

## Burma: What chance another coup?

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*Almost as soon as president Thein Sein took office in 2011, rumours began to circulate that certain elements in the armed forces were unhappy with the new political arrangements and were planning to mount another coup. These reports, however, tended to come from observers who were unfamiliar with the Tatmadaw's careful calculations, designed to retain ultimate power in Myanmar, and its long-term aims.*

Whenever Burma-watchers get together these days, one topic that usually gets an airing is the prospect of another military coup.<sup>1</sup> Some analysts have put the likelihood of this happening over the next five years as high as 20 per cent, while others believe the odds are much lower.<sup>2</sup> A few observers have argued that the country is still effectively under military control, so the question of a coup simply does not arise.

Contrary to expectations, President Thein Sein's ambitious reform program has developed a momentum of its own and there is now palpable hope for real change. Opinion is divided<sup>3</sup> on whether or not the process

1 ANU College of Asia and the Pacific, 'Myanmar and Coups', *News & Events*, 16 August 2013, [asiapacific.anu.edu.au/news-events/all-stories/myanmar-and-coups](http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/news-events/all-stories/myanmar-and-coups).

2 Joshua Kurlantzick and Devin T. Stewart, *Burma's Reforms and Regional Cooperation in East Asia*, Paper (New York: Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, 24 July 2013), [www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles\\_papers\\_reports/0164.html/pf\\_printable](http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles_papers_reports/0164.html/pf_printable).

3 'Burmese Parliament Speaker Says "Reform Process Irreversible"', *BBC News*, 27 September 2012, [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-19740502](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-19740502).

is 'irreversible'.<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to see Burma going back to the dark days before 2011 but, in certain circumstances, the armed forces (*Tatmadaw*) could be prompted to step in and exert greater direct control.

This issue can be examined at the national, institutional and personal levels.

At the national level, the armed forces are deeply committed to Burma's sovereignty, unity and internal stability, as they judge such matters. These goals were encapsulated in the former government's three 'national causes' and have been enshrined in the 2008 constitution. Any developments that threaten the country in these ways would greatly concern the military leadership and raise the possibility of intervention of some kind.

The perceived external threat to Burma has receded since the international community embraced Thein Sein and his reform program.<sup>5</sup> However, there are still up to 100,000 armed men in the country who do not (or only begrudgingly) recognise Naypyidaw's authority. Some are waging guerilla wars against the central government. Others have been designated Border Guard Forces and technically put under the *Tatmadaw's* control, but their reliability is suspect.

Also, as seen over the past few years, civil unrest can suddenly erupt over a range of political, economic and social issues. Further religious violence is a real possibility. A failure by Thein Sein to meet rising popular expectations is another potential trigger for protests. Should Aung San Suu Kyi's presidential ambitions be blocked, there is likely to be a domestic and international outcry, arousing the *Tatmadaw's* deepest fears.<sup>6</sup>

At the institutional level, the armed forces would be concerned at any attempts to deny them their special place in national affairs. This is not only spelt out in the constitution, but was recently reaffirmed by both

4 Scott Stearns, 'Aung San Suu Kyi Says Burma Reforms Not Yet Irreversible', *Voice of America*, 18 September 2012, [www.voanews.com/content/aung-san-suu-kyi-begins-us-visit/1510124.html](http://www.voanews.com/content/aung-san-suu-kyi-begins-us-visit/1510124.html) [page discontinued] [now at [www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/aung-san-suu-kyi-says-burma-reforms-not-yet-irreversible](http://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/aung-san-suu-kyi-says-burma-reforms-not-yet-irreversible)].

5 Andrew Selth, *Burma and the Threat of Invasion: Regime Fantasy or Strategic Reality?*, Griffith Asia Institute Regional Outlook Paper No.17 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 2008), [www.griffith.edu.au/business-government/griffith-asia-institute/pdf/Andrew-Selth-Regional-Outlook-17v2.pdf](http://www.griffith.edu.au/business-government/griffith-asia-institute/pdf/Andrew-Selth-Regional-Outlook-17v2.pdf) [page discontinued].

6 Andrew Selth, 'Will Aung San Suu Kyi Be President of Burma?', *The Interpreter*, 16 May 2013, [www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/05/16/Will-Aung-Suu-Kyi-be-President-of-Burma.aspx](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/05/16/Will-Aung-Suu-Kyi-be-President-of-Burma.aspx) [page discontinued] [now at [www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/will-aung-san-suu-kyi-be-president-burma](http://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/will-aung-san-suu-kyi-be-president-burma)].

the President<sup>7</sup> and the commander-in-chief.<sup>8</sup> Most military officers are intensely nationalistic and take seriously their role as guardians of the country, with their responsibility to step in and ‘save’ Burma if it is believed necessary.

The military leadership is also likely to act if the *Tatmadaw* itself was under threat. For example, should the government or parliament drastically reduce the defence budget, or try to seriously restrict the armed forces’ sources of off-budget revenue, there is likely to be trouble.<sup>9</sup> The *Tatmadaw* would be particularly concerned if it felt it was being denied the men and materiel necessary to fulfil its duty to ‘safeguard the constitution’.

At the personal level, many servicemen would be unhappy about an attempt to remove the clause in the constitution that seems to grant them immunity from prosecution for human rights violations committed under the former government. If opposition politicians, or the international community, revived efforts to put Burmese military personnel on trial for war crimes, that, too, would prompt a strong reaction.<sup>10</sup>

Another scenario that deserves at least passing mention is an attempt by a faction within the armed forces either to slow the reform process or to preserve perks and privileges that seem to be slipping away.<sup>11</sup> It has been suggested, for example, that many younger officers resent the fact that current and proposed changes to Burmese society may deny them the opportunities for personal enrichment enjoyed by their predecessors.

