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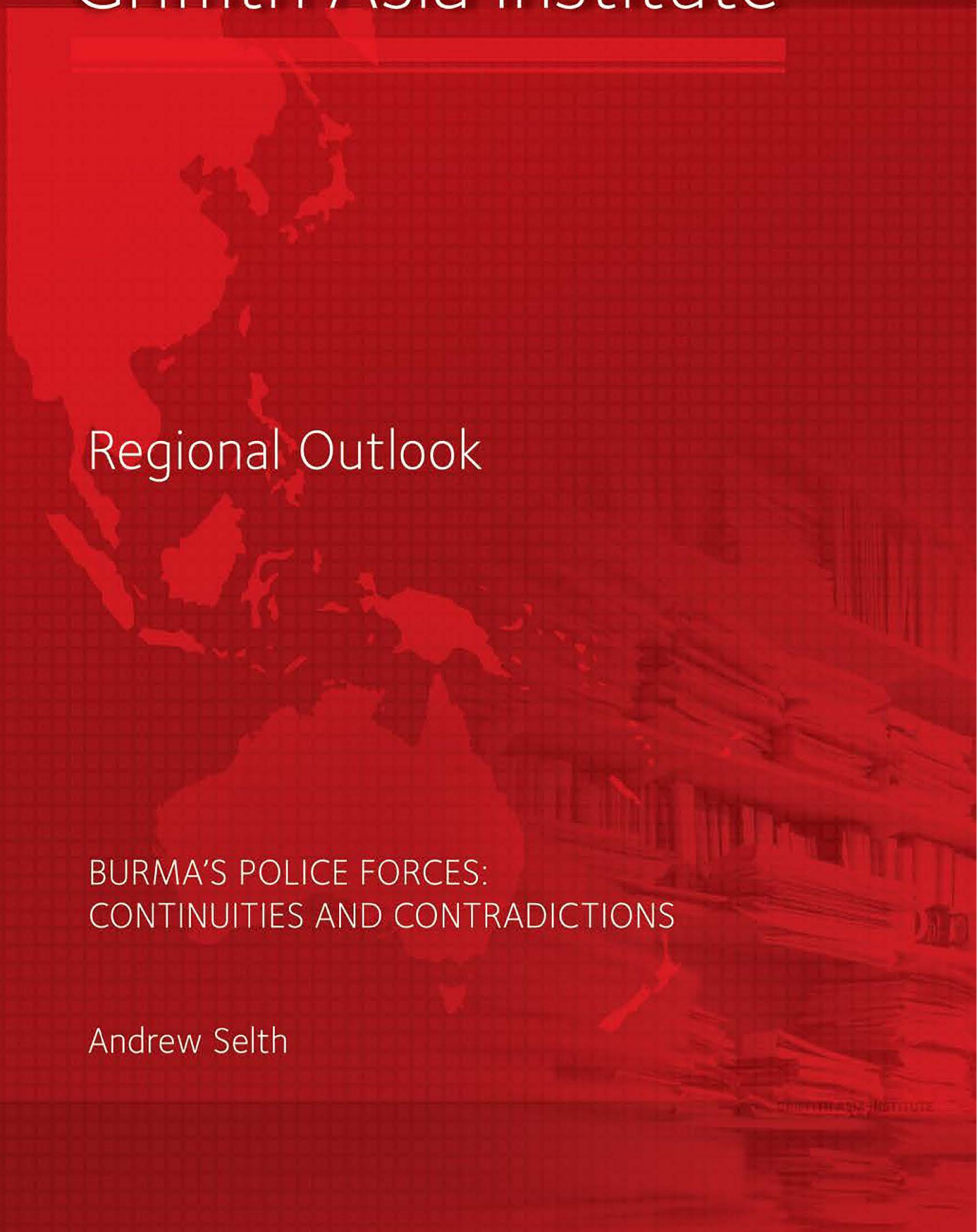
## Regional Outlook



## BURMA'S POLICE FORCES: CONTINUITIES AND CONTRADICTIONS

Andrew Selth

Griffith Asia Institute

Regional Outlook

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# Executive Summary

Whenever reference is made to Burma's coercive state apparatus, the armed forces (Tatmadaw) immediately spring to mind. This is hardly surprising. After all, the country boasts the world's most durable military dictatorship. Over the past 50 years, the armed forces have taken the lead in crushing domestic protests and waging counter-insurgency campaigns against a wide range of armed groups. There is another institution, however, that was once even more important and, arguably, is starting to recover its former place in Burma's internal affairs. This is the country's national police force.

Under British, Japanese and Burmese governments, the police have always played a critical role in the country's administration and national security. Since the 1962 military coup the police force has been overshadowed by the armed forces, but it has continued to evolve and grow. As the Myanmar Police Force (MPF), it is now larger and more powerful than at any time in Burma's history, and is considered a key instrument of control by the hybrid civilian-military government which first met in Naypyidaw in January 2011. As the armed forces step back – to some degree, at least – from direct rule, and the new administration tries to present a more civilian face to the world, the national police force is likely to become even more important.

Such a transition will place the MPF under considerable strain. It already faces major challenges, many of which were shared by its colonial forebears. An effort is currently being made to improve the force's performance and reform its culture, but this will take a long time. It will also be dependent on factors that are outside the Police Chief's control, not least of which is the Tatmadaw's willingness to allow the MPF greater autonomy. Even so, the process will bear watching, as it holds out the promise of a more capable and professional police force in Burma. This is not only something that has long been desired by the Burmese people, but it will be essential if the country is ever to make an orderly transition to genuine democratic rule.

