to the military regime, warranting at least intelligence collection, and possibly even infiltration and disruption, operations.

All these activities reveal the high priority that the junta has placed on the collection of intelligence against opposition groups, both armed and unarmed. For one of the main difficulties in suppressing such forces, whose nature is largely anonymous and clandestine, is identifying and locating them. Simon Innes-Robbins has gone as far as to suggest that, in the kind of conflict now seen in Myanmar, "good intelligence is the difference between victory and defeat". He continues;

*Intelligence provides an ability to understand the insurgent organization, intentions and capabilities. It additionally enables the security forces to launch counterinsurgency operations that are targeted against clearly identified targets, such as insurgent bases, cells and supporters. Poor intelligence results in ill-considered and poorly-targeted reactions to insurgent attacks, such as overly aggressive and intrusive patrols and stop-and-search operations, which alienate the population.*¹⁶⁸

Poorly directed and ill-disciplined sweeps by police and military units are already common in Myanmar. Also, there is little point in the junta acquiring new and sophisticated arms if it cannot direct them against specific targets. Using them indiscriminately is not only a waste of precious resources, but it inevitably leads to the loss of innocent lives and destruction of private property. This in turn encourages further opposition to the regime, from both the affected population and, in many cases, the international community.¹⁶⁹

Arrests and interrogations

Another aspect of HUMINT collection in Myanmar that needs to be considered is the military regime's approach to arrests, interrogation and detention.

Under the terms of conventional Western military intelligence doctrine, interrogations are usually defined as;

*The systematic effort to procure information to answer specific collection requirements by direct and indirect questioning techniques of a person who is in the custody of the forces conducting the questioning.*¹⁷⁰

The US Army field manual on human intelligence collection operations further states;

*The goal of any interrogation is to obtain usable and reliable information, in a lawful manner and in the least amount of time, which meets intelligence requirements of any echelon of command.*¹⁷¹

It has been a very long time, however, since interrogations conducted by the security forces in Myanmar have conformed in any way to international military or humanitarian law, or widely recognised standards of police practice. Indeed, the violence, intimidation and humiliation routinely inflicted on political prisoners and other detainees by members of the security forces has been characterised by one former detainee as "often less concerned with extracting information than with inflicting pain for its own sake".¹⁷²

The 2021 coup, and the consequent return of OCMSA to prominence, has resulted in countless stories in the international news media and online forums decrying the systematic human rights abuses of the past, and their reappearance under the junta. As stated bluntly by *The Irrawaddy* news magazine;

*The state security apparatus is once again persecuting all opponents of the regime and bullying the general public in order to entrench military rule.*¹⁷³

Less than two weeks after the coup, the junta suspended those sections of the 2017 Law Protecting the Privacy and Security of Citizens that were designed to prevent arbitrary detention, and warrant-less surveillance, search and seizure.¹⁷⁴ This was the same law that decreed a "Responsible Authority":

*Shall not surveil, spy upon, or investigate any citizen in a manner which could disturb their privacy and security or affect their dignity.*¹⁷⁵

With the assistance of the MPF's Criminal Investigation Department and Special Branch, and probably the Bureau of Special Investigation, OCMSA has been rounding up anyone suspected of anti-junta views or activities, and interrogating them, often brutally. Since 1991, military intelligence officers

have been able to submit confessions forcibly obtained from detainees directly to the courts. Their victims have to prove that they were tortured, usually a fruitless task.¹⁷⁶ Militia members and other informers are used to help the security forces penetrate local communities and identify people to be included in military and police sweeps.¹⁷⁷

These interrogations are taking place in a range of facilities around the country. In addition to the 46 declared prisons run by the Myanmar Correctional Department, there are numerous interrogation centres in military camps, police compounds and other places that operate below the public's level of awareness.¹⁷⁸ The larger prisons, like Insein Gaol just outside Yangon, reputedly house the most political prisoners, but the numbers constantly change as detainees are killed, moved to other places of confinement, or released (invariably under strict conditions). Most prisons and holding centres are run down and badly overcrowded, the result in part of the wave of arrests made since the coup. Insein Gaol, for example, reportedly holds more than double its official 5,000-person capacity.¹⁷⁹ Indeed, such is the demand for these kinds of facilities that a number of old interrogation centres, closed down during the period of NLD rule, have been reopened.¹⁸⁰ Even without the torture and brutal treatment routinely meted out to political prisoners to make them divulge sensitive information, conditions in these facilities are very harsh. All inmates suffer terribly, but women appear particularly vulnerable.¹⁸¹



An aerial view of Insein Prison, Yangon. (iStock)

The US State Department's 2022 Country Report on human rights in Myanmar summarised the situation as follows:

*Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: unlawful or arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial killings; forced disappearances; torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment by the regime; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest or detention; political prisoners or detainees.*¹⁸²

The report noted that, as in the past, “impunity for abuses by regime officials and security forces was absolute”.¹⁸³ According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma), at the time of writing 22,726 Myanmar citizens had been arrested and detained by the security forces. Of that number, 3580 were believed to have been killed while in custody. Only 4,319 had been released, leaving 18,407 still detained, including those who had already been sentenced.¹⁸⁴ A total of 156 people have been sentenced to death since the coup, of whom 114 are currently prisoners awaiting execution.¹⁸⁵

There are several reasons for these interrogations. As far as this research paper is concerned, however, the key one is to extract information that can be used both to compromise (and convict) the detainees concerned and to assist in the identification and capture of others sympathetic to the opposition cause. In that sense, the interrogations in prisons and elsewhere can be listed with other activities conducted by the Tatmadaw and the MPF to collect human intelligence on the regime’s opponents, both armed and unarmed. The seamless connection between OCMSA, CID and SB in this regard can be gauged by the fact that interrogations are sometimes conducted jointly, or by different agencies taking turns.¹⁸⁶ Also, in February 2023, the Deputy Chief of OCMSA responsible for domestic operations—and thus counter-intelligence and the country’s interrogation centres—Major General Toe Yi, was appointed Deputy Minister for Home Affairs.¹⁸⁷ In that position, he will have direct oversight not only of the MPF, with its CID and SB components, but also the BSI which has certain intelligence functions. He will report to the Home Affairs Minister, Lieutenant General Soe Htut, another former head of OCMSA.¹⁸⁸

As Amnesty International noted in its last annual report on Myanmar, there are no signs that the illegal detentions, interrogations and torture being conducted by the junta’s intelligence agencies will diminish in frequency or severity in the foreseeable future.¹⁸⁹ Indeed, as the junta becomes more desperate in the face of continuing resistance, they may even increase.

Electronic surveillance

Even before the coup, the NLD government had stepped up electronic and online surveillance of the Myanmar population. In 2020, for example, 335 closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras were installed in public areas around Naypyidaw as part of the NLD’s “Safe City” project. At that stage, they were under MPF management.¹⁹⁰ The plan was later extended to Yangon, Mandalay and Sittwe. In July 2022, *Reuters* reported that the new military regime was installing similar devices in a number of other cities across the country, and putting them under military and police control.¹⁹¹ Camera surveillance systems were reportedly planned for cities in each of Myanmar’s seven states and seven

regions. In addition to those projects already begun or completed, the population centres being targeted included Mawlamyine, Taunggyi, Dawei, and Myitkyina. According to one report, over 200 cameras had already been installed in Mawlamyine, and 300 in Mandalay, with more to follow.¹⁹² Tenders have also been issued for CCTV coverage in Hpa-an and Bagan.

The CCTV cameras reportedly come from three Chinese companies: the Shenzhen-based Huawei Technologies Ltd., Zhejiang Dahua Technology in Hangzhou and Hikvision, also based in Hangzhou. They have been contracted through local Myanmar suppliers.¹⁹³ The scanning software appears to be from a different source.¹⁹⁴

The public rationale given by the former NLD government for the installation of these cameras was crime prevention.¹⁹⁵ However, Human Rights Watch has reported that, from the very outset, the cameras were equipped with facial recognition and motor vehicle licence plate identification technology, which could alert the authorities to anyone on a digital wanted list.¹⁹⁶ The facial images acquired could apparently be compared with photographs on national registration cards, or taken by members of the security services during street demonstrations.¹⁹⁷ There is currently little information available about how the data acquired will be collected, stored and used, but the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) has been told that “this data was collected by authorities and used to identify and prosecute people involved in anti-coup protests, sometimes months after their image was recorded”.¹⁹⁸ With readily available commercial software, it is also possible for Myanmar’s intelligence agencies to use online images to conduct network analyses, for example by compiling a link matrix showing the relationships between different activists seen at different times in different places.

