

4

Burma's armed forces: How loyal?

(11:08 AEDT, 6 June 2008)

In the wake of the 'Saffron Revolution' in 2007, and Cyclone Nargis in 2008, there were persistent rumours, mainly among foreign activists and Myanmar's exile community, that, because of the military government's brutality, indifference and incompetence, the loyalty of the country's armed forces could no longer be relied upon. Some commentators even raised the possibility of a mutiny in the ranks, but that was always a remote prospect.

It is always difficult to know what is happening inside Burma and, in particular, inside the armed forces (known locally as the *Tatmadaw*). There are signs, however, that the military government's power base is weakening. The regime is not likely to fall any time soon, but this development has implications for Burma's future stability and possibly even the regime's long-term survival.

It is widely accepted that the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) depends upon the continued loyalty and cohesion of the armed forces. Military strength and the ability to enforce its rule across the country are the only basis on which the regime, lacking any popular mandate, remains in power. It was partly with this in mind that, after taking back direct political power in 1988, the SPDC's predecessor, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), launched an ambitious program to expand and modernise the *Tatmadaw*.

Over the next 15 years, Burma's armed forces doubled in size to around 400,000 personnel, making it the second-largest force in Southeast Asia (after Vietnam's) and, by some counts, the fifteenth-largest in the world. The *Tatmadaw* also acquired a wide range of modern arms and equipment, mainly from China, but also from Russia, the Ukraine, Poland, India, North Korea and several other countries. At the same time, a major effort was put into improving the *Tatmadaw's* command, control and communications systems, intelligence capabilities and logistics, training and support infrastructure. During this period, at least 35 per cent of Burma's national budget was devoted to defence—more than twice the combined allocations made to health and education.

The *Tatmadaw* still faced many difficult problems, but it gradually changed from a lightly armed infantry force geared to counterinsurgency campaigning and regime protection to a much larger, better armed and more balanced force capable of a wider range of military operations, including limited territorial defence. It also constituted a formidable instrument to counter Burma's armed insurgencies and enforce military rule over the civilian population.

From its peak around 2002, however, the *Tatmadaw's* size and capabilities began to decline. It became increasingly difficult to find new recruits, leading to a greater reliance on conscripts and young men pressganged into service. The number of child soldiers in the ranks seems to have increased. According to anecdotal evidence, the rate of desertions has also grown. Overall numbers may have slipped to around 350,000, or possibly even fewer. Also, in terms of living conditions, the gap between the senior officers and other ranks has grown markedly, causing considerable resentment. These and other developments have reportedly led to a serious deterioration in morale and a weakening of commitment to the regime's political objectives.

Reports of tensions among senior officers surface periodically, usually reflecting professional or personal rivalries. Inevitably, there are also policy differences, as occurs in any large organisation. A palace coup within the ruling hierarchy would be significant and could see a change in approach towards Burma's current problems, but it would not mean the end of military rule. The regime is likely to be more threatened by widespread unrest among the rank and file (including junior officers) on whom the daily enforcement of military rule actually depends. Yet, it is at this level that it seems to be losing most support.

The 'Saffron Revolution' in September 2007—and, in particular, the regime's use of force against demonstrating monks—appears to have shaken many in the armed forces. Reports of serious breakdowns in military discipline last year cannot be confirmed, but there is little doubt that many soldiers were very unhappy about the tough action taken by the police and army. Some soldiers were beaten by their officers for refusing to manhandle the revered *sangha*, or Buddhist 'clergy'. And it can be assumed that the violence meted out to the monks upset many other soldiers and their families—almost all of whom are devoutly Buddhist.

What might at other times be dismissed simply as grumbling in the ranks has now been exacerbated by a deep concern—even anger—among many in the armed forces over the regime's ineptitude and wilful obstructionism in response to Cyclone Nargis. Increasingly, reports are filtering out of Burma that many in the *Tatmadaw* believe the armed forces could have done much more to help those affected by the cyclone, in keeping with the regime's oft-repeated claims that the *Tatmadaw* is the protector of the Burmese people. Those most unhappy with the regime are naturally those with family and friends in the Irrawaddy Delta.

In ordinary circumstances, these problems may not have greatly troubled the regime. It faces no real threat from the country's few remaining armed insurgent groups. Nor does it need 400,000 men and women in uniform, armed with the latest military hardware, to crush popular dissent and enforce the SPDC's idiosyncratic policies. It could easily do that with 200,000—the number in the *Tatmadaw* before 1988—armed only with the basic infantry weapons manufactured in Burma. Also, as seen during the disturbances last September, there are still professional army units willing and able to use force against civilian protesters, including Buddhist monks, if ordered to do so.

A serious weakening of morale and commitment among the rank and file, however, is likely to be of greater concern to the SPDC in the light of recent calls for an invasion of Burma—or at least 'coercive humanitarian intervention'¹—to deliver aid to the cyclone victims. Any attempt to 'bash Burma's doors down', as suggested by the Australian Prime Minister early last month,² would be strongly resisted by the regime, probably using

1 Romesh Ratnesar, 'Is It Time to Invade Burma?', *TIME*, 10 May 2008, content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1739053,00.html.

2 Jonathan Pearlman, 'Rudd Says Donors Must Bash in Doors', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 May 2008, www.smh.com.au/world/rudd-says-donors-must-bash-in-doors-20080510-gdsd3w.html.

armed force. In such circumstances, it would need to rely on the loyalty and cohesion of the Burmese armed forces more than ever before. Such external intervention was never likely, but if the threat had become real, the regime could have had a major problem on its hands.

Discontent among Burma's military rank and file has not yet reached a point at which the regime needs to fear for its survival. It has faced internal problems before and gone on to become the world's most resilient and durable military dictatorship. In any case, there are many well-established mechanisms to identify and root out any potential centres of unrest in the armed forces before they can become a serious challenge to the leadership. It is worth noting, however, that serious cracks are appearing in the *Tatmadaw's* normally solid support for the regime and all it stands for. Depending on how the political situation in Burma develops, and how economic and social conditions evolve in the wake of the cyclone, this development could become much more important.

This text is taken from *Interpreting Myanmar: A Decade of Analysis*,
by Andrew Selth, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian
National University, Canberra, Australia.