## Note

This Regional Outlook is based on a seminar paper given at Griffith University on 17 October 2011. It also draws on material presented for discussion at a workshop entitled 'Asian Policing Compared: Traditions, Practices and Capacities', arranged by the Australian Research Council Centre for Excellence in Policing and Security at the Australian National University from 28–29 July 2011. The author would like to thank all those at the two meetings who offered comments and suggestions.

# Author's Note

After the Burmese armed forces crushed a nation-wide pro-democracy uprising in September 1988, Burma'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 Burma regained its independence from the United Kingdom (UK) in January 1948. In July 1989 the new military government changed the country's name once again, this time to the 'Union of Myanmar'. At the same time, a number of other place names were changed to conform more closely to their original Burmese pronunciation. The new names were subsequently accepted by the United Nations (UN) and most other major international organisations. Some governments and opposition groups, however, have clung to the old forms as a protest against the military regime's continuing human rights abuses and its refusal to hand over power to the civilian government elected in 1990.

In this paper the better-known names, for example 'Burma' instead of 'Myanmar', 'Rangoon' instead of 'Yangon', and 'Irrawaddy' instead of 'Ayeyarwady', have been retained for ease of recognition. Quotations and references, however, have been cited as they were originally published. Also, formal titles introduced after 1989 have been cited in their current form, such as 'Myanmar Police Force' and 'Myanmar Army'.

The armed forces have ruled Burma since 1962 but, from 1974 to 1988, they exercised power through an ostensibly elected 'civilian' parliament. On taking back direct control of the country in September 1988, the armed forces abolished the old government structure and created the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which ruled by decree. In November 1997, apparently on the advice of a United States-based public relations firm, the regime changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). In 2008, it held a constitutional referendum, which was followed by elections in 2010. The resulting national government, consisting of both elected officials and non-elected military officers, first met in January 2011.

After the UK sent military forces into the royal capital of Mandalay and completed its three-stage conquest of Burma in 1885, Rangoon became the administrative capital of the country. It remains the commercial capital, but in October 2005 the regime formally designated the newly built town of Naypyidaw (or Nay Pyi Taw), 320 kilometres north of Rangoon, as the seat of Burma's government. When they appear in this paper, the terms 'Rangoon regime', or in some cases simply 'Rangoon', are used as shorthand for the central government, including the military government that was created in 1962 and re-invented in 1988. After 2005, the government is referred to as the 'Naypyidaw regime', or simply 'Naypyidaw', to reflect the administrative change that took place that year.

Another term used in this paper is *Tatmadaw* (literally 'royal force'), the vernacular name for Burma's armed forces. In recent years this term has gained wide currency in English-language publications on Burma.

# 1. Introduction

> The Police department has always been and will always be one of the most important branches of administration of Burma.
>
> Daw Mya Sein
> *The Administration of Burma* (1938)

For more than half a century, whenever reference has been made to the coercive apparatus of the Burmese state, it has been the armed forces (or Tatmadaw) which have immediately sprung to mind. This is hardly surprising. After all, the country boasts the world's most durable military dictatorship. There is another institution, however, that was once even more important and, arguably, is starting to recover its former role in Burma's internal affairs. This is the country's national police, currently organised as the Myanmar Police Force (MPF).

Since the coup d'etat in 1962 that brought General Ne Win to power, the armed forces have come to dominate almost every aspect of Burmese society. In addition, over the past 20 years the Tatmadaw has been greatly expanded and modernised. Estimates of its current size vary enormously, from over 500,000 to less than 300,000.[1] Whatever figure is used, however, it is probably still the second largest armed forces in Southeast Asia. For 50 years, it has been the primary coercive arm of Burma's central government. Its troops have been deployed not only to combat armed insurgents and narcotics warlords in the countryside, but also to put down civil unrest in urban centres. Continued military rule has also been made possible by a powerful intelligence system. Notwithstanding a new constitution in 2008 and the 'election' of a new government in 2010, the armed forces remain the ultimate arbiters of power in Burma.[2]

Throughout this period, the police have received little publicity. From time to time, there have been references in Burma's state-controlled news media to police campaigns against crime in the cities and police involvement in rural anti-narcotics operations. There have even been occasional reports of police corruption and abuses. Rarely, however, has the force itself excited much attention, either locally or further afield. There have been a few passing mentions in the academic literature but descriptions in reference books have generally been wide of the mark.[3] Similarly, estimates of the MPF's size have failed to keep pace with its growth.[4] International human rights groups have highlighted the activities of the force's anti-riot units and the role of Special Branch, which has played a part in the arrest and interrogation of dissidents. Even then, however, very little attention has been paid to the police force as a national institution.

That situation is now changing. Burma's police force is gradually being recognised as a large, increasingly powerful and influential organisation that is likely to become a key instrument of control under the hybrid civilian-military government that is now ensconced in Naypyidaw, Burma's new capital.

# 2. Development and Roles

Over the past 180 years, the size, structure and effectiveness of Burma's police forces have varied greatly. Whether they have been under British, Japanese or Burmese control, however, they have always played an important role in the country's administration and national security.