One small comfort to the opposition movement is that the CCTV cameras apparently carry protection against hacking, but not against sabotage, poor maintenance and power outages. It has been reported that many of those cameras currently installed in public places in Myanmar are not operational.¹⁹⁹

For many years, very few businesses and private homes in Myanmar were covered by security cameras. Some government offices, military installations and foreign diplomatic missions had such devices installed, but they tended to be used only to prevent unauthorised entry and to deter criminals. These days, however, the installation of such devices is much more common. Many factories, shops, businesses and houses are now protected by security cameras. Most provide a live feed (sometimes with related audio) but some transmissions are recorded for later viewing and the historical record. As one Yangon-based organisation noted even before the 2021 coup, the significance of this trend is that “CCTV recordings can be accessed and reviewed by

public security to identify those involved in peaceful protest".²⁰⁰ Recordings by such cameras can also be seized if it is felt by the authorities that they might reveal details of other kinds of anti-government activity, for example preparations for an assassination. It is not just government CCTV cameras that activists and other members of the opposition movement need to be aware of, and guard against.

The CCTV cameras being installed across Myanmar are part of a much greater reliance by Myanmar's intelligence agencies on modern high technology electronic, as opposed to traditional on-the-ground human, surveillance. HUMINT sources will always be important, but the technology currently being developed and marketed internationally will allow the junta to exercise a much greater degree of sophistication in its approach to control over the civilian population.²⁰¹ This is perhaps most easily seen in the approach taken by the junta to communications intelligence (COMINT).

Communications intelligence

Under General Khin Nyunt, Myanmar's intelligence agencies were quick to recognise the dangers posed to the military regime by advances in communications technology. At an early date, they made an effort to acquire the infrastructure and expertise needed to monitor Internet and mobile phone use.²⁰² Several DDSI officers were sent overseas for specialised training in information technology, and by 1995 the agency boasted "the largest computer facility in Burma", popularly known as the "Cyber War Centre".²⁰³ Using equipment probably purchased from Singapore, this facility reportedly monitored and recorded a wide range of transmissions, including those made via satellite.²⁰⁴ Some were later published by the regime (in English and Burmese) as part of propaganda exercises.²⁰⁵ It is believed that the MPF operated its own "cyber-crime unit" to detect undercover and citizen journalists trying to send copy out of Myanmar via the Internet.²⁰⁶ At the same time, the regime introduced instruments like the 1996 Computer Science Development Law, which meted out prison sentences of seven to 15 years for owning an unregistered modem or fax machine.²⁰⁷

According to the US government, by 2004 Myanmar had "fairly well-developed human and technical surveillance capabilities focused primarily on the domestic political opposition and insurgent groups".²⁰⁸

These developments reflected a notable shift in emphasis by the country's intelligence agencies to surveillance using technical means.²⁰⁹ OCMSA and SB in particular benefited not only from the rapid advances made in electronics and related fields, but also in the commercialisation and spread of formerly restricted technologies. This shift coincided with, and was encouraged by, an extraordinary growth in telecommunications in Myanmar, from almost no mobile

phone subscribers in 2010 to nearly 82 million in 2020.²¹⁰ At least half the subscribers were also data users. Myanmar's population currently stands at around 54 million, which means that many subscribers had more than one account. There has also been an explosion in the use of computers and in the number of people in Myanmar routinely trying to access the Internet for news, and to exchange information through social media platforms like Facebook. While this brought many advantages to the citizens of Myanmar, and made them better connected with each other and the outside world, it also exposed them to state interference in their communications.²¹¹

As noted by the International Crisis Group, since the first hours of the coup on 1 February 2021;

*the Tatmadaw's actions have reflected a keen awareness of the importance of the internet, social media and communications technology for consolidating control.*²¹²

Shortly after the coup, the SAC ordered the two foreign mobile phone companies operating in Myanmar, the Norwegian firm Telenor and the Qatar-based Ooredoo, to hand over all their customer data. In July 2021, *Frontier Myanmar* also reported that;

*the regime ordered mobile phone companies to install equipment to enable them to monitor calls, text messages, and locations of selected users, flagging each time they use words such as 'protest' or 'revolution'. Mention of these words may trigger heavier surveillance or be used as evidence against those being watched. The regime also monitored social media use, including data from visited websites, as well as conversations in public and private chat groups.*²¹³

These demands led Telenor to withdraw from Myanmar, as the junta's new regulations breached European law. Telenor subsequently sold its operations to a Lebanese group but under another name they ended up with a Burmese firm linked to the armed forces.

Part of this acquisition included the possibly illegal transfer of a German made Utimaco lawful interception gateway (LIG). This LIG provided the junta with the means to monitor all calls and SMS text messages made through the old Telenor network, in real time.²¹⁴ According to documents reviewed by the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, even before the coup the Myanmar government planned to install "lawful interception" tools on the networks of all the country's telecommunications providers.²¹⁵ Requests for the installation of this software apparently came in the first instance from the civilian Ministry of Transport and Communications, but it was apparent to the suppliers that it would eventually be controlled by the armed forces and police, through Myanmar's intelligence apparatus.²¹⁶ Despite its misleading title, this software

permits the junta to listen to and record phone calls, view text messages and web traffic, like emails. It can even determine the location of users without going through Internet or individual telecommunications companies.²¹⁷ Unlike other countries where such software is installed, there are no legal safeguards in Myanmar to prevent its misuse or abuse.

While OCMSA has developed the capability to intercept private communications, the "cybersecurity team" carrying out most of the latest surveillance activities seems to be based inside the MPF's Special Branch.²¹⁸ The CID has also requested "high-end technological gadgets" from the Ministry of Transport and Communications, to be able to obtain more information on the resistance movement and, presumably, the criminal enterprises which have flourished since the coup.²¹⁹ The Bureau of Special Investigations too is thought to have tried to acquire "phone extraction" products from the Swedish company MSAB.²²⁰ This list suggests that all the major elements of Myanmar's national intelligence apparatus are now engaged in collecting and manipulating COMINT.

As described by Gerard McDermott, the junta has banned Facebook and WhatsApp, which were being used to organise demonstrations against the military takeover.²²¹ Shortly afterwards, the junta instructed providers to block Instagram and Twitter, and itself blocked 200 websites under Section 77 of the Telecommunications Law. The junta stated that these measures were required to prevent "disinformation" being spread about the military coup. Other measures followed, including lengthy Internet shutdowns.²²² These were most severe in Rakhine State and Chin State, where the junta was conducting counter-insurgency operations and wanted to isolate particular communities.²²³ In August 2022, the junta announced that it was planning to replace Facebook in Myanmar with a social media platform of its own. According to the SAC's Information Minister;

*Facebook has a lot of influence on national identity, culture and politics in Myanmar and the things that are causing political unrest are happening on Facebook.*²²⁴

More to the point, Facebook was how most Burmese obtained their daily news, and shared their thoughts about political developments. The junta also restricted Internet use to about 1,200 approved "white" websites with local service providers and telecommunications companies.²²⁵

Myanmar's security agencies have been associated with a wide range of foreign spyware. Before the coup, the Tatmadaw employed at least two private surveillance firms to monitor its political opponents: Israel's Cellebrite between 2016 and 2018, and Germany's Finfisher in 2019.²²⁶ These systems reportedly allowed users to hack into text messages, emails, photos and GPS data. It is believed that the

junta has continued to use Cellebrite since then.²²⁷ A few reports have mentioned the likelihood of US and Swedish technology also being acquired to "hack into computers and vacuum up their contents".²²⁸ It was revealed in January 2023 that, a month before the coup, the Israeli company Cognyte Software had won a tender to sell intercept software to the state-owned Myanmar Posts and Telecommunications enterprise. This was not all. A study conducted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in March 2023 identified a number of other commercial spyware and digital forensics technology systems that had been acquired by Myanmar. They included Open Text, Magnet Forensics, SecurCube, SalvationDATA, EaseUs, iMyFone, Elcomsoft, Silicon Forensics, Sirchie, Passware, Oxygen Software and SysTools.²²⁹

It is a formidable list, underlining the efforts being made by Myanmar's intelligence apparatus to monitor and exercise control over the country's population.



