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Burma's police: The long road to reform

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Although it once played a much greater national role, Myanmar's police force had long been overshadowed by the much larger and more powerful armed forces. However, there were signs that, under president Thein Sein, the police were becoming a larger, more professional and more independent part of the state's coercive apparatus.

Last week, television viewers in Burma were treated to a remarkable sight: the police force formally apologising for using excessive force to break up a protest at a mine site and injuring more than 20 Buddhist monks.¹ This unusual event was in response to widespread public criticism of the violence, which will also be the subject of an official inquiry led by Aung San Suu Kyi.²

The 'sorry ceremony', in which senior police officers and other officials paid obeisance to Buddhist elders and washed the feet of monks, was prompted in large part by the special place that Buddhism occupies in

1 'Burma Apologises for Police Attack on Protesting Monks', *BBC News*, 8 December 2012, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-20650576.

2 'Suu Kyi Adds Credibility to Burma Mine Probe, Says Academic', *Radio Australia*, 3 December 2012, www.radioaustralia.net.au/international/radio/program/connect-asia/suu-kyi-adds-credibility-to-burma-mine-probe-says-academic/1055212 [page discontinued].

Burmese society.³ However, it is significant for another reason, for it reflected the Thein Sein Government's wish to reform the police, not only to make this arm of the security forces more effective and to improve its public standing, but also to make it more accountable.

For more than 50 years, whenever reference has been made to Burma's coercive state apparatus, the armed forces (*Tatmadaw*) have always sprung to mind. This is hardly surprising. After all, since General Ne Win's coup in 1962, the country has been governed by the world's most durable military dictatorship. Since the 1990s, Burma has boasted one of the largest armed forces in Southeast Asia.

Throughout this period, troops were not only deployed to combat armed insurgents and narcotics warlords in Burma's countryside, but also routinely used to enforce the law, maintain order and, if deemed necessary, crush civil unrest in urban centres.⁴ The *Tatmadaw's* intelligence apparatus—the dreaded MI—monitored the civilian population and underpinned continued military rule.

Historically speaking, however, another institution was once more important than the armed forces 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).

After the 1962 coup, the police received few resources and little publicity. From time to time, there were 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 were even occasional reports in the press of police corruption and other abuses. Yet the force was viewed merely as the 'younger brother' of the *Tatmadaw* and excited little interest, either in Burma or abroad.

Since the 1988 prodemocracy uprising, international human rights organisations and activist groups have highlighted the activities of the force's 'riot squads' and Special Branch, which in different ways targeted

3 'It Is Time for All to Carry Out Purification and Propagation of Sasana Ceremony to Apologise to State Sangha Maha Nayaka Sayadaws for Incidents Stemming from Protest in Letpadaungtaung Copper Mining Project', *New Light of Myanmar*, [Yangon], 8 December 2010, www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF13/nlm081212.pdf [page discontinued].

4 Andrew Selth, *Civil-Military Relations in Burma: Portents, Predictions and Possibilities*, Griffith Asia Institute Regional Outlook Paper No.25 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 2010), www.griffith.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/215341/Selth-Regional-Outlook-25.pdf [page discontinued].

anti-regime elements. In 2007, the MPF's blue-helmeted 'combat' battalions initially took the lead role in suppressing the so-called Saffron Revolution.⁵ Even then, however, little attention was paid to the police force as a national institution.

That situation is now changing. The MPF is gradually being recognised as a large, increasingly powerful and influential organisation that, in a more modern and civilianised form, seems likely to become a key instrument of state control under the mixed civilian–military government inaugurated in Naypyidaw in March 2011.

Even before President Thein Sein came to power, an effort was being made to expand the MPF's capabilities, improve its performance and reform its culture. The force is now about 80,000 strong, which gives an estimated ratio of one police officer for every 750 Burmese (Australia's national average is about 1:350). This includes 18 battalions of paramilitary police, which are specially equipped to respond to serious outbreaks of civil unrest, such as that seen in Arakan (Rakhine) State earlier this year.

The MPF is grappling with a wide range of problems, with the aim of creating a more professional force. Loyalty to the government is still valued highly, but there is now a greater emphasis in training courses on personal discipline and an increased focus on community policing. Officer recruitment standards have been raised and specialised instruction at all levels has increased. Some steps have been taken to deal with corruption and further measures have been promised.⁶

It remains to be seen how successful this program will be. As developments over the past year demonstrate, such a profound cultural shift will be difficult and will take time. Until that occurs, the force will continue to face accusations of brutality and corruption. Even so, the latest incident suggests not that the reform process is stalling, as some have suggested, but rather that the government is aware of the need for change and is trying to be more responsive to public concerns.⁷

5 *Crackdown: Repression of the 2007 Popular Protests in Burma*, Vol.19, No.18(C) (New York: Human Rights Watch, December 2007), www.hrw.org/reports/2007/burma1207/burma1207web.pdf.

6 Aye Nai, 'Corruption Charges Hit Police Chiefs', *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 26 January 2011, www.dvb.no/news/corruption-charges-hit-police-chiefs/13894 [page discontinued].

7 Parameswaran Ponnudurai, 'Is Reform Stalling in Burma?', *Radio Free Asia*, [Washington, DC], 4 December 2010, www.rfa.org/english/east-asia-beat/mine-12042012121852.html.

A particularly thorny issue will be the future relationship between Burma's police and armed forces. If the formal separation of the two institutions in Indonesia in 1999 is any guide, there are bound to be disagreements over their respective roles, areas of jurisdiction and budgets.⁸ In Indonesia, the police and army have also (literally) fought over the spoils of corruption.

In Burma's case, much will depend on developments in Naypyidaw—in particular, the success of Thein Sein's ambitious program of political, economic and social reforms. Another critical factor will be the willingness of the *Tatmadaw's* leadership to further loosen its grip on Burmese society. The process will bear watching closely, though, as it holds out the promise of a more capable and professional police force—something that will be essential if Burma is ever to make an orderly transition to genuine and sustained democratic rule.

8 *Indonesia: The Deadly Cost of Poor Policing*, Asia Report No.218 (Jakarta/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 16 February 2012), www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/asia/south-east-asia/indonesia/218%20Indonesia%20--%20The%20Deadly%20Cost%20of%20Poor%20Policing.pdf [page discontinued] [now at www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/indonesia/indonesia-deadly-cost-poor-policing].

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