During the colonial period, the police were essential for British rule. The conquest of Burma - in three wars between 1826 and 1885 - was by regular soldiers, of the East India Company, British India and the United Kingdom itself. The army also assisted in the 'pacification' of Burma after the fall of Mandalay, and was called upon to help crush the so-called Saya San Rebellion in the 1930s.[5] Yet, it was the province's police forces that from day to day were responsible for enforcing colonial rule, maintaining law and order - as defined by various officials in Rangoon, Calcutta and London - supporting the civil administration and protecting the commercial ventures which soon established themselves in Britain's rich new possession. The police were also in the forefront of the colonial regime's attempts to stem the rising tide of nationalism early in the twentieth century.

Thus the Burma Police (BP) was the principal component of the colonial administration's coercive apparatus. Formally instituted in 1861 as a provincial civil or constabulary police force within British India, it was joined by the Burma Military Police (BMP) in 1887, the Railway Police in 1890 and the Rangoon Town Police in 1899. After a review of British India's police forces in 1891, most executive positions in the BP were filled by members of a new colony-wide service which became known as the Indian Imperial Police.[6] In 1937, when Burma formally separated from India and became a colony in its own right, two thirds of the BMP were reconstituted as the Burma Frontier Force. After Burma was 'pacified', relatively few regular army units were stationed in-country. In 1908, there were 9,486 British and 'native' troops in Burma.[7] By 1939, the number had declined to 5,000, less than half the strength of the military police force.[8]

To help fulfil its multiple roles, the BP developed an extensive system to gather intelligence, not just on criminal organisations and unlawful activity but also on local personalities and developments of broader social, political and security interest.[9] In Burma, as in India proper and other British colonial dependencies, it became the accepted practice for the civil police force to act as 'the eyes and ears of their Government'.[10] As early as 1890, an Intelligence Branch (IB) was formed in Burma Police headquarters to collate information about the movements of 'suspicious strangers', monitor domestic dissent and deal with 'cases of a political nature'.[11] It later became Special Branch. In 1906, a separate Criminal Investigation Branch (CIB) was established. With wide responsibilities, it became a 'cornerstone of the surveillance and intelligence function of the government'.[12]

Following the outbreak of the Second World War, and the British retreat to India in 1942, an indigenous Burmese police force helped the *Kempeitai* military police enforce compliance with Japanese rule. When Britain reoccupied Burma in 1945 it re-established the old civil police force and created two new paramilitary forces to help restore law and order. These were the Armed Police and Frontier Constabulary. After Burma regained its independence in 1948, the new Burma Police (Organisation) and Union Military Police (UMP) were an integral part of Prime Minister U Nu's grand design to bring peace and prosperity to the country. Faced with serious internal security problems, however, the police struggled to exercise their basic functions. Even before the 'Bogyoke' or 'caretaker' military government was installed in 1958, they were overshadowed by Burma's growing armed forces.

The 1962 military coup saw the effective eclipse of Burma's national police force as an independent entity. Initially, responsibility for all functions of government, including law and order, was exercised directly or indirectly by the Tatmadaw. After a major reorganisation in 1964, the renamed People's Police Force (PPF) acquired greater power and formal status. However, following a nation-wide pro-democracy uprising in 1988, and severe criticism of the police's performance from both within and outside Burma, the newly installed State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) reorganised the force once again. It still occupied a subordinate role, vis-à-vis the army, but by the mid-1990s the revamped and renamed Myanmar Police Force had been elevated to a more important position in Burma's domestic affairs.[13]

This trend is likely to continue as the armed forces step back from direct rule – to some degree, at least – and the new administration in Naypyidaw attempts to change the popular perception of the government and its instruments of power by presenting a more civilian face to the country, and the world.

Such a transition, however, will not be easy. Burma's police have never enjoyed a positive image. Before 1942, the force was 'viewed with disdain as a lackey of the colonial power'.[14] It was the same story under the Japanese who, despite initially being welcomed by Burmese nationalists, soon came to be viewed as even more oppressive than the British. The widespread perception of the police as inefficient, corrupt and politically partisan was reinforced during the immediate post-Independence period, when U Nu's government was accused of using the police – including the UMP – against its political opponents. After the 1962 coup, the PPF became the willing, albeit junior, partner in a repressive military regime. This position was confirmed in the popular mind by the brutality of the *Lon Htein* riot police before and during the 1988 uprising.[15]

Under the SLORC and, after 1997, its nominal successor the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the MPF still faced serious problems. Yet, after a series of administrative and personnel changes, it gave the impression of being better organised, better resourced and more professional in the execution of its duties. It is significant that, after a purge of the country's powerful military intelligence apparatus in 2004, the MPF was given greater responsibility for monitoring aspects of Burma's internal security.[16] For a period, the force seemed to be gaining a greater level of public respect. Its popular standing suffered another blow in 2007, however, when it helped to put down the civil unrest that year. Some observers have suggested that a distinction was made by most Burmese between the behaviour of the police and that of the army, with the latter receiving the greatest opprobrium. Even so, the MPF did not come out of that episode well, either domestically or internationally.[17]

Notwithstanding their fluctuating fortunes, throughout this entire period Burma's police forces have been much more than merely a symbol or an extension of the central government's judicial authority. In addition to their more traditional responsibilities for crime prevention and detection, and civil order, they have exercised important paramilitary functions and operated closely with the armed forces of the day. Except for three years or so during the Second World War, when the Imperial Japanese Army exercised unbridled coercive power, and another period following the 1962 coup, there have always been dedicated armed police units in Burma. Since the formation of the BMP in 1887, their duties have ranged from crowd control in the cities and punitive expeditions against rural communities to military-style operations against insurgents.