Myanmar youths browsing at an Internet shop in Yangon in 2018. (Sai Aung MAIN / AFP)

Presumably, the sale of such software is accompanied by training packages. In addition, according to Gerard McDermott, the armed forces, and most likely intelligence agencies like OCMSA and SB, have received digital surveillance technology and training from China, Russia and conceivably even Iran. In the months following the coup, there were rumours that China had delivered sophisticated surveillance software to Myanmar, and provided technical experts to help the local authorities get it up and running.²³⁰ In December 2021, for example, veteran Myanmar-watcher Bertil Lintner described how China was assisting the junta to create systems that could control information flows and tap into dissident communications.²³¹ Given its arms sales to Myanmar since 2021, and other links to the junta, it has been suggested that Russia may indirectly be assisting the Chinese to create this so-called "golden firewall".²³²

The management of all this data will doubtless pose challenges. However, the junta has announced that it is

currently building a national electronic database, which aims to bring together in one place information on Burmese citizens in a way that permits the authorities to make immediate searches across a range of subject areas. The database will reportedly include all the details contained on national registration cards, such as identification numbers, photographs, addresses, and fingerprints. The database will have access to household registration certificates, driving licenses and other personal information.²³³ It will also be possible for the regime to check personal data against national SIM card registrations and obtain the details of a user's on-line financial transactions. Thus, any messages sent or received in support of the opposition movement, or any transfers of funds to opposition accounts, would be visible to the junta. The database is still being built and, like all such projects, it will doubtless face a number of teething problems. However, when it is finished it is expected to be a powerful tool in the arsenal of the security forces, which hopes to preside over what the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has dubbed a "digital dictatorship".²³⁴

The junta's determination to control information flows within Myanmar, and between Myanmar and the rest of the world, can also be seen in its proposed Cyber Security Law, described by some observers as among the most oppressive legislation related to digital rights proposed anywhere in the region.²³⁵ According to Adam Simpson;

*The law would allow the SAC to access user data, block websites, order internet shutdowns and prosecute critics who would have little legal recourse.*²³⁶

A "Central Committee", led by senior junta officials, would be "empowered to declare any digital intermediary or service provider as 'critical information infrastructure' relevant to 'cybersecurity'".²³⁷ The free use of virtual private networks (VPN), which have been used by many in Myanmar to evade junta controls, would effectively be banned under the new law. Data protection measures are virtually non-existent. The bill also includes provisions to punish people who spread "misinformation".

Notwithstanding human rights and privacy concerns, it follows that the measures introduced by the junta over the past two and a half years have greatly strengthened the hands of the country's intelligence agencies, which now have access to sophisticated surveillance, monitoring and intercept capabilities. These in turn permit the junta more easily to identify, track and detain anti-junta elements. As summarised recently by the US State Department, the junta "regularly monitored private electronic communications through online surveillance; there were numerous reports that the regime monitored pro-democracy supporters ... Before the coup, the military built an 'electronic warfare capability' and bought surveillance technology,

including cell phone-hacking tools to monitor pro-democracy activists".²³⁸

Understandably, these measures are of considerable concern, both to Myanmar citizens and foreign human rights campaigners. However, all is not lost.

Over the past few decades, Myanmar has undergone a technological revolution. In addition to acquiring computers, mobile phones and satellite dishes, the population is now confident in its use of a wide range of software. The skills of "Generation Z" make it much more difficult for the junta, usually through the police and intelligence agencies, to restrict their behavior and curb their contacts with the outside world. They have already found ways to get around some controls. Also, shutting down the Internet may prevent people from organising protests, sharing sensitive information and warning of military operations, but it can cause more problems than it solves. It adversely affects business, the financial sector and other essential services.²³⁹ It also adds to the Tatmadaw's own problems by impairing government operations and making it difficult to keep in touch with its supporters. An "intranet" with clearances granted to select users has been introduced but it is clumsy, expensive and difficult to control. As the ICG has said, "the regime has quickly realised that it is not set up to win the fight for control of the online space".²⁴⁰ That does not mean, however, that it is not determined to try.

Information warfare

Another notable characteristic of Myanmar's intelligence apparatus before 2021 was its readiness to engage in information warfare against opponents of the military regime, both at home and abroad. It not only maintained a close watch on the newspapers and magazines published inside Myanmar, but actively exploited them by planting stories slanted towards the government and against Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD. The agencies also had a role in the publication of numerous outlets themselves, the English-language *Myanmar Times* being an obvious example.²⁴¹ In 2016 and 2017, during the Tatmadaw's brutal "area clearance" operations against the Rohingyas in Rakhine State, it was revealed that the intelligence agencies had used Facebook to spread lies and hate speech about the Rohingyas and Burmese Muslims in general. Apparently, hundreds of Tatmadaw operatives "created troll accounts and news and celebrity pages on Facebook and then flooded them with incendiary comments and posts timed for peak viewership".²⁴² The same agencies were tasked with collecting intelligence on popular accounts and criticising posts unfavourable to the armed forces.

Since February 2021, the junta has attempted to counter the narrative being promoted by the opposition movement and international news media with propaganda of various kinds. For example, soon after

the coup a series of "Information Sheets" were produced in English and posted online, with titles like "The Rioters' Conducting Anarchic Mob Like Activities and Sabotage Activities".²⁴³ Just before SENGEN Min Aung Hlaing's trip to Jakarta for an ASEAN meeting in April, the regime published a 118-page book under the title *The Current Political Situation in Myanmar* in which it sought to "prove", by reference to the 2008 constitution, that the generals did not break any laws by seizing power. Denied the use of Facebook since the coup, the junta has tried through other platforms to paint itself as the saviour of Myanmar from destructionist elements intent on its "balkanisation". Using a combination of social and state-controlled media, the junta has also attempted to exonerate the armed forces from the more damaging claims made about its indiscriminate use of violence, its extra-legal killings and the torture of activists in prison. For a period, the junta hired a former Israeli intelligence officer and arms salesman to spread this message beyond Myanmar.²⁴⁴

In what appears to be an attempt to deny journalists, academic researchers and others from writing critically about developments in Myanmar, the regime has blacklisted some IP addresses, presumably to keep their users from accessing certain government websites.²⁴⁵

As veteran Myanmar-watcher Bertil Lintner has pointed out, however, there is no sign that the latest (or any earlier) public relations campaign by the military regime has made any real impression, either on the Myanmar population or observers living outside the country.²⁴⁶ Most audiences being targeted by the junta are well used to the Tatmadaw's clumsy attempts to justify its actions and evade responsibility for its repeated atrocities. Also, despite some rather questionable material, there is sufficient evidence now available in the public domain for most people to make up their own minds about what has been happening in Myanmar since the coup. Indeed, the obvious weaknesses in the junta's propaganda has led to suggestions from the International Crisis Group that the campaign may actually be an attempt by the junta to shore up its own support base, particularly military personnel and their families, USDP members, ultra-nationalist groups and compliant civil servants.²⁴⁷ The morale and continuing support of these sectors of the population will play a large part in the durability of the junta and its ability to exercise a measure of control over the country.

As already noted, after the 1 February 2021 coup, the armed forces were banned from Facebook, through which millions of people in Myanmar kept up to date with breaking news. Since then, an effort has been made by the junta to spread its version of events through other forms of social media. For example, the army has reportedly ordered thousands of soldiers to play a part in what it is calling "information combat".²⁴⁸ Soldiers have been tasked to create fake accounts through which they can spread the junta's propaganda, monitor dissenters and attack them online as traitors to the nationalist cause. By joining online groups under assumed names, they are also able to track and report them to the OCMSA. A review of thousands of social media posts conducted by the news organisation Reuters in 2021 found that about 200 military personnel, using their personal accounts on platforms including Facebook, You Tube, Tik Tok, Twitter and Telegram, "regularly posted messages or videos alleging fraud at the [2020] election and denouncing anti-coup protesters as traitors".²⁴⁹

In addition, female supporters of the opposition movement have been singled out on social media platforms like Telegram for highly personal attacks in a practice known as "doxxing" (short for "dropping documents"). According to UN experts;

*Pro-junta [social media] accounts regularly use hateful, sexualised and discriminatory rhetoric in an attempt to discredit women activists and human rights defenders.*²⁵⁰

The private information of women, including their names, addresses and photos, has been posted online. Some have been the victims of leaked private videos.²⁵¹ Female pro-democracy activists and human rights campaigners have been accused of having sexual relations with Muslim men or supporting the local Muslim population, a clear appeal to the ultra-nationalist and Islamophobic sentiments found among the predominantly Buddhist Burmese population. Some women have been threatened with rape and other forms of gender-based violence. The UN believes that this campaign has caused many women in Myanmar to curb their opposition activities and withdraw from public life. This is clearly the junta's aim.²⁵²



Russian Federation Deputy Defence Minister Alexander Fomin at the Armed Services Day parade in Naypyidaw on 27 March 2021, (Mil Ru | Wikimedia Commons)

Foreign contacts and counter-intelligence

International intelligence cooperation is something of an oxymoron. Intelligence services and intelligence collection are at heart manifestations of individual state power and of national self-interest.

Stephen Lander

"International Intelligence Cooperation: An Inside Perspective"²⁵³

There is another aspect of the junta's intelligence activities since 2021 that needs to be mentioned in a survey such as this, and that is its foreign relationships, both friendly and unfriendly.

Friendly relationships

Since the coup two and a half years ago, the junta has been heavily criticised, indeed shunned, by many countries and international organisations around the world. It has suffered a range of political and economic sanctions directed against it, mainly from the Western democracies. A few specifically target its intelligence agencies. For example, the US has recently added Myanmar (which it calls Burma) to the list of countries "subject to the Export Administration Regulations' military-intelligence end-use and end-user controls on certain support activities by US persons".²⁵⁴ This restricts the export, re-export or transfer to Myanmar of any items intended for military intelligence purposes. The US, and a range of other countries, has also imposed embargoes on the sale of weapons and dual-use technologies to the junta. The UN has periodically called for tougher sanctions against the junta, designed to deny it funds, arms and essential supplies for its armed forces and defence industries. Despite such measures, however, Myanmar seems to have been able to maintain intelligence relationships with its immediate neighbours and a number of other countries.

