

## Myanmar Police Force needs more foreign help to reform

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*The hopes of both the Myanmar people and the international community were pinned on the reform of the Myanmar Police Force (MPF), both to exercise a greater civilian role in internal security and to strengthen the rule of law. However, to achieve these aims, the MPF needed more support, in terms of recognition, resources and training, including from overseas.*

Two years ago,<sup>1</sup> I wrote that the MPF was gradually being recognised as a large, increasingly powerful and influential organisation that, in a more civilianised form, was likely to become a key instrument of state control under the hybrid civilian–military government that was inaugurated in Naypyidaw in 2011.

Since then, there have been a growing number of reports in the news media suggesting that President Thein Sein’s comprehensive reform program has slowed or even stalled.<sup>2</sup> With that in mind, it is worth looking at the MPF again, to see how the transition described in my 2012 post is going.

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1 Andrew Selth, ‘Burma Police: The Long Road to Reform’, *The Interpreter*, 13 December 2012, [www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2012/12/13/Burmas-police-The-long-road-to-reform.aspx?COLLCC=2825173060&](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2012/12/13/Burmas-police-The-long-road-to-reform.aspx?COLLCC=2825173060&[page%20discontinued]) [page discontinued] [now at [archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-police-long-road-reform](http://archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-police-long-road-reform)].

2 Jean-Marie Guehenno and Richard Horsey, ‘Despite the Headlines, Progress in Myanmar Isn’t Slipping Away’, *Reuters*, 19 November 2014, [blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2014/11/19/staying-on-course-in-myanmar/](http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2014/11/19/staying-on-course-in-myanmar/).

There have been some positive developments. The MPF has been restructured and includes several new departments, such as the aviation, maritime, border and tourist police. Some modern equipment has been acquired. A major recruitment program is under way and training institutions provide courses on modern policing and human rights. Greater emphasis is being given to tackling transnational crime.

More importantly, perhaps, the MPF is emphasising a ‘service-oriented approach’ and giving a high priority to issues like accountability, transparency and respect for human rights.<sup>3</sup> There is a new MPF code of conduct. Such rhetoric has been heard before, but recent statements by senior police officers seem to reflect a genuine wish to change the force’s image, ethos and behaviour.

In other ways, however, little has changed.<sup>4</sup> The MPF still suffers from a lack of resources, abuses still occur, corruption remains a problem and ‘community policing’ doctrines have yet to take a firm hold. The transfer of large numbers of men from the armed forces to the police is seen by some as a ruse by Burma’s military leaders to maintain their coercive power through less obvious means.

After decades of authoritarian rule, in which the armed forces dominated all aspects of internal security, including law and order, it is unrealistic to expect the MPF to become a modern, capable and internationally respected police force overnight. Mindsets are hard to change. Also, given the pressures on official resources, the force cannot implement many reforms without external help. Yet, such support has been slow in coming.

Since 2011, the MPF has received assistance from the UN, mainly through the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF). The International Committee of the Red Cross has also advised on modern policing standards. MPF officers have attended courses at the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation and the

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3 The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Ministry of Home Affairs, Myanmar Police Force, ‘Speech Delivered by the Chief of Police at the 49th Anniversary of the Myanmar Police Force’, Ministry of Home Affairs, 1 October 2013, [www.unodc.org/documents/southeastasiaandpacific/speech/2013/Speech\\_-\\_Chief\\_of\\_Police\\_at\\_49th\\_Anniversary\\_of\\_MPF.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/southeastasiaandpacific/speech/2013/Speech_-_Chief_of_Police_at_49th_Anniversary_of_MPF.pdf).

4 Andrew Selth, *Police Reform in Burma (Myanmar): Aims, Obstacles and Outcomes*, Griffith Asia Institute Regional Outlook Paper No.44 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 2013), [www.griffith.edu.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0025/118906/Regional-Outlook-Paper-44-Selth-web.pdf](http://www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0025/118906/Regional-Outlook-Paper-44-Selth-web.pdf).

Bangkok-based International Law Enforcement Academy. The EU has run useful pilot courses in community policing, crowd management and media relations.<sup>5</sup>

There have been a few bilateral initiatives, mainly related to transnational crime.<sup>6</sup> But, despite continuing low-level contacts,<sup>7</sup> most Western democracies seem chary of closer engagement. The MPF's poor reputation makes them cautious and, despite Aung San Suu Kyi's support for police training,<sup>8</sup> activists oppose aid to any components of Burma's 'coercive apparatus'.

With the active support of the MPF, the UNODC conducted a comprehensive survey of the force earlier this year. The study was aimed at gaining a greater understanding of the MPF, including its strengths and weaknesses. It was envisaged that the final report would help guide further reforms and identify specific areas where foreign governments and international organisations could assist.

Given its past close relations with the MPF, the UNODC was in an ideal position to make an honest appraisal of the force. Provided that its observations and recommendations are culturally sensitive and made in a way that encourages their acceptance, the final report could become a blueprint for wideranging changes to the MPF's policies and practices.

The reform of the MPF remains a key part of Thein Sein's attempts to civilianise internal security functions in Burma, strengthen the rule of law and improve judicial processes. As with most of his proposed changes, this process will not be quick or easy. There will be plenty of opportunities for critics—both within and outside Burma—to point out the MPF's shortcomings. Yet it is vital that the momentum built up since 2011 is maintained.