After the Tatmadaw took back direct political power in 1988, the SLORC and SPDC have seen the police force not only as a means of maintaining social order and enforcing military rule in Burma, but also as an extension of the country's broader national security apparatus, able to perform both internal and external roles. During the so-called 'saffron revolution' in 2007, for example, the police – notably the paramilitary security battalions

and Special Branch – worked closely with the army, not only to help suppress the demonstrations in the streets but also to identify, arrest and interrogate protesters.[18] The security battalions in particular are seen as an important strategic reserve, available to join with the Tatmadaw to defend the country in an emergency.[19]

There is one area, however, in which the police force has stood out from the armed forces, and that is in the level of its international profile and relationships. Unlike the normally secretive and introverted Tatmadaw, the MPF has been prepared to share details of its organisational structure with outsiders – up to a point, at least – and to work with various foreign agencies in tackling aspects of transnational crime. There are only two openly declared police liaison offices in Burma – those based in the Australian and US embassies in Rangoon – but the MPF routinely meets and discusses a wide range of policing issues with its counterparts from neighbouring countries, notably China and Thailand. MPF officers have attended training courses in China.

In addition, Burma is a member of INTERPOL, ASEANPOL and a number of United Nations and other international organisations which look at problems like the narcotics trade, human trafficking and money laundering.[20] While these contacts appear to have resulted in few practical initiatives – most countries preferring bilateral agreements on specific issues – they have nevertheless exposed Burmese police officers to different perspectives on such issues and permitted them to become familiar with a variety of police operating procedures.[21] The MPF has also sent officers to training courses offered by the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation, which was established with Australian help in 2004. Most of these courses have been for mixed classes drawn from Association of South East Nation (ASEAN) member states and other regional countries. At least one course, however, has been tailored to the specific needs of the MPF.[22]

# 3. Structure and Organisation

During the colonial and early post-Independence periods, Burma's policing roles and capabilities were divided between separate civil and military police forces, supplemented by a number of distinct functional units. During the 1950s, the BP was assisted by various 'special police reserves' and a bewildering array of militia organisations.[23] After the 1962 coup, however, the Union Military Police (renamed the Union Constabulary by the 'caretaker' government) was absorbed into the Tatmadaw. All civil police forces, including the separately organised Rangoon Town Police, were consolidated into one centralised police structure. This was to remain the situation until 1974, when widespread labour and student unrest prompted Ne Win's Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) government once again to create a force of paramilitary police.[24] Even then, however, the *Lon Htein* remained within the national police command structure.

The MPF falls within the jurisdiction of the Minister of Home Affairs, currently Myanmar Army Lieutenant General Ko Ko. His last position was as Chief of Bureau of Special Operations 3 in Tatmadaw headquarters, responsible for Pegu and Irrawaddy Regions and Arakan State. The Minister effectively reports directly to the new president, Thein Sein, and is a member of the National Defence and Security Council which was established under the 2008 constitution.[25]

While exact numbers are difficult to determine, reliable sources in Burma believe the current strength of the MPF to be close to 80,000.[26] This is an increase of some 8,000 men and women over the past decade.[27] INTERPOL's public website states that the MPF's strength is 'more than 93,000', and some unofficial estimates range as high as 100,000, but these claims are difficult to sustain.[28] In organisational terms, the MPF has for at least a decade been made up of six separate, but inter-related, component parts. These are the national headquarters, the State and Region (formerly Division) police forces, four special departments, five training centres, 15 police security battalions and several small auxiliary forces.[29] This is in addition to a number of other units and organisations that are either administered by, or in other ways closely connected to, the MPF.

## National Headquarters

At national headquarters in Naypyidaw, the MPF is headed by the Chief of Police, who usually holds the rank of Police Major General. The present incumbent is the former Deputy Commander of the Tatmadaw's Rangoon Command, (Myanmar Army) Brigadier General Kyaw Kyaw Tun.[30] Under him is the Deputy Chief of Police (DCP), who holds the rank of Police Brigadier General. As the MPF's second-in-command, the DCP has responsibility for 'the proper command, control and monitor all the Departments of the Myanmar Police Force' [sic].[31] There are six other Police Brigadier Generals in the national headquarters, managing the General Staff Department, Criminal Investigation Department (CID), Special Branch, Adjutant General's Office, Quartermaster-General's Office and Police Battalion Command.

## State and Region Police Forces

Under national command, there are now 14 Region and State Police Forces, matching Burma's 14 Regions and States.[32] Each is commanded by a Police Colonel, working from the respective State and Region capitals. Generally speaking, the jurisdictions of these forces follow established civil administrative boundaries, as laid down in the 2008 constitution.[33] Below them are police at the district, township and (in some places) village level. There are currently over 1,200 police stations in the country.[34] These range

in size from quite large facilities in densely populated areas to small rural outposts manned by only a few officers.

## 'Special' Departments and Agencies

There are four 'special' departments in the MPF, namely the Criminal Investigation Department, Special Branch, Railways Police and City Development Police Force.

The CID maintains a central Directorate in Naypyidaw and has two regional branches, one in Rangoon and one in Mandalay. Both branches are commanded by Police Colonels.[35] In addition, there are small CID detachments under the command of Police Lieutenants in the capitals of all States and Regions. Special Branch too has its headquarters in Naypyidaw, with branches in Upper and Lower Burma. Officers are also out-posted to State and Region capitals.