Although few details are available, it can be assumed that Myanmar's intelligence relationships continue with Russia and China, which stand out as the junta's two most steadfast allies. Both have defended Myanmar in diplomatic forums like the UN Security Council and given practical support through the sale of sophisticated weapons systems.²⁵⁵ The Russian Deputy Foreign Minister was the only foreign dignitary to attend Myanmar's Armed Forces Day in Naypyidaw on 27 March 2021, prompting Min Aung Hlaing to describe Russia as a "true and loyal friend".²⁵⁶ Russia has described Myanmar as a "reliable ally and strategic partner" and expressed a wish to deepen military ties. This would almost certainly include cooperation in the intelligence field. Less enthusiastically, perhaps, China too has hitched its diplomatic wagon to Myanmar, and the Ministry of State Security (MSS) can be expected to continue its longstanding intelligence exchanges with the OCMSA and MPF.²⁵⁷ Beijing has long been happy to share equipment, expertise and intelligence with these agencies under a "comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership" between the two countries.²⁵⁸ Chinese intelligence officials also maintain close contact with the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and other insurgent groups based along Myanmar's border with China.²⁵⁹

At this point, brief mention must be made of the recent spate of articles and online comments about an alleged Chinese signals intelligence (SIGINT) station in Myanmar. In March 2023, the London-based think-tank Chatham House published a report, based largely on commercial satellite imagery, noting a number of modest improvements to the airfield and other facilities on Myanmar's Great Coco Island, which is situated just north of India's Andaman and Nicobar group, in the Andaman Sea.²⁶⁰ It was a sensible and cautiously worded report, but it referred to the possibility that these improvements to the island's infrastructure could somehow be related to a joint Myanmar-China project, first mooted during the 1990s, to collect intelligence against India. The report sparked a flood of breathless news stories and op-eds that took this idea and elaborated upon it, usually without any supporting evidence.²⁶¹ It was reminiscent of a flurry of inaccurate and unsubstantiated articles on the same subject some 25 years ago. Those articles only ceased when India's Chief of Staff announced in 2005 that there was no Chinese SIGINT station on Great Coco Island, as claimed.²⁶² Beijing may be helping the Tatmadaw to upgrade its facilities, but there is still no sign of a Chinese presence on the island.²⁶³

India has maintained an intelligence relationship with Myanmar ever since 1948, but in recent years it has been given a higher priority. One liaison officer posted to the Indian embassy in Yangon was Rajinder Khanna, later the Chief of India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). Considered an expert on counter-terrorism, Khanna significantly strengthened cooperative arrangements on such matters.²⁶⁴ Also, a defence agreement has been signed that covers surveillance of Naga, Manipuri and other ethnic insurgents operating in India's north-east, who often take refuge in Myanmar.²⁶⁵ In recent years, these groups have been subject to joint (or at least, coordinated) military operations by the Myanmar and Indian armed forces.²⁶⁶ Another perennial source of interest to India is of course Myanmar's strategic relationship with China.²⁶⁷ For their part, Myanmar's security forces have been keen to secure Indian support against Myanmar-based EAOs operating along the country's western border, which are obtaining arms and other supplies from India. These concerns have doubtless increased since the 2021 coup, as both refugees and local resistance fighters have established base camps in India.

Since the coup, the ASEAN countries have been reluctant to take any strong measures against Myanmar, a fellow member. Its Five Point Roadmap has been dismissed by the junta as the toothless piece of diplomatic flummery that it always was, intended to give the impression of concern while lacking any practical impact. Myanmar was not invited to the

meeting of ASEAN leaders in October 2021, nor was it invited to the ASEAN foreign ministers meeting in February 2022. However, Myanmar's Defence Minister attended the 12th ASEAN Military Cooperation Meeting in June 2022. More to the point, OCMSA chief Lieutenant General Ye Win Oo attended the 19th ASEAN Military Intelligence Meeting in Phnom Penh in March 2022. It is also relevant that Myanmar Police Colonel Zaw Lin Tun was appointed as the Executive Director of the ASEAN Police Secretariat, while a Myanmar delegation was attending the 40th ASEANAPOL Conference in Phnom Penh from 1-4 March 2022.²⁶⁸ Also, bilateral contacts still occur, for example between the Myanmar and Thailand armed forces.²⁶⁹ Clearly, the need for continued security cooperation between the ASEAN states and Myanmar trumps any political or humanitarian concerns they might have.²⁷⁰

Despite attempts to keep a low profile, it seems that Israel too has been happy to maintain its close relationship with the Tatmadaw. Israel reportedly stopped exporting arms to Myanmar in 2018, due to the adverse publicity surrounding the Tatmadaw's operations against the Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine State, since described as "ethnic cleansing" and "genocide".²⁷¹ However, SENGEN Min Aung Hlaing signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Israel in 2015 that, in addition to arms sales, reportedly covered intelligence cooperation.²⁷² Also, the Tatmadaw is still operating Israeli offensive cyber systems that presumably require servicing.²⁷³ According to *The New York Times*, the Myanmar armed forces has also purchased software used to extract information from Apple computers developed by BlackBag technologies, a company recently purchased by Israel's Cellebrite. Israel has sold Myanmar military grade observation and surveillance unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) made by Israel's Elbit Systems. It has also helped train Myanmar's special forces and, probably, its intelligence agencies.²⁷⁴ Such links are not abandoned easily.

There are a few other countries that have maintained an intelligence relationship with post-coup Myanmar. One is Australia, whose Federal Police (AFP) force continues to liaise with the MPF with regard to narcotics trafficking, money laundering, international terrorism and other transnational crimes.²⁷⁵ Australia's government has taken a range of measures against the junta since February 2021, but believes that it is in Australia's national interests to keep in contact with Myanmar on such issues. This has not been a popular position with human rights activists, who claim that such links give the junta a legitimacy it does not deserve.²⁷⁶ Australia has also been criticised in the past for assisting in the provision of counter-terrorism and other training for Myanmar's police force, including members of its Special Branch.²⁷⁷ Such programs have been conducted through the Jakarta

Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation, but since the coup they appear to have been suspended.

Unfriendly relationships

Not all foreign intelligence interest in Myanmar, however, is deemed beneficial by the military government. Given their deep-seated suspicions of outsiders, and past experiences of foreign threats, the generals continue to worry about the activities of hostile intelligence services.²⁷⁸ By all accounts, they are also sensitive to public reports of such matters, even when there seems little cause for them to worry. For example, one recent account by a claimed CIA operative of covert activity in Myanmar can be dismissed as greatly exaggerated, if not completely fanciful.²⁷⁹ Another book, by a former CIA analyst, makes a more serious contribution to the literature but it is based on open sources and understandably avoids any discussion of the Agency's activities in and against Myanmar.²⁸⁰ Much of the recent reporting related to an alleged Chinese SIGINT station on Great Coco Island in the Andaman Sea can be dismissed as speculative, if not far-fetched and at times even deliberately provocative.²⁸¹ However, such distractions aside, the junta does have some grounds to be concerned about foreign intelligence interest in Myanmar.

There is little doubt that Myanmar remains the subject of close and continuing interest by the intelligence agencies of regional countries and others further afield. Myanmar's critical geostrategic position on the Indian Ocean between two superpowers, its membership of ASEAN and its close relationships with Russia and China make it an obvious target for official attention. Also, the Tatmadaw's harsh policies, from its atrocities against the Rohingyas in 2016-2017 to more recent events, have thrust it into the world's headlines. Myanmar has probably received more attention from the international community, including the UN, over the past ten years than it has for the previous half century. It has even been referred to the Security Council.²⁸² All these developments have attracted the attention of official observers, strategic analysts and other researchers around the world.²⁸³ While usually not directly involved in policy formulation, a few intelligence agencies appear to have been tasked to help formulate approaches to the junta by foreign actors, and to explore ways of breaking the current impasse in Myanmar over the domestic political situation and civil war.²⁸⁴

In this regard, it is worth noting the publications about the junta and Myanmar's security forces that have been produced by NGOs and sundry Myanmar-watchers since the coup. Over the past two and a half years, the UN and several other international organisations have released a large volume of open source intelligence (OSINT) and provided detailed

reports on subjects such as the Tatmadaw's arms acquisitions and its domestic arms industries.²⁸⁵ Other groups have compiled useful material on the arms and equipment being used in the current civil war and the nature of the conflict.²⁸⁶ These works follow major studies of the Rohingya crisis conducted by the UN's Human Rights Council, among others.²⁸⁷ At the same time, organisations like the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar, the International Crisis Group, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have maintained a steady output of high quality reports on the crisis in Myanmar and its wider implications. While strictly speaking not official intelligence assessments, all these publications add significantly to the data and analyses available to researchers interested in developments in Myanmar over the past few years.