7 Anne Gearan, ‘Burma’s Thein Sein Says Military “Will Always Have a Special Place” in Government’, *The Washington Post*, 19 May 2013, [articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-05-19/world/39376769\\_1\\_president-obama-than-shwe-sanctions](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-05-19/world/39376769_1_president-obama-than-shwe-sanctions) [page discontinued] [now at [www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/burmas-thein-sein-says-military-will-always-have-a-special-place-in-government/2013/05/19/253c300e-c0d4-11e2-8bd8-2788030e6b44\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/burmas-thein-sein-says-military-will-always-have-a-special-place-in-government/2013/05/19/253c300e-c0d4-11e2-8bd8-2788030e6b44_story.html)].

8 Lawi Weng, ‘In Naypyidaw, Suu Kyi Attends Armed Forces Day’, *The Irrawaddy*, 27 March 2013, [www.irrawaddy.org/archives/30671](http://www.irrawaddy.org/archives/30671).

9 Brian McCartan, ‘Myanmar Military in the Money’, *Asia Times Online*, [Hong Kong], 28 February 2012, [www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast\\_Asia/NB28Ae02.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/NB28Ae02.html) [page discontinued] [now at [brianpmccartan.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/20120228-Myanmar-military-in-the-money-1.pdf](http://brianpmccartan.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/20120228-Myanmar-military-in-the-money-1.pdf)].

10 Marwaan Macan Markar, ‘US Joins Calls for Myanmar War Crimes Trial’, *Asia Times Online*, [Hong Kong], 20 August 2010, [www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast\\_Asia/LH20Ae01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/LH20Ae01.html) [page discontinued].

11 Euro–Burma Office, *The Tatmadaw: Does the Government Control the Tatmadaw?*, EBO Briefing Paper No.3/2013 (Brussels: Associates to Develop Democratic Burma, 6 May 2013), [euro-burma.eu/doc/EBO\\_Brief\\_No\\_3\\_2013\\_Tatmadaw.pdf](http://euro-burma.eu/doc/EBO_Brief_No_3_2013_Tatmadaw.pdf) [page discontinued] [now at [euroburmaoffice.s3.amazonaws.com/filer\\_public/bb/2b/bb2ba05e-f7cd-4960-bf19-526dd9d1b73f/ebo\\_brief\\_no\\_3\\_2013\\_tatmadaw.pdf](http://euroburmaoffice.s3.amazonaws.com/filer_public/bb/2b/bb2ba05e-f7cd-4960-bf19-526dd9d1b73f/ebo_brief_no_3_2013_tatmadaw.pdf)].

All that said, the *Tatmadaw* is not the institution it once was, and there are significant constraints on military intervention. There would inevitably be a strong reaction to a coup, both within the country and outside it. Also, Thein Sein's reforms enjoy some support in the ranks and the generals would need to weigh the benefits of a military takeover against the possibility that it could cause a serious breakdown in discipline.

In any case, the armed forces need not resort to anything as crude as a coup. There is some debate over the respective powers of the President and the commander-in-chief but, under the 2008 constitution, the latter can legally take over the running of the country.<sup>12</sup> Short of that, the *Tatmadaw* can exercise considerable influence without actually assuming power.

The government is already dominated by military and ex-military personnel. As Burma scholar Maung Aung Myoe has noted, of 46 ministers at the national level, 37 are from the *Tatmadaw*, including five still on active service.<sup>13</sup> Of the 14 chief ministers of Burma's states and regions, all but one are retired military officers. In all national, state and regional assemblies, 25 per cent of the seats are reserved for serving military personnel. The pro-government USDP consists largely of veterans and 80 per cent of senior civil service positions are occupied by former servicemen.

Some activists have gone further and claimed that Thein Sein's administration is a sham and that the 2008 charter, like Burma's 1974 constitution, is simply a political device that permits the *Tatmadaw* to continue running the country behind the facade of a quasi-civilian government.<sup>14</sup> If that is true, there would be no need for a coup, as the military leadership could simply manipulate the current system to get whatever it wanted.

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12 Janet Benshoof, 'It's Time for the Int'l Community to Address Burma's Constitution', *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 20 February 2013, [www.dvb.no/analysis/its-time-for-the-int%E2%80%99l-community-to-address-burma%E2%80%99s-constitution/26505](http://www.dvb.no/analysis/its-time-for-the-int%E2%80%99l-community-to-address-burma%E2%80%99s-constitution/26505) [page discontinued].

13 ANU College of Asia and the Pacific, 'Myanmar/Burma Update, 15–16 March 2013', The Australian National University, Canberra, [asiapacific.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/myanmar/MBU-flyer.pdf](http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/myanmar/MBU-flyer.pdf).

14 Bertil Lintner, 'The Military's Still in Charge', *Foreign Policy*, 9 July 2013, [www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/07/09/the\\_militarys\\_still\\_in\\_charge](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/07/09/the_militarys_still_in_charge).

Needless to say, the situation is much more complicated than that.<sup>15</sup> Whatever may have been intended by the authors of the 2008 constitution, politics in Burma is no longer the exclusive domain of the armed forces. However, the *Tatmadaw* remains the ultimate arbiter of power and, as Aung San Suu Kyi has acknowledged, a genuinely democratic system of government cannot be introduced without its agreement and cooperation.

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15 Aung Zaw, 'Putting a New Face on Myanmar's Military', *The Irrawaddy*, 12 July 2013, [www.irrawaddy.org/archives/39914](http://www.irrawaddy.org/archives/39914).

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