The Railways Police Force is commanded by a Police Colonel, and is responsible for law and order on trains and in railway-related premises. The City Development Police Force is commanded by a Police Colonel. It appears to have replaced the old Rangoon Town (later City) Police, and has units in Rangoon and Mandalay, each commanded by a Police Major. Since Burma's seat of government was transferred to Naypyidaw in 2005, there has also been a MPF unit responsible for the national capital, which is technically a Union Territory directly administered by the president.

The MPF is also directly involved in the operation of two important government agencies, the Central Committee for Drug Abuse Control (CCDAC) and the Department Against Transnational Crime (DATC).

The CCDAC was established in 1976 'in order to eradicate the menace of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances'.[36] It was reorganised in December 1997. Its Chairman is the Minister for Home Affairs, but its Secretary is the Chief of Police. The force's Director (Narcotics) acts as Joint Secretary. In addition, the DCP and MPF Chief of Staff attend CCDAC meetings as ordinary committee members. The committee has two Vice Chairmen and 24 Central Committee members. The CCDAC leads all drug enforcement efforts in Burma. It oversees 10 sub-committees and coordinates the MPF's 26 Anti-Narcotic Task Forces.

The DATC was created by the MPF in September 2004, just six months after Burma became a state member of the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.[37] It is managed by a Police Colonel. Its activities are also governed by UN Security Council Resolutions 1373, 1276 and 1455.[38] The Department has a very wide remit, and covers such issues as terrorism, narcotics offenses, arms smuggling, sea piracy, cyber crime, money laundering and people trafficking.[39] It is often through this department that the MPF maintains contacts with foreign police forces.

## Additional Bodies

Details are difficult to obtain, but the MPF has a specialist counter-terrorist unit, commanded by a Police Colonel. This unit appears to be trained and equipped along the lines of the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) units found in most Western police forces. It appears to include a number of female police officers.[40] Observers who have witnessed unit training programs speak highly of its capabilities.[41]

MPF organisation charts show three other 'Additional Bodies'. These are the Border Patrol Police, Sea Patrol Police and Central Institute of Public Training.

The first appears to refer to the 'Border Control Force' (abbreviated in Burmese to *Na Sa Kha*). This is a multi-jurisdictional organisation which was established in 2001 and

reportedly expanded to cover most of Burma's major border crossing points.[42] Not to be confused with the later Border Area Trade Directorate (*Na Ka Tha*), it now operates only along the border with Bangladesh. Little is known about the Sea Patrol Police, but there have always been police units assigned to patrol Burma's many rivers and ports.[43] The Central Institute of Public Training at Phaunggyi provides management courses and ideologically-oriented programs designed to 'keep patriotism alive'.[44] It also educates civil servants and others in the MPF's roles and responsibilities.

## Training Centres

There are five police training centres in Burma. The main facility is the MPF's Central Institute of Police Training, which was opened on a 150-acre site between Mandalay and Maymyo (Pyin Oo Lwin) in 1999. It was anticipated that, after it was completed in 2002, the Institute would have the capacity simultaneously to train 1,800 students in a wide range of courses.[45] In addition, there are Police Training Schools at Taungleyon (in southern Shan State) and Yemathin (near Mandalay). There are also two smaller police training depots. The CID maintains a specialist training centre at Insein township, just outside Rangoon.

## Police Battalions Command

Since the first *Lon Htein* unit was created in 1974, the MPF has steadily expanded its paramilitary capabilities. While most official publications state that there are 16 security battalions, only 15 are currently active.[46] They are commanded by a Police Brigadier General based in Naypyidaw. Each battalion has a formal establishment of 500 men, but they are usually only about 350 strong.[47] Battalion commanders are Police Lieutenant Colonels. The key function of these units is 'suppression of uprising, sabotage and riot'.[48] Seven battalions are based in or around Rangoon, two are in Mandalay Region, two in Arakan State, one in Sagaing Region, two in Pegu Region and one is based in Mon State.[49] There are also three Deputy Battalion Commands under Police Colonels based in Rangoon, Mandalay and Sittwe.

## Auxiliary Forces

There are two Auxiliary Forces attached to the State and Regional police forces. These are the Traffic (or Highway Patrol) Unit (under a Police Lieutenant Colonel) and the Oil Field (or Oil Refinery) Security Unit. In practice, however, they seem to be little more than paper units made up of State and Region level police officers assigned to these particular duties. From all reports, their areas of jurisdiction are quite restricted, for example on the Rangoon-Mandalay highway and around the oil refineries at Syriam (Thanlyin).

# 4. Colonial Continuities

Ever since the armed forces first seized power in 1962, Burma's military government has pursued a relentless campaign to denigrate the British administration and the various state agencies through which it exercised control over the Burmese people. The propaganda produced as part of this campaign has covered many diverse issues, but one consistent target for criticism has been the colonial police forces, which have been characterised as oppressive, inefficient and corrupt.[50] Since 1988, the MPF has repeatedly been exhorted to 'stay away from the ideas and views and bureaucratic habits that were popular in the colonial period'.[51]

Even so, the MPF still bears a number of striking similarities to the police force which developed under the British. This is something that continues to cause concerns both in Burma and abroad. Indeed, looking at policing in the country since 1826, it is possible to identify eight broad themes that link past and present forces.

- → The first is the very unsettled (at times even volatile) nature of Burmese politics and society
- → The second is the high rate of recorded crime (particularly violent crime)
- → The third is the central government's conflation of law and order with broader internal security issues, and the consequent pressure on the prison system
- → The fourth is the effective separation of the police force from the wider Burmese population.
- → The fifth is the force's long record of low professional standards, corruption and abuse of power.
- → The sixth is the division of the police force into civil and paramilitary arms.
- → The seventh is the inclination of successive rulers of modern Burma, be they British, Japanese or Burmese, to view the country's police forces as a vital part of its national security apparatus.
- → This leads in turn to an eighth theme, which is the close relationship that has always existed between the country's police forces and the regular armed forces, notably the army.