Since the creation of the NUG and PDF in April 2021, the opposition movement has been calling for foreign assistance against the junta. It has asked for diplomatic support, humanitarian supplies, funds and lethal aid. It has even asked foreign countries to implement a no-fly zone over Myanmar, to prevent the junta from using its air power. Arms and ammunition are trickling in from expatriate groups and foreign supporters in places like the US and UK.²⁸⁸ The PDF is also manufacturing its own crude weapons in jungle workshops, using local parts and components made using 3D technology.²⁸⁹ As far as is known, no foreign government has yet provided the opposition with lethal aid, but the junta is doubtless alive to the possibility that one or more may eventually break ranks with the international community and give the opposition clandestine support.²⁹⁰ It would not be the first time this kind of thing has happened. China, for example, provided logistical support to Communist Party of Burma insurgents for many years. The US Congress-funded National Endowment for Democracy supported a number of pro-democracy initiatives during the SLORC and SPDC eras. Under the 2021 BURMA Act, the US government is free to share intelligence with the NUG, as it does with Ukraine, as anything provided would be "non-lethal aid".²⁹¹

The junta has no doubt tasked its intelligence operatives in opposition camps and places like Thailand, China and India to keep a close watch for signs of any developments in this regard. Myanmar's diplomats and Defence Attaches overseas have no doubt received similar requests for any information available on such matters.

There has been a stark reminder recently of the intelligence threats the generals face. It has been revealed that, about 50 years ago, in partnership with Germany's Federal Intelligence Service (BND), the US's CIA and National Security Agency (NSA) acquired control of a Swiss firm that manufactured sophisticated cryptographic equipment. From 1970, under the operational codenames "Thesaurus" and "Rubicon", the three agencies used their positions to facilitate the

interception of both allied and adversary communications.²⁹² The Germans apparently left the scheme in 1993, but their share was bought out by the CIA and the operation continued. As Robert Farley has written, the extent of penetration into Asia is unknown, but it has been established that Myanmar was one of those countries that purchased the compromised CryptoAG cipher equipment.²⁹³ This means that, for many years, diplomatic, intelligence-related and other confidential traffic between Myanmar's embassies overseas and the government in Yangon could be read by the US and Germany. It is possible too that, under bilateral arrangements and the "Five Eyes" agreement between the US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, these messages were shared with other countries, including Israel and Sweden.²⁹⁴

The revelation of such actions by foreign intelligence agencies has fed a deep suspicion—some would even say paranoia—in the higher levels of Myanmar's security forces about foreign interference in the country's internal affairs.²⁹⁵ For example, before 2021 some Tatmadaw generals were convinced that key members of the NLD had been recruited by the CIA, and that the NLD's ambitious social reform program was part of a US plot to undermine Myanmar society.²⁹⁶ The Australian economist Sean Turnell, who was incarcerated in Yangon and Naypyidaw for 650 days after the 2021 coup, was repeatedly accused by his interrogators of being a foreign spy. They were encouraged in this belief, apparently, by his routine contacts on economic matters with foreign embassies and international bodies like the World Bank.²⁹⁷ Interestingly, the OCMSA, SB and CID officers who interrogated him seemed convinced that he was working for the British Secret Intelligence Service, known as MI6. The fact that Turnell was an Australian did not dissuade them from this view, which probably reflects another deeply sensitive issue among the armed forces and police hierarchy, and that is Myanmar's status as a former British colony.²⁹⁸

Counter-intelligence

With regard to foreign interest in Myanmar, it should also be noted that, as far as can be determined, the junta has undertaken a range of measures to protect its secrets from both domestic opponents and foreign intelligence agencies. In a wide-ranging counter-espionage program dating from before the coup, a number of safeguards have been put in place to prevent leaks of official information from government offices and military units, and dire warnings have been issued to anyone contemplating such actions.²⁹⁹ Harsh penalties have already been exacted against journalists, civil servants and military personnel who have been caught passing on information deemed by the government to be classified.³⁰⁰ For example, Aung San Suu Kyi and her Australian economic advisor Sean Turnell were charged under the colonial-era Official

Secrets Act for sharing information that was considered (for the purposes of their show trials, at least) "directly or indirectly, useful to an enemy".³⁰¹

In addition, as part of its electronic upgrade program, it believed that the military regime has taken precautions to safeguard their communications. According to anecdotal evidence, many orders are apparently being passed on by landlines, rather than sent by cable or radio, for fear of interception by the opposition movement and foreign agencies. More than 20 years ago, the fear of such attacks reportedly influenced the installation in Myanmar of a network of fibre-optic cables linking Myanmar's main population centres and key military bases. For example, it has been reported that since 2000 fibre-optic cables have connected the main nodes of Myanmar's military command and control system, thus protecting it from both interception and sabotage. According to the activist group Justice for Myanmar, this network is managed by the Myanmar Army's Directorate of Signals.³⁰² In 2010, with technical help from China and Russia, the Tatmadaw completed construction of a nation-wide integrated air defence system that was also connected by

fibre-optic cable.³⁰³ The system reportedly connects the Tatmadaw's high command with airfields, early warning radar stations and anti-aircraft missile units.

As long as the junta feels under threat, from both foreign countries (including their intelligence agencies) and the domestic opposition movement, such infrastructure upgrades and other protective counter-measures can be expected to continue.



Cellphone tower alongside an ancient Buddhist pagoda in Yangon. (ArtemFrolov / Wikimedia Commons)



Members of a People's Defence Force unit undergo military training at a camp in Kayin State, near the Myanmar-Thai border. (STR / AFP)

Intelligence and the opposition movement

It is necessary that all guerrillas must practice intelligence and counter intelligence work, since wars are won more through cunning and shrewdness than by pulling the trigger finger.

Alberto Bayo
*One Hundred Fifty Questions for a Guerrilla*³⁰⁴

If accurate, relevant and timely intelligence is critical to the junta, for it to understand, close with and ultimately destroy the various forces arrayed against it, then such intelligence is even more important to the tens of thousands of pro-democracy and anti-junta fighters who make up the EROs, the People's Defence Force, the Local Defence Forces, the People's Defence Teams and the many independent resistance cells that are scattered around the country.³⁰⁵ Lacking a unified organisation, specialised communications, trained personnel, heavy weapons, aircraft and other means of waging a conventional military campaign, the opposition movement needs more than ever to rely on "cunning and shrewdness" to make up the gap in capabilities. It also needs to know what it is up against in terms of the forces, including intelligence forces, that have been deployed against it.³⁰⁶

Structure and organisation

Little is known about the intelligence organisations that have been created by the opposition movement since the coup, or how far their development has progressed over the past 18 months or so. In the NUG and PDF, however, it is possible to identify at least four and possibly up to six bodies that seem to have some kind of intelligence function.³⁰⁷

Under the Minister, two Deputy Ministers and the Secretary, the NUG's Ministry of Defence has seven main departments. One is designated the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA).³⁰⁸ Under a Director General, it produces a range of briefings and reports for the Ministry, prepares all-source intelligence analyses for the Minister and other NUG components, and provides mission support for the PDF. It also conducts its own intelligence operations, including surveillance, reconnaissance and interrogations. In this regard, it works closely with the PDF. The DIA is also the main source of intelligence support for the NUG's Central Command and Coordination Committee (C3C), which coordinates military operations between the PDF, allied EAOs and other resistance groups. The DIA maintains bilateral links with the intelligence elements of "armed neutral" EAOs, like the Karen National Union, which are sympathetic to the opposition movement and conduct warlike operations against the junta, but are not formally part of the C3C structure.³⁰⁹

In December 2022, it was announced that a PDF military headquarters had been created, with five separate departments. One was the Department of Military Intelligence (DMI), which came under the command of a Director General or, in military parlance, a G2.³¹⁰ It has a battlefield intelligence section and a psychological warfare section.³¹¹ It also performs counter-intelligence and technical intelligence, including signals (SIGINT) and geospatial intelligence (GEOINT) functions, down to the level of the PDF's five regional commands (based on a geographical division of the country) and combat battalions. It reports to the Chief of Staff—PDF. It is

envisaged that, when opportunity permits, the DMI will work with the DIA to manage the new government's Defence Attaches. Another department in the PDF's headquarters structure is the Department of Public Safety and Security, which appears to have certain intelligence-related functions. However, those functions are unclear.