5 KG/Xinhua, 'Myanmar EU to Promote Police–Public Relations', *New Europe*, [Brussels], 26 May 2014, [www.neweurope.eu/article/myanmar-eu-promote-police-public-relations](http://www.neweurope.eu/article/myanmar-eu-promote-police-public-relations).

6 'US to Help Combat Narcotics Trade, Police Say', *Eleven*, 7 October 2014, [www.elevenmyanmar.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=7766:us-to-help-combat-narcotics-trade-police-say&catid=44:national&Itemid=384](http://www.elevenmyanmar.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7766:us-to-help-combat-narcotics-trade-police-say&catid=44:national&Itemid=384) [page discontinued].

7 Tim McLaughlin, 'Police Train with Bangladeshi Counterparts in United States', *Myanmar Times*, [Yangon], 25 July 2014, [www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/11124-myanmar-police-train-with-bangladeshi-counterparts-in-us.html](http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/11124-myanmar-police-train-with-bangladeshi-counterparts-in-us.html).

8 'EU Begins "Crowd Control" Training for Burmese Police', *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 6 November 2013, [www.dvb.no/news/eu-begins-crowd-control-training-for-burmese-police/34210](http://www.dvb.no/news/eu-begins-crowd-control-training-for-burmese-police/34210) [page discontinued] [now at [english.dvb.no/news/eu-begins-crowd-control-training-for-burmese-police/34210](http://english.dvb.no/news/eu-begins-crowd-control-training-for-burmese-police/34210)].

The need for continuing police reform can be considered at both practical and political levels.

As regards the first, Burma is facing serious problems caused by population growth, urbanisation and rapid economic change. Crime rates are growing. Arguably, the dramatic influx of foreign influences since 2011 has weakened traditional cultural norms, which helped curb antisocial behaviour.<sup>9</sup> Also, while difficult to quantify, the relaxation of controls over civil society has probably contributed to an increase in civil unrest.

These issues pose major challenges for the police. For example, a recent report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) recommended that the US explore the training of the MPF in cooperation with other democratic countries, on the grounds that ‘communal violence has spiralled out of control over the past two years because the police have little or no training and experience in modern crowd control’.<sup>10</sup>

The MPF also needs to be bigger, more efficient and more effective. With 75,000 men and women on its books, the force has a ratio of only 120 officers per 100,000 people. If it achieves its goal of 155,000 personnel by 2020, there will be 256 officers per 100,000, which is comparable to international standards. Even if the force had not been neglected for decades, however, such an expansion will demand a massive infusion of resources.

There are also broader political issues. As a Canadian parliamentary committee noted last year: ‘[S]ecuring the rule of law in Burma will require the wholesale reform of the entire security apparatus.’<sup>11</sup> The committee drew particular attention to ‘the urgent need to begin reforming the Burmese police forces’ on the grounds that ‘a principled, effective, and accountable police force is a cornerstone of democracy’.

9 Belle Hammond, ‘Burma’s Terrible Beauty’, *Griffith News*, 14 March 2013, [app.griffith.edu.au/news/2013/03/14/burmas-terrible-beauty/](http://app.griffith.edu.au/news/2013/03/14/burmas-terrible-beauty/).

10 J. Stephen Morrison, Murray Hiebert, Thomas Cullison, Todd Summers and Sahil Angelo, *Myanmar: Regressed, Stalled, or Moving Forward?*, A Report of the CSIS Global Health Policy Center and the CSIS Sumitro Chair for Southeast Asia Studies (Washington, DC: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, October 2014), [csis.org/files/publication/141019\\_Morrison\\_Myanmar\\_Web.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/141019_Morrison_Myanmar_Web.pdf).

11 *Conflicting Realities: Reform, Repression and Human Rights in Burma*, Report of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, Subcommittee on International Human Rights, 41st Parliament, 1st Session (Ottawa: House of Commons, Canada, June 2013), pp.34–36, [www.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?DocId=6157999&Language=E](http://www.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?DocId=6157999&Language=E).

Traditionally, Burma's security forces have shunned outside influences. Indeed, they have been intensely proud of their ability to manage their own affairs, albeit with limited resources and mixed success rates. Before 2011, for example, few MPF officers were sent overseas for training. Now the security forces are reaching out to the international community and the MPF is taking the lead in seeking advice, training and equipment.

The American sociologist Morris Janowitz once wrote: 'It is a basic assumption of the democratic model of civilian–military relations that civilian supremacy depends upon a sharp organizational separation between internal and external violence forces.'<sup>12</sup> When Indonesia's police force broke away from the army in 1999, it received strong support from the international community.<sup>13</sup> Burma's police force deserves no less.

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12 Morris Janowitz, *The Military in the Development of New Nations: An Essay in Comparative Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p.38.

13 David Connery, Natalie Sambhi and Michael McKenzie, *A Return on Investment: The Future of Police Cooperation between Australia and Indonesia*, Special Report (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 25 March 2014), [www.aspi.org.au/publications/a-return-on-investment-the-future-of-police-cooperation-between-australia-and-indonesia/SR67\\_Australia\\_Indon\\_police\\_coop.pdf](http://www.aspi.org.au/publications/a-return-on-investment-the-future-of-police-cooperation-between-australia-and-indonesia/SR67_Australia_Indon_police_coop.pdf) [page discontinued] [now at [www.aspi.org.au/report/return-investment-future-police-cooperation-between-australia-and-indonesia](http://www.aspi.org.au/report/return-investment-future-police-cooperation-between-australia-and-indonesia)].

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