Briefly surveyed, these themes can provide a snapshot of policing in modern Burma, and how it has changed – or not changed – over the past 185 years.

The state of Burma – in its various historical manifestations – has always been deeply fractured, and beset with a wide range of political, ethnic, religious and social tensions. The British colonial regime succeeded – to a degree, at least – in imposing a superficial unity and sense of order, but it added to these underlying problems by precipitating the breakdown of many traditional political, social and cultural structures. Partly as a consequence, Burma gained the reputation of being the most criminal province in the British Empire, with the highest incidence of violent crime.[52] These problems were exacerbated by the economic devastation and social dislocation of the Second World War and the subsequent civil wars, which almost caused the collapse of the newly independent Union.

Since 1962, the armed forces have imposed a similar kind of unity on Myanmar but the country has been wracked by insurgencies and civil protests, and suffered the depredations of narcotics warlords. Also, the BSPP's failed experiment in socialist autarky

caused widespread economic distress. Most Burmese still live in rural towns and villages, but as the population increased so Burma began to experience all the usual social problems associated with rapid urbanisation. Yet, despite all these developments, successive military governments have routinely claimed a steady decline in civil offenses, in all major categories. At the same time official graphs showing the rate of arrests and convictions remorselessly point upwards.[53] Few statistics in Burma, however, can be taken at face value. Most are fabricated for public consumption, and for the benefit of the country's rulers. They are also affected by endemic corruption and poor record keeping.

More to the point, it is difficult to know the true crime rate in Burma when the government routinely conflates law and order and threats to the peace (in the traditional sense) with the more ambiguous and politically sensitive concept of internal security. To both the British and more recent rulers, any actions which threatened social stability or national unity (as the government defined these terms) constituted serious offences. This is currently demonstrated by the responsibilities exercised by the MPF's Special Branch, which is charged with the detection of 'activities of people and political leagues which could ruin the security of the state'. This includes political parties, religious groups, labour unions and student associations. The Branch also takes action against those who 'make destructive impediments in order to obstruct stability of the state, community peace and prevalence of law and order'.[54]

As a range of new laws was introduced during the British colonial period, and the police forces gradually became more effective, so the number of people in Burma's prisons ballooned. In 1925, a British Commissioner for Prisons noted that Burma, with a population then of about 13 million, was sending over 20,000 people to jail each year, a ratio of 1:650. This was at a rate higher than in any other province of British India.[55] In 1940, an official report noted that the daily average number of prisoners held in Burma's jails was 18,206.[56] By 1978, when Burma's population was around 35 million, there were over 40,000 convicts in the country, a ratio of 1: 875. They were spread between more than 40 overcrowded, unsanitary and poorly maintained jails and some 50 labour camps.[57] The current number of convicts is unknown, but appears to be at least as high. The state of the country's prisons does not seem to have improved since then.[58]

At least under colonial rule there were few political prisoners – at least not before the upsurge of nationalism in the 1920s. The number of such prisoners in Burma is currently unknown, with claims ranging between 600 and 2,200.[59] While some are serving relatively short sentences, others are in jail for 80 years or more, having been charged with provisions under Burma's legal code which criminalise a wide range of activities.[60] Some of these laws date back to the colonial period, when the British created a whole new category of crimes designed to protect the imposed structure of political management and control. During the 1950s, the U Nu government revived the draconian internal security and public order laws 'that allowed any and all critics of the government and army to be treated as enemies of the state'.[61] Since 1962, they have been used by the armed forces leadership to crush dissent in Burma.

Under the British, this system worked partly because those enforcing it, namely the civil police, the military police and – in extremis – the armed forces, were essentially separate from the Burmese population. In criminological terms, they were 'strangers policing strangers'.[62] Right up to 1948, the police force was commanded almost entirely by European officials. From 1893, there was even a separate institution – the Indian Imperial Police – which recruited personnel directly from the UK with the express purpose of filling the executive ranks of the provincial police forces.[63] The BMP was made up almost entirely of Indians (including Gurkhas) and members of Burma's ethnic minorities, none of whom identified with the ethnic Burman majority. Despite occasional

'Burmanisation' campaigns, particularly after the turn of the century, the civil police force was also heavily weighted in favour of 'foreigners'.

Such racial distinctions disappeared after Independence in 1948 – although the preponderance of ethnic Burman policemen in the BP after that date prompted complaints from members of the Indian community and ethnic minorities, who felt discriminated against. After the 1962 coup, the force was still heavily Burman, but it also developed a sense of exclusiveness and privilege, as policemen were encouraged to see themselves as extensions of the ruling military regime. Many officers became members of the BSPP. Also, policemen were often housed in barracks and tended to socialise only with other police families. Over time, these distinctions began to fade, as the military government became more unpopular and postings were reduced, leaving more policemen to live among their home communities. This tested police loyalties, however, as demonstrated by the appearance of policemen marching with pro-democracy demonstrators in 1988.[64]

Throughout this entire period, the police force's professional standards were generally poor. Indeed, for many years the colonial police force had the reputation of being 'the worst and most costly in the world'.[65] Its officers tended to be those who failed to get into the armed forces, or the prestigious Indian Civil Service. Among the lower ranks, education and training levels were low, as were pay scales. As the force's main focus gradually shifted from internal security to civil policing, there was a greater requirement for more literate and numerate officers. However, recruitment and training programs failed to match the force's changing needs. Similar problems existed under the BSPP government, which treated the PPF as the poor cousin of the armed forces, denying it both status and resources.