The NUG has created a Department of Special Investigation within its Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration. Little is known about this body but, albeit from a different political perspective, it appears broadly to mirror the BSI that existed in the Ministry of Home Affairs under Aung San Suu Kyi's quasi-civilian government. The NUG seems to envisage a Special Branch in its proposed new police force, which will also fall under the jurisdiction of the Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration.³¹² On that matter, the NUG has announced its intention to create a "People's Police Force", and the CRPH has passed enabling legislation, but no other details have yet been released.³¹³ It is planned that, initially at least, the force will operate only in those areas considered "liberated" from the military regime and thus able to host an alternative administrative structure. This is a quite separate initiative from the creation of a Karenni State Police force in August 2021, made up of disaffected members of the MPF in Kayah State, and the development over the past 30 or so years of (usually paramilitary) police forces by the larger EAOs.³¹⁴

There is a Department of Intelligence Cooperation within the NUG's Ministry of International Cooperation (MOIC-IC). Its stated role is to;

*cooperate with the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other Ministries for coordination between Ministries or with the International Community to gather and exchange important intelligence on subjects regarding the safety, defence, and affairs of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, its allies and partners.*³¹⁵

According to the NUG website, the director of the department is currently Zaw Htun. Little else is known about the department, and how it fits in with the NUG's overall intelligence effort. It does not appear to have established any international links yet, or at least none that it is prepared openly to acknowledge. Unsurprisingly, enquiries made to the Ministry about the department resulted in a message to say that, due to the sensitivity of the subject, and the continuing civil war, it was not possible to elaborate on the outline given on the NUG's website.³¹⁶

The NUG's Ministry of Foreign Affairs webpage does not show any department that might be interpreted as an intelligence agency. Yet, as in foreign ministries the world over, the NUG's official representatives abroad perform certain intelligence-related duties, such as gathering and interpreting open-source intelligence about their host country's attitudes toward the civil war in Myanmar and

other forms of resistance to the junta. Nor is any detail given on the NUG website regarding the membership of the NUG's Security and Defence Council (SDC), which might be expected to have members drawn from the intelligence agencies. It is known, however, that the council receives intelligence and advice from the DIA, passed through the Ministry of Defence, which has a seat at the SDC table.³¹⁷

No other details are available about the management of intelligence and security by the NUG and PDF at the higher staff levels. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, it can only be assumed that the new agencies broadly reflect those that existed under the quasi-democratic government of Aung San Suu Kyi. One point made in correspondence from the NUG, however, was that the shadow government, through its individual ministries and intelligence agencies, was focussed on the domestic situation in Myanmar and along the country's borders. As might be expected, their highest priority was the defeat of the junta and its armed forces, and the installation of a democratic government. Senior officials of the shadow government have travelled abroad, explaining the NUG's policies and lobbying for greater support. They have also attended numerous virtual meetings. However, for obvious reasons, there has been little scope to date for the NUG's official organs, including its intelligence agencies, to establish cooperative arrangements with counterpart organisations in other countries.³¹⁸

Many aspects of this political and bureaucratic structure remain unclear. There is apparently a degree of coordination and sharing of information at the higher staff levels, and the agencies mentioned above reach down to lower levels to a degree. However, it is not known how intelligence reports produced by individual military units and branches, particularly below battalion level, are collated, analysed and disseminated—if indeed those processes occur in a structured manner. Some observers believe that the PDF's overall command structure is becoming more cohesive and better coordinated, but it is still being developed.³¹⁹ For example, while there are senior officers in the Defence Ministry and PDF managing intelligence at the strategic and operational levels, it is not known if there is an equivalent to the junta's Chief of Intelligence, coordinating the overall intelligence effort, or at least that of the NUG and PDF.³²⁰ Perhaps this role has been left to the C3C. It is also unclear how small units in the field collect tactical and operational intelligence, assess what they acquire and share it with others.

This question is complicated by the many different armed groups that make up the resistance movement. Some are full members of the PDF and are responsive to orders from the military command structure established by the NUG. Others, like the EROs, are allied with the shadow government and its armed forces, but remain independent from them. There are also EAOs which are broadly supportive of the opposition's aims but wage their own armed struggle against the junta, outside the NUG/PDF's

control. In addition, the many local defence groups, small defence "teams" and resistance cells scattered around Myanmar vary in their level of allegiance and responsiveness to the NUG and PDF. Some claim to support its aims, and are happy to coordinate their actions with them. Others, however, while perhaps paying lip service to the NUG's and PDF's broad policies, act completely independently from them. Even groups that are theoretically aligned with the NUG and PDF sometimes stray outside their broad principles and codes of conduct. Within all these organisations and groups, there are factions and divisions of other kinds.³²¹ Collecting, collating, analysing and disseminating intelligence in such a fragmented environment must be very difficult.

From anecdotal evidence and unconfirmed press reports, it would appear that the larger PDF and ERO units have designated intelligence officers, in ways that would be familiar to regular service personnel. The KNU, for example, has long had an Information and Intelligence Department and the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) has a well-established Intelligence and National Security Department.³²² As might be expected in such veteran organisations, their armed wings, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and Kachin Independence Army respectively, have dedicated intelligence elements integrated into military units at various levels. One senior Karen guerrilla, for example, has described his time as the head of the Intelligence Branch at KNLA General Headquarters, responsible for intelligence matters "down to the battalion level". As he has written, "I was looking for intelligence about the Burmese, the communists, and everyone else".³²³ He maintained a stable of spies "who kept an eye on the enemy", conducted interrogations of Tatmadaw deserters and prisoners of war (POW), and exchanged intelligence with members of the Thai army.³²⁴ Such practices doubtless continue today.³²⁵



Soldiers and children in a liberated area under control of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). (Nicholas Ganz | Shutterstock)

Most insurgent groups, however, particularly the small teams and cells created after the 2021 coup, seem to operate much more informally, and depend on tactical and operational intelligence gathered locally and assessed within each group.

Intelligence collection

As the American strategist and military historian Samuel Griffith once wrote, "Intelligence is the decisive factor in planning guerrilla operations".³²⁶ This lesson has been reinforced by the civil wars that have ravaged Myanmar over the past 75 years.

For many years now, most major EAOs have been able to intercept and read the Tatmadaw's radio signals.³²⁷ The KNLA, for example, became adept at intercepting and decoding Burmese army transmissions. It was prepared to share these skills with the students who joined them after the 1988 uprising, and went on to create the All Burma Students Democratic Front. The KNLA and the ABSDF used the knowledge gained from these intercepts to plan military operations, warn villagers of troop movements and to spread the word about the military regime's human rights abuses.³²⁸ Other EAOs did the same. The KIA, for example, had a corps of "cipher clerks" and routinely intercepted Tatmadaw radio signals.³²⁹ These days, it can be assumed that the (renamed) EROs continue to monitor Tatmadaw communications, and have passed at least some of their skills on to members of the PDF. Given the improvements in radio technology and cryptographic systems over the years, it is not known whether they enjoy the same level of success, but such practices remain a key part of the intelligence war between the junta and the opposition movement. Presumably, the resistance groups are also shown how to prevent their messages from being intercepted by the Tatmadaw.³³⁰

From an early date, the PDF and other resistance groups were also able to obtain useful information from police officers and members of the Tatmadaw who joined the opposition movement.³³¹ The figures remain unconfirmed, but it has been claimed by groups like People's Embrace and the NUG that, since early 2021 nearly 3,000 soldiers and some 7,000 police officers have defected to the opposition movement.³³² Most have come from the main population centres, although that is now changing. These figures are misleading, however, in that they make no distinctions between defectors who actually changed sides and deserters who simply went absent without leave. Nor does it specify the rank of the people joining the opposition. Clearly, the higher ranked the officer, the greater value they can potentially be in terms of the intelligence they might provide. Most defectors to date have been low-ranking soldiers. According to one unconfirmed report, only three army lieutenant colonels have defected to the opposition, and about 100 captains. The rest have

been other ranks (OR). Among the police defectors, the highest ranked officer has been a major.³³³

The opposition movement has learned the hard way that not all defectors and deserters can be trusted. Soldiers and police officers can be a valuable source of intelligence and practical advice, but until they prove themselves they are viewed with suspicion.³³⁴ As already noted, some may be undercover agents trying to collect intelligence, or worse.³³⁵ After they arrive in ERO or PDF controlled areas, they are usually asked to provide detailed accounts of their upbringing, schooling and military or police service, so that their backgrounds can be checked. They have to show that they have not directly participated in any abuses of human rights, although being the member of an offending Tatmadaw unit does not seem automatically to disqualify them from acceptance. Until they prove themselves, defectors are usually kept away from the front lines, given menial tasks at base camps and are not permitted access to weapons. Others have been more readily accepted, and used to train new recruits in weapons and tactics in rear areas. The NUG's Ministry of Defence has estimated that, of the 10,000 or so defectors to date, only about 500 have actually joined the armed resistance on the front line.³³⁶ It has been reported that, in a few cases, known spies were permitted to join resistance groups so that they could be monitored and used to spread disinformation.

