

The potential for army–police rivalry in Myanmar

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Rumours that the commander-in-chief of Myanmar's armed forces was investigating several police and intelligence officers for corruption raised the question of the broader relationship between the Tatmadaw and the MPF. Given past tensions between these two organisations, the possibility of a new rift in the security forces would be of concern to both sides of domestic politics.

Since December 2015, a rumour has been circulating in Yangon that the commander-in-chief of Myanmar's armed forces is investigating several police and intelligence officers for corruption. If that is true, it is a timely reminder of the often-tense relationship between components of the country's coercive apparatus, just as Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD are forming a new government in Naypyidaw.

Over the past five years, the armed forces (known as the *Tatmadaw*) and the MPF have consistently received strong support from President Thein Sein. In large part, this has been to help them modernise and introduce wideranging reform programs. Both have modified their organisational structures, acquired new arms and equipment and made an effort to win back public respect through innovative public relations campaigns.

Also, the *Tatmadaw* has stepped back from day-to-day politics and given a higher priority to territorial defence. It aims to become smaller, but more capable, more professional and better connected internationally. In an effort to civilianise Myanmar's internal security operations, the

MPF plans to expand from 80,000 to 155,000 personnel by 2020. With foreign help, it is receiving training in human rights, community policing and modern methods of crowd control.¹

The army and police have always worked closely together, patrolling Myanmar's borders, conducting counterinsurgency campaigns and putting down internal unrest. In intelligence operations, the military agencies have shared a range of interests with the Special Branch and the Bureau of Special Investigations (BSI). There has always been rivalry between the armed forces and police, however, and this has sometimes caused problems.

After Myanmar regained its independence in 1948, U Nu's fledgling government created two police forces. One was a civil organisation that dealt with everyday policing. The other was a paramilitary force called the Union Military Police (UMP). It helped deal with problems that demanded the application of lethal force, such as operations against army mutineers, ideological and ethnic insurgents and armed bandits known as *dacoits*.

The UMP cooperated with the *Tatmadaw*, but the two always competed for status and scarce resources. Their relations were complicated by the fact that they answered to different ministers, who were themselves rivals for political power. In 1958, the Minister for Home Affairs ordered UMP units to march on Rangoon. He claimed it was to forestall a coup, but it was probably to settle a personal disagreement with the defence minister.

General Ne Win always resented the fact that the *Tatmadaw* did not enjoy a monopoly of the means to exercise state force. In 1958, when his 'caretaker' administration took over Myanmar's government for two years, he renamed the UMP the Union Constabulary, drafted army officers into its ranks, ordered policemen to attend military-style training camps and reduced police resources.

After Ne Win's coup d'état in 1962, all paramilitary police units were absorbed into the army. In 1964, the civil arm was reformed as the People's Police Force (PPF), with a military-style rank structure. Army

1 Andrew Selth, *Burma's Security Forces: Performing, Reforming or Transforming?*, Griffith Asia Institute Regional Outlook Paper No.45 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 2013), www.griffith.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/559127/Regional-Outlook-Paper-45-Selth.pdf [page discontinued].

officers were posted into senior police positions. For the next 20 years, the PPF was considered the ‘younger brother’ of the *Tatmadaw* but continued to be given a low priority for funds, arms and equipment.²

The PPF developed a reputation for corruption and incompetence. After it was created in 1974, the PPF’s paramilitary ‘riot squad’, or *Lon Htein*, became known for its arrogance and brutality. During the abortive 1988 prodemocracy uprising, it was considered even more ruthless than the armed forces. Myanmar’s ruling military council later allocated the PPF more resources and tried to lift its standards, but with little apparent success.

When Thein Sein took office in 2011, the government recognised that it needed to do something about the (renamed) MPF. Not only did it require radical reform, but it was also seen as a means of permitting the armed forces to relinquish some of its internal security duties and become a more conventional military organisation. Before long, blue uniforms began to replace green uniforms on the streets of Myanmar’s population centres.

A clearer differentiation between police and army roles seemed an obvious step, but it carried certain risks. For example, when the Indonesian police force split from the army in 1999, disputes arose over their respective roles and responsibilities and the allocation of resources. Both personal and institutional jealousies arose. There were a number of armed clashes as members of the two forces competed for control of off-budget finances.

Such problems are much less likely in Myanmar. The *Tatmadaw* is still the country’s most powerful institution, it commands the lion’s share of the budget and, under the 2008 constitution, the Minister of Home Affairs is always a serving army officer. Also, the expansion of the MPF is being achieved in part through transfers from the armed forces. The Chief of Police and about 10 per cent of MPF officers are former military personnel.³

2 Andrew Selth, *Burma’s Police Forces: Continuities and Contradictions*, Griffith Asia Institute Regional Outlook Paper No.32 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 2011), www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/372761/Selth-Regional-Outlook-Paper-32.pdf [page discontinued].

3 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/0009/512379/Regional-Outlook-Paper-44-v.2-Selth.pdf [page discontinued].

That said, the MPF is trying to develop its own ethos and esprit de corps. Police officers are being encouraged to see themselves as separate from the armed forces, with different responsibilities requiring different methods. If the force is able to develop independently, and receives reasonable budget allocations, then serious tensions between the *Tatmadaw* and the MPF can be avoided. However, any obvious intrusion into police affairs by members of the armed forces could cause tensions.

In Myanmar, all unconfirmed rumours should be treated with caution, but it is in this context that the recent story regarding the commander-in-chief becomes interesting.

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing has reportedly ordered an investigation into claims that several officers from the MPF's Special Branch and the BSI have been involved in drug trafficking. In one sense, this comes as no surprise. Myanmar is ranked as one of the most corrupt countries in the world.⁴ However, the accused officers are from the two agencies in the Ministry of Home Affairs with specific responsibilities for rooting out such practices. This might be why the *Tatmadaw*, and someone as senior as the commander-in-chief, is said to be involved.

Both civilian and military leaders in Myanmar would have an interest in this case. Aung San Suu Kyi has long emphasised the rule of law and opposed corruption. She would want to be seen as supporting a strong response to any official misconduct. Also, division within the security forces is a recurring nightmare for Myanmar's generals. Past attempts to weaken the cohesion and loyalty of the state's coercive apparatus have prompted firm action.

The significance of this rumour should not be overstated. However, if it is true, we may be seeing an early and welcome example of the country's most senior leaders acting together to tackle a problem of shared concern.

4 Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2015* (Berlin: Transparency International, 2015), www.transparency.org/cpi2015.

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