There were honourable exceptions of course, but as a general rule the BP enjoyed a poor reputation. Before 1988, the PPF were widely viewed as 'particularly corrupt, officious, and exploitative'.[66] Bullying, petty theft, extortion and fraud were considered commonplace. From time to time more serious infractions – such as rape and murder – were exposed. Some officers were even brought to court, but this tended to be more the exception than the rule.[67] These abuses caused widespread resentment, as illustrated by the attacks against police stations – and the murder of 20 or more policemen – by angry mobs during the 1988 uprising. After the SLORC's takeover, the MPF inherited this reputation. An effort has since been made to overcome some of these problems, but the force's culture and image will be difficult to change.

Seeing all manner of crime as a threat to social stability, and thus to the state itself, the British were quick to utilise armed force against offenders. The BMP in particular was used to enforce colonial rule and impose collective punishments on villages deemed to be sources of subversion and unrest. Measures taken were often severe, at times prompting outrage in Britain itself. There was even a special category of 'punitive police'. BP units were billeted in particular villages, often for lengthy periods and at the villagers' own expense, to prevent acts of overt rebellion and to pre-empt civil disorder. Since 1962, the military government has been prepared to deploy armed police units in the event of serious civil unrest. As seen during the 1974, 1988 and 2007 disturbances, should the police prove unable to cope the army is called in, usually with lethal consequences.[68]

Indeed, before 1962, there was often little to distinguish the police from the armed forces. It was often remarked by BMP officers that there were few real differences between them and members of the regular army – which was quick to absorb entire BMP units during the First and Second World Wars. Also, senior positions in the colonial police were often filled by military personnel. In 1958, and again in 1964 Ne Win transferred army officers into the police force and adjusted its structure to reflect more closely that of the armed forces. After the 1988 uprising these links were further

strengthened. A number of executive and senior positions in the MPF are now held by serving or former military officers. Over the years, this practice contributed to close operational links between the police and armed forces, and to a police culture that in some ways mirrored that of the Tatmadaw.

This situation is now changing, as the police force itself is changing, but the official MPF website still describes the force as the 'younger brother' to the Myanmar Army, and an integral part of Burma's wider 'Defence Services'.[69]

The police force has always been seen as an armed reserve by the military government, able to support the regular armed forces. Under the concept of 'people's war under modern conditions', it is currently envisaged that the armed forces would initially defend Burma against an aggressor but, in the event that was not successful, the government would revert to a 'total people's defence'.[70] This strategy envisages the mobilisation of all sectors of Burmese society, notably the MPF and forces such as the Auxiliary Fire Brigade and the Myanmar Red Cross, but also extending to village militia groups, civil servants, non-governmental organisations and mass political parties. Given its national command structure, secure communications links and paramilitary security battalions, the police would clearly play a key role in the event of such an emergency.

# 5. Classic Contradictions

As a result of these continuities, the MPF today bears a number of striking similarities with the police forces of the colonial, post-Independence and Ne Win eras. They have many of the same strengths and weaknesses. They are also supported by many of the same laws. This has both reflected, and contributed to, a shared dilemma. For, ever since the birth of Burma's modern police force in 1861, it has been required to fill two important but potentially quite contradictory roles.

The first has been the preservation of the political order, be it Britain's colonial rule, Japan's military administration, the post-independence democratic system or successive forms of the military dictatorship.

During the colonial era, the police took a militaristic, authoritarian approach to law enforcement. Some contemporary scholars have even described Burma before 1948 as being under a kind of permanent martial law.[71] Broadly speaking, this style of policing was maintained under the 1958-60 military caretaker government, and was reinforced by the armed forces after the 1962 coup. As seen in the years since then, the police force - particularly Special Branch and the security battalions - have played a significant role in helping successive military governments detect political dissent, respond to civil unrest and remove from society anyone daring to challenge the endorsed political order.

The police have thus exercised a role in the country's internal affairs that has gone well beyond the traditional British policing model. With any serious challenge to law and order viewed also as a threat to the government, and thus the state, the police have been injected directly into highly charged and often violent disputes with traditionalists, nationalists, communists, ethnic separatists, drug lords and - most recently - pro-democracy activists. While paid lip service, the Western ideal of community policing by consent has repeatedly been set aside in favour of policing through control and coercion.

At the same time, however, Burma's police forces have been charged with protecting society from crime and other threats faced by the civil population. This role demands public respect and a high level of trust and cooperation. For, unlike the Tatmadaw, which has created a virtual state within the state of Burma, lives in special enclaves and usually conducts military operations far from the main population centres, the police live and work among the general population. Even more than civil servants, they are the day-to-day interface between the government and its citizens. For most, the police force marks the entry point into a regime of law. It is thus imperative that the police force feels accountable to the public and conducts itself in a way that properly reflects this community role.

For the past 10 years or so, the MPF has commanded more resources and its members have undergone more extensive training. A greater emphasis is now placed on community policing, and on professional and personal discipline. Even so, policemen are still expected to give their loyalty first to the central government. Also, due to persistent problems of low pay, lax discipline, poor leadership and an abiding sense of privilege, abuses are still common. It is reputed, for example, that most shady businesses in urban centres enjoy some degree of police protection, including at a senior level.[72] Officers reportedly seek positions where they have opportunities to solicit bribes.[73] As policemen live and work among the community, their faults are on display for all to see.