Most defectors take with them to the other side a store of useful expertise, experience and information. They have been able to offer tactical and operational intelligence that was useful in planning and executing military operations against specific junta targets. Some have also been able to pass on strategic level intelligence that helps the opposition understand the junta's plans for countering the insurgency and the kind of forces it is up against. Those defectors with combat experience or specialist technical expertise, such as radio operators and demolition experts, can pass on their skills to the resistance fighters. Even drill instructors and suchlike NCOs have proven valuable to the PDF, given the lack of military experience among its recruits.³³⁷ The price of giving this help is usually a death sentence. The junta shows no mercy towards those it considers "traitors".³³⁸ POWs too can be useful, although most are at a relatively low rank. They are usually more willing to talk than officers, but their humble perspectives have meant that they can rarely offer information of strategic significance.³³⁹

Some defectors remain in contact with their former comrades and, under guidance, receive tipoffs about military deployments, weapons acquisitions and so on. In late 2022, the NUG invited soldiers, police and civil servants who for some reason could not or would not defect to "join the revolution as key informants". The appeal was based on the judgement that "intelligence needs are growing as the revolution accelerates".³⁴⁰

Such informants and double agents have been described as “watermelons”, ie green (military) on the outside but red (revolutionary) on the inside.³⁴¹ The same news story claimed that so-called watermelons had already been passing intelligence to the opposition forces on troop movements and regime targets for some months. The NUG’s statement also promised rewards for informants depending on the level of information they provided. They were also offered protection from the regime, should their activities be discovered.³⁴² According to one report, care still needed to be taken about information received from informers still in place, as the regime has used such links to spread false information.³⁴³ This game is played by both sides.

Over the past several months, the rate of defections has dropped significantly, as the junta has taken measures both to persuade and pressure its security personnel to remain loyal.³⁴⁴ Another possible reason for the smaller number of defectors has been the failure of the NUG and other armed groups to provide adequate protection and support for those wishing to defect, and their families.³⁴⁵ This may be a case of a lack of resources, or unrealistic expectations, but it appears to have had an impact. In an attempt to encourage more defections, the NUG has promised safe accommodation for military personnel and their families who join the CDM, or who wish to join the PDF. Cash rewards, most around 1 million kyats (about US\$2,400) have been offered to tempt serving military personnel to defect with their weapons, or a vehicle. In August 2022, the NUG offered a cash reward of 1 billion kyats (about US\$500,000) to any soldier who defected with an anti-aircraft weapon, or who destroyed such a weapon before absconding. This followed a period of heavy air attacks against PDF bases and sympathetic villages.³⁴⁶

There is of course another critical source of intelligence available to the EROs, PDF units and other insurgents fighting the junta, and that is the local population. As the Chinese strategist Mao Tse-tung famously wrote, successful guerrillas must move among the people as a fish swims in the sea.³⁴⁷ The depredations of the Tatmadaw and police over the years have tended to make the locals more sympathetic to the insurgents than to the security forces, and thus a potentially valuable source of information. The harsh lessons of history have taught the insurgents that they cannot make too many demands on the locals, but they still look to them to help with food, funds, recruits and, in particular, intelligence about their adversaries. Women, usually discounted as combatants in Myanmar, have proven a “valuable source of information and intelligence”.³⁴⁸ It has been on this basis that the Tatmadaw has long favoured a COIN strategy first developed in Malaya and Vietnam last century, and popularly known as the “four cuts”.³⁴⁹ It is designed to isolate the insurgents from the population and deny

them these sources of support. In this regard, the denial of intelligence is perhaps the most important aim.

Surveillance and reconnaissance

The opposition movement employs its own spies and undercover agents, and of course most military units have scouts. Needless to say, before any attack is mounted against a police station, army camp or radio mast, surveillance of the target is essential. The attacking force needs to know the layout of the facility, how many people are employed there, how they are armed, their level of alertness and so on. Occasionally, attempts will be made to enter the targeted facility on reconnaissance missions, or even to infiltrate the unit in question. For example, it was reported in early 2023 that two “resistance fighters” had signed up as recruits in the regime’s militia known as the *Pyu Saw Htee*, near Pakkoku.³⁵⁰ This particular group was about 60 strong, and was led by a member of the pro-military USDP. It worked closely with local army units to hunt down PDF members and to terrorise the local population into withholding its support from the opposition movement. The two infiltrators were later able to report back to the PDF on the group’s organisation, capabilities and activities.³⁵¹ They were also able to describe the atrocities committed by this and another *Pyu Saw Htee* group, and help plan retribution.

Intelligence is also required for the planning of assassinations, or “targeted killings”, as the NUG and PDF prefer to call them.³⁵² Prior to any action, the individuals singled out for attack are surveilled and their movements carefully noted. For example, in one case earlier this year a Tatmadaw intelligence officer operating undercover in Kachin State was watched closely for “a few weeks” before being captured, interrogated and killed.³⁵³

Both for political and operational reasons, potential targets for assassination are usually investigated before any action is taken by self-styled “urban guerrilla” units. This is in order to confirm that the intended victim is an informer, or in some other way poses a genuine threat to the opposition movement. Such targets have included policemen, ward administrators and other civil servants (such as teachers and nurses who defy the CDM’s work bans), serving and retired Tatmadaw officers, politicians and businessmen believed to be working with the military regime.³⁵⁴ Sometimes, the intended target has been warned that he or she is being considered for retribution. They have been given an opportunity to stop working for the junta, and thus avoid being attacked. Some have taken this chance, but others have not. In one high profile incident, which clearly rattled the junta and its supporters, on 22 April 2023 the Union Election Commission Deputy Director-General was shot dead in Yangon.³⁵⁵ Security

personnel, officials and USDP members have been warned to practice a range of counter-measures, such as curbing their use of mobile phones and avoiding posts on social media that forecast their movements.

Sometimes, the intelligence compiled by urban guerrilla units has been faulty and mistakes have been made. Occasionally, the family members of intended victims have been killed or injured, in what has later been described as unfortunate "collateral damage".³⁵⁶ At times, the NUG has had to discipline resistance fighters who have attacked innocent people.³⁵⁷ There have also been suggestions of overreach in targeting policies. In November 2021, for example, three former peace negotiators who had worked with the armed forces prior to the coup claimed that their names were on a "hit list" drawn up by the NUG and PDF.³⁵⁸ The NUG denied the claim but Brookings Institution Myanmar-watcher Yun Sun wrote at the time that "Experts and policy practitioners who work on the matter know that such a list indeed exists". It was not clear, however, who drew up the list or on what basis particular names were added.³⁵⁹ As noted above, given the "hydra-headed nature" of the opposition movement, and the difficulty of coordinating its policies and actions, such decisions are hard to pin down. Also, the standards of intelligence analysis being applied to such problems invariably range across a wide spectrum.

It is difficult to put numbers on the opposition's program of assassinations, but at one stage the junta claimed that public servants like ward administrators were being killed at a rate of more than one a day.³⁶⁰ In August 2022, SENGEN Min Aung Hlaing stated that anti-regime groups had carried out 2,442 attacks in Yangon, and 2,194 in Mandalay, since February 2021. However, he did not differentiate between assassinations, bombings with improvised explosive devices (IED) and other kinds of incidents.³⁶¹

The opposition movement's campaign of assassinations has raised a number of questions over its ambiguity under international law and the morality of killing unarmed civilians and their family members without any semblance of a trial.³⁶² It has also sparked some debate among observers over the definition of terrorism and prompted comparisons with terrorist attacks in other countries.³⁶³ This is not just an academic exercise. Foreign governments and international organisations need to be able to reconcile their public support for the NUG and its armed struggle with their clearly stated obligations under international conventions against terrorism. This is likely to be one reason why they are reluctant formally to recognise the NUG (which has openly supported the assassinations) or provide the PDF with lethal aid.³⁶⁴ Even so, the campaign appears to be working. Large numbers of ward administrators and other public servants have resigned following death threats from local resistance groups.³⁶⁵ The junta is finding it increasingly difficult to replace them. Also,

informers are becoming harder to recruit, despite cash rewards and other inducements.³⁶⁶

Imagery intelligence

Surveillance and reconnaissance can take other forms. Since the 2021 coup, unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones, have been used by the junta's security forces to gather intelligence about protests in Yangon and other urban centres.³⁶⁷ UAVs have also been used by the Tatmadaw for surveillance and tactical reconnaissance in the field.³⁶⁸ More recently, armed drones have been used for air strikes against insurgent forces, such as the Arakan Army in the country's west, and Karen PDF units in the east of the country. The platforms employed for these missions include Chinese CH-3A, CH-4, Yellow Cat A2 and Sky 02A drones, and Russian Orlan 10-E surveillance drones.³⁶⁹ The Tatmadaw also operates Elbit Systems Skylark 1 surveillance drones acquired from Israel.³⁷⁰ Soon after the 2021 coup, however, the Tatmadaw began to lose its monopoly of Myanmar's air space. The opposition movement has no aircraft, but tech-savvy members of the PDF and other resistance groups have purchased and adapted commercial off-the-shelf drones to perform a variety of missions. These have ranged from tactical surveillance and targeting to air support and ground strike.

Most of the drones being used by the resistance appear to be Chinese-made DJI machines, and UAVs similar to Indian MR-10 cargo "quadcopter" drones. Both can be ordered through the internet at a cost of between US\$1,000 and US\$3,000, depending on their size and payload capacity. Larger "hexacopter" drones originally intended for agricultural use have also been acquired and modified to carry heavier bombs, including mortar rounds. According to one report, Karen guerrilla groups have even experimented with fixed wing UAVs, carrying small bomblets loaded horizontally, but there have not been any confirmed sightings of them being used in combat.³⁷¹ Replacement parts for these machines are expensive and difficult to obtain, but some can be produced in resistance camps, using 3D printers. Under Project Skywalk, the PDF aims to acquire more and larger commercial drones in the future and adapt them for military use. While the impact of these drones has so far been limited, it is expected that, with increases in funds, expertise and opportunities, they will make more of an impression in the future.

In news reports and online commentaries, most attention has been given to the use of UAVs by the resistance to drop small bombs on junta facilities, like rural police stations, or on concentrations of Tatmadaw troops.³⁷² Over the past two years, PDF units with names like "Federal Wings", "Wings of the Irrawaddy" and "Falcon Wings" have carried out hundreds of aerial attacks against junta forces, mainly in Sagaing and Magwe regions, but also further afield.³⁷³ However, unarmed UAVs have also been important for

reconnaissance and imagery intelligence collection. Drones fitted with small video cameras have been used to gather information about intended targets, to keep informed of troop movements and in other ways to collect geospatial intelligence. It is planned to equip drones with night vision cameras so such operations can be performed 24 hours a day.³⁷⁴ These efforts are all aimed at improving the situational awareness of the resistance forces.³⁷⁵ In a recent development, it has even been possible for PDF commanders to give real-time orders to their troops, based on direct video footage from drones.³⁷⁶

The Tatmadaw has responded to these attacks by installing anti-drone guns and signal-jamming equipment on the roofs of public buildings, around military bases (including airfields) and at other sites. The junta claims it can shoot down drones from a distance of between 700 and 1,000 metres, and jam their operating signals. However, many still get through.

Information warfare

From an early stage, the NUG demonstrated a keen awareness of the need to spread its message and maintain contact with its supporters in Myanmar and further afield. It also needed to engage in the information war being waged by the junta, and counter its propaganda. This needed to be coordinated with its broad intelligence effort. A radio station calling itself Public Voice (or People's Voice) first began transmissions in August 2021. It had regular morning and evening FM broadcasts. At least two other anti-junta FM stations have been launched. When People's Voice was first aired, the NUG Defence Minister stated that it was a response to the need for "emergency communications" in the "next phase" of the anti-junta movement, although it is not entirely clear what he meant.³⁷⁷ The NUG also makes heavy use of social media like Facebook and Twitter to spread news and make policy announcements. Operating from bases around Myanmar's periphery these platforms are less susceptible to junta jamming of radio and other signals.

The cameras installed on the PDF's drones have also been used to support the NUG's information warfare campaign. Film clips of small bombs and mortar shells falling onto Tatmadaw positions, vehicles and naval vessels have had a dramatic impact on public perceptions of the civil war.³⁷⁸ Footage of such incidents have been posted on social media platforms and released to the international news media.³⁷⁹ These clips are intended to raise awareness of the resistance struggle in Myanmar, attract donations to the

opposition cause by demonstrating its capabilities, and boost the morale of PDF forces in the field.³⁸⁰ They are also intended to undermine the morale of the junta's personnel, by demonstrating to them in graphic form that they are vulnerable to attack anywhere, at any time.

Shortly after the coup, anti-junta protesters calling themselves the "Myanmar Hackers" managed to disrupt the communications of a number of government departments and organisations. These included the Central Bank, the website of the Tatmadaw's True News Information Team, the state-run broadcasters MRTV and Myawaddy TV, the Port Authority and the Food and Drug Administration.³⁸¹ The group also targeted Myanmar's Trade Department, Customs Department and the Directorate of Investment and Company Administration. Most hacks took the form of denial-of-service attacks and "hacktivism", or the defacement of target websites.³⁸² It would be surprising if the opposition movement has not since recruited people with such skills, with a view to breaking into the communications of the armed forces and police force, among others, to collect intelligence on the junta's policies, plans and possible actions.

Such attacks will not be easy. Myanmar's national intelligence capabilities are protected against cyber threats, including hacking and denial of service attacks, by a National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC). Formally part of the Ministry of Transport and Communications, and located in Naypyidaw, the NCSC claims to be "responsible for the digital security of its country ... [and] works to bring its awareness of potential digital vulnerabilities to citizens in all regions".³⁸³ However, the junta's official networks probably claim its highest priority. In 2020, it was announced that South Korea's largest telecom company, SK Telecom, had signed an agreement to work with the NCSC to "build a sophisticated security operation system in Myanmar to strengthen protections against the ever-increasing cyber threats".³⁸⁴ The plan was to design a Security Operation Centre for the NCSC, using SK Telecom's "Smart Guard" technology. In a press release, SK Telecom said it would also provide Security Information and Event Management, a security solution developed by the Korean company Igloo Security.³⁸⁵

In the bitter civil war currently being fought between the junta and the opposition movement, battles are raging at all levels and in all ways. This includes the struggle for paramountcy between the intelligence forces of both sides.



(Tobias Tullius | Unsplash)

Conclusion

When you know a thing, to recognize that you know it, and when you do not know a thing, to recognize that you do not know it. That is knowledge.

Confucius
The Analects ³⁸⁶

CONCLUSION

Myanmar is in for a long war. As the US intelligence community stated in its latest public assessment of global threats;

*Protracted violence between the Burmese junta and its prodemocracy opponents probably will sharpen as neither side has the military capability to win outright in the near future, and both sides increasingly see their conflict in existential terms, effectively precluding compromise.*³⁸⁷

Indeed, the junta has repeatedly vowed to “annihilate” the opposition movement, which it has branded a terrorist organisation. The NUG and its allies, for their part, have declared a “defensive war” against the junta and stated their firm intention to achieve a complete military victory. No thought is being given to a negotiated solution and when one has been suggested both sides have reacted strongly.³⁸⁸ In the bitter, protracted conflict that is flowing from these decisions, intelligence will play a critical role.

Even under the quasi-civilian government of Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar’s intelligence agencies were growing in strength and acquiring new capabilities. Both the armed forces and police were given new powers and new equipment which made it easier for them to monitor and control the civil population. The steps taken between 2016 and 2020 are now proving their worth to the junta. The intelligence agencies have been further strengthened by a range of measures taken since 2021 which permit the security forces to act without restraint in their efforts to identify, locate and neutralise members of the opposition movement in the population centres. In the rural areas, intelligence is once again playing a crucial role in counter-insurgency operations against members of the armed resistance. After a period in which the generals could be accused of over-confidence, the junta seems to have accepted that this will be a long and arduous process that will

require patience and determination. Like T.E. Lawrence, they have learned that “[Making] war upon rebellion is messy and slow, like eating soup with a knife”.³⁸⁹

Little is known about the opposition movement’s intelligence apparatus and operations, but it is clear that the NUG, PDF and its allies in the EROs and elsewhere recognise and accept the need for a sophisticated intelligence effort to survive, let alone win the civil war. The armed resistance has learned the hard way that it needs accurate and timely intelligence to protect itself from the greater resources and firepower of the junta, let alone take the offensive, as it is keen to do.³⁹⁰ Despite its many internal problems, the Tatmadaw remains a formidable foe. It is better organised, better resourced and better supported by international actors. It thus poses a major challenge to the poorly armed, relatively ill-trained and often uncoordinated forces of the EROs, PDF and other armed groups. The opposition also needs to be able to anticipate and counter the efforts of OCMISA and the other intelligence agencies that are deployed against it.

In these circumstances, the civil war is likely to drag on for many months, if not years, with no real result. It faces what the Wilson Centre in the US has called a “strategic stalemate”.³⁹¹ Both sides are trying to wear down the other in the hope that their opponent will ultimately accept the futility of further resistance and seek a negotiated peace. As Carl von Clausewitz once wrote, modern warfare is “a slow process of mutual attrition that will reveal which side can first exhaust its opponent”.³⁹² The side that wins the intelligence war, however, will have a better chance of winning the shooting war, or at least being in a better position to negotiate the terms of any final settlement. It may not be the battle of bombs and bullets that decides the outcome of the civil war in Myanmar, but the battle of wits and wiles.

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