Negative views of the MPF have been encouraged by the advent of community journalism and the ubiquity of the electronic media. The international news coverage of the regime's response to the 2007 demonstrations, for example, was picked up via

satellite by thousands of viewers in Burma itself, almost as events were unfolding.[74] Dissidents released from jail have also been able to spread stories of brutality and corruption, not just by prison guards but also by MPF officers. This has all reinforced a deep public cynicism, a suspicion of the police force and resentment at its corruption and heavy-handedness.[75] As Errol Mendes has noted, such a situation encourages a lack of respect for the societal institutions that promote the rule of law and the proper functioning of the criminal justice system.[76]

# 6. The Future

Reflecting perhaps the highly structured nature of Buddhist scriptures, the MPF's official website states that the force is 'always serving the interest of Myanmar People to carry out four objectives with four efficiencies on the basis of five criteria in order to accomplish main tasks and establish integrated institution (sic)'.[77] The four stated objectives are 'To ensure the rule of law', 'Prevalence of peace and tranquillity', 'Regional development' and 'To serve the public interest'. The four efficiencies are 'Uplift of morality and esprit de corps', 'Constant training program', 'Welfare of members' and 'Correct administration system'. The five criteria are morality, discipline, loyalty, unity and competency.

Given Burma's long history of official abuses, broken promises and failed initiatives, it is not surprising that many observers - both within Burma and outside it - are sceptical that the MPF will be able live up to these high ideals. Even so, there are some intriguing signs of progress, at both the macro and micro levels.

Since taking office in January 2011, President Thein Sein has made a number of public statements, and promised various changes, that could lead to a more open-minded and conciliatory approach to tackling Myanmar's many challenges. For example, he has met with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who has expressed herself 'happy and satisfied' with his intention to introduce 'real positive change'.[78] Hundreds of political prisoners have been released, a move which addresses - to a certain extent at least - another major sticking point with dissidents and foreign governments. The armed forces clearly intend to remain firmly in control of Burma, but there now appears to be the possibility of greater personal freedoms, rational economic policies and a more relaxed attitude towards the development of civil society.[79]

These developments have prompted widely varying reactions from among the Burma-watching community. A number of respected academics and commentators have taken a strategic view and, with the usual caveats, sought to highlight what they believe may be the start of a gradual process of political reconciliation and incremental reform. The International Crisis Group has gone even further and issued a report announcing that 'major reform is under way' in Burma.[80] A hard core of activists and their supporters, however, have dismissed recent developments as part of a massive confidence trick by an entrenched military regime.[81] Citing continued human rights violations, some have even called for harsher sanctions against Naypyidaw.

If recent developments indeed herald a new approach to government in Burma, there will be important implications for the role and future management of the country's police force. Even if the latest changes do not meet everyone's high hopes, it still seems to be envisaged that, under Burma's new 'multi-party disciplined democracy', the police force will take a larger and more prominent role in law and order issues.

Possibly in anticipation of such a development, an effort is being made to expand the MPF's capabilities, improve its performance and reform its culture. It appears that a serious attempt is being made to try and grapple with some of its longstanding problems, with a view to creating a more professional and civilianised force. The MPF's organisational structure has already become more like those of Western police forces. There is a greater emphasis in training courses on a professional approach to community policing. More specialised instruction is being provided, at all levels. Cadets at the junior commissioned rank must now hold university degrees. Also, some steps have been taken to deal with abuses, and more reforms are promised.[82]

Some sceptics will be hard to convince. For example, there have already been accusations that the growth in the number of police security battalions in recent years is an attempt to strengthen the military regime's coercive apparatus. However, the MPF's increased paramilitary capabilities can also be portrayed as part of a wider program to civilianise functions that have long been performed – inappropriately – by the armed forces, such as the protection of diplomatic premises.[83] The move is also reportedly to provide a suitably trained and equipped alternative to the army in the event of urban protests – although the latter will always be an option if the disturbances are beyond the MPF's ability to control. As it has expanded, the proportion of the force in the battalions has in fact declined. At present, their personnel only constitute 6 per cent of the total number.

In considering all these issues, it is perhaps worth bearing in mind the difficulties that accompanied the formal separation of Indonesia's national police force (POLRI) from the armed forces (ABRI), in 2000.[84] Disputes have arisen relating to the police force's formal role, jurisdiction, individual identity and funding.[85] There have even been armed clashes as members of the two forces competed for sources of off-budget finance.[86] Burma presents a different case, not least because the armed forces remain firmly in control of the country and are thus in a position to dictate terms to the police. Yet, if the MPF is to develop a new and distinctive civilian character then its relationship with the Tatmadaw will have to change, and such changes are not made easily in Burma where power and authority are conceived as finite and limited.[87]

It remains to be seen how successful the current police reform program will be. Such a profound cultural shift will take time. Inevitably, there will be setbacks and some problems will not be easy to resolve. Much will depend on factors that are out of the Police Chief's control. These have a lot to do with developments in Naypyidaw, in particular the willingness of the Tatmadaw's leadership to relinquish its tight control over Burmese society and allow the new administration space to implement certain changes. Even so, the process will bear watching, as it holds out the promise of a more capable and professional police force. This is not only something that has long been desired by the general population, but it will be essential if Burma is ever to make an orderly transition to genuine democratic rule.

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