

### 3 Of *kyay-zu* and *kyet-su*: the military in 2006

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To many observers, the *Tatmadaw* (Burmese, for ‘armed forces’) of 2006 appeared omnipotent. Its senior officers ran a state that had eliminated or neutralised major rivals. It had concluded truces with, or obtained surrenders from, nearly all of its former armed adversaries. The military completed a breakneck-paced expansion of its personnel, from 180,000 in 1988 to close to 400,000 in the mid 1990s (probably about 300,000 today). Garrisons now dot the map of the whole country, a vast change from the pre-1988, post-colonial setting. Commercial enterprises associated with the armed forces play significant roles in many sectors of the economy and individual military units run an extensive array of industries, plantations, road check-points and other revenue-raising ventures.

But the *Tatmadaw*, like any large political institution anywhere in the world, is far from omnipotent. Its dominance in politics has not managed to create broad legitimacy at home or abroad, nor has its expanded power and size created a seamless or wholly unified institution. This chapter will explore the gap between the senior officers—who regularly perform acts of *kyay-zu*<sup>1</sup> (which I translate in

this context as ‘good deeds’)—and the rest of the military. Among their many often thankless tasks, soldiers and junior officers find themselves responsible for producing millions of *kyet-su*<sup>2</sup> (physic nuts) to generate bio-energy.

## The other seams

Before proceeding, let me explain why I am not focusing on the other, better known seams in the military. For nearly 18 years now—since the current version of military governance began—there have been constant reports of imminent splits in the military. Many democracy and peace advocates have pinned hopes on internal and élite military struggles to spark some kind of dramatic and radical (by local standards) reform. Observers have focused on splits such as the hard-liners against the soft-liners; regional commanders against headquarters; junta chair, Senior General Than Shwe, versus vice-chairman, General Maung Aye, regional commanders against headquarters, and so on.

Most attention focuses on power struggles within the uppermost reaches of the regime. Until the 2004 sacking of Secretary-1 General Khin Nyunt, along with nearly all the senior officers closely associated with him, regime affairs reportedly were widely explained through a monocular lens of a single power struggle between Khin Nyunt and State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) Vice-Chair, Maung Aye. The intransigent latter was said to counter every ‘baby step’ by Khin Nyunt at least marginally in the direction of reform, including the dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi and the negotiation of cease-fire arrangements with more than 20 former rebel organisations. With the sidelining of Khin Nyunt, so-called hard-liners are said to have resoundingly defeated the soft-liners. After the defeat of Khin Nyunt, the struggle is said to pit Maung Aye against his boss, junta chair, Senior General Than Shwe. At stake now seems to be less a hard-line or soft-line policy orientation than raw power, as Maung Aye has spent 13 years as Than Shwe’s deputy and is thought to be chafing at the bit to ascend to the top position.

Accordingly, in a style reminiscent of Cold War Kremlinology, regime watchers scrutinise every promotion and reassignment for hints of the apparent balance tipping towards one or the other. The reshuffles of command assignments in May 2006 were widely reported in the press as a clear sign that ‘Burma’s Vice-Chairman [is] losing [his] grip on power’.<sup>3</sup> Why? Because regional commanders with close ties to Maung Aye (his *ta-bye*, or followers) were demoted. The misfortunes of the *ta-bye* are said to reflect a weakening of the power of the *hsaya* (teacher, or benefactor in this case). Their demotions involved reassignment to either ministerial or War Office appointments in Rangoon/Yangon. While it is true that getting kicked upstairs in this fashion has to represent a demotion from the quite powerful position of a regional command, not all kicks upstairs are equal or constitute an unequivocal loss of face and power for the *hsaya*.

One sure demotion and loss of influence did come in the assignment of Major-General Maung Maung Swe, Coastal Region Commander and Maung Aye’s brother-in-law, as Minister of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement (concurrent with Minister of Immigration and Population).<sup>4</sup> Major-General Ye Myint, however, Eastern Commander and widely considered a Maung Aye follower, was transferred to the War Office, where he is now chief of Military Affairs Security.<sup>5</sup> In the past, many thought that Than Shwe placed only his most trusted generals in the War Office. It is certainly possible that he has brought in a Maung Aye follower in order to keep an eye on him, but isn’t it also possible that Maung Aye had some say in this assignment? Assuming that a personnel chess game is really what is going on, perhaps Maung Aye’s *ta-bye* will be able to feed him information on what Than Shwe is up to. In other words, the tea leaves of *ta-byel hsaya* fortunes can sometimes be read in different ways.

A second set of intra-military tensions has received ample attention as well, including from myself in the past. These tensions are rooted in the enormous power and influence that regional commanders have attained in the past 18 years. In charge of all military and administrative affairs in their regions, they at times have acted like incipient war-lords,

particularly in the early 1990s. While they remain very powerful, the junta and the War Office in Yangon have established formal and informal mechanisms to rein them in, starting in the early 1990s with moves to require regional commanders to serve as members of the junta and, subsequently, regular reassignments of regional commanders to War Office and Cabinet positions. Several major reshuffles have occurred since then, without producing any significant challenges to the regime. Regional commanders remain powerful, but the junta chair retains ultimate authority.

In a couple of generations, historians could find that this litany of tensions is notable not for their existence but for their irrelevance in terms of macro-level political change. Another seam, however, could have more durable structural (though not necessarily immediate political) significance in the long run: this is the growing gap between rich and poor inside the army or between senior-level officers and the sprawling and relatively impoverished rank and file and junior members of the officers' corps. To be clear, however, I do not want to overstate the consequences of this seam or any others in the *tatmadaw*. Senior military leaders have proven effective at managing conflict in the past. For example, in the case of the tensions between the junta and the regional commanders in the early 1990s, the former initiated successful reforms to patch up that seam. It is possible that the military brass could direct some portion of its pending natural resource windfalls to ameliorating the difficult conditions in which the rank and file live. Even if the leadership does not address this problem head-on, however, the common experience of poverty, or at least of diminished economic expectations, is probably unlikely—in the short term—to create sympathies and linkages between the equally impoverished civilians and soldiers, or at least not linkages significant enough to spark major political reform. The rich–poor gap in the military, however, is likely to influence Burma/Myanmar further down the road, as rent-seeking by officers will continue to hamper economic development efforts. Additionally, impoverishment among soldiers leaves them few opportunities for economic gain other than plying their skills in violence.

## The gap

The *Tatmadaw* has changed quite a bit in the past decade and a half. Among the myriad changes to the institution is this vastly growing gap between the fortunes of the senior ranks of the officer corps and everyone else in the military. In 2006, some officers lived lives of unprecedented, though relative (by Burmese standards), luxury, with ample opportunities for wealth accumulation, status and *kyay-zu* performances, according to Buddhist precepts.

Let me illustrate with an example: in 1991–92, while I was doing my PhD research on military history in the military archives of Burma/Myanmar, a quite senior colonel—one widely thought to be a *ta-bye* of the then junta chair, Senior General Saw Maung—was assigned responsibility for watching over me. Mostly, he left me alone, but once or twice he drove me from one place to another. He drove what was then widely known as a ‘colonel car’. It was a Mazda 323, had no air-conditioning and the windows were stuck in a closed position, a happy condition during the rainy season, but utterly suffocating during the hot season. Nonetheless, it was a symbol of great status in a poor country with few cars, little opportunity for wealth accumulation and relatively low expectations. At the same time in other Southeast Asian countries—such as Thailand and Indonesia, for example—colonels on active duty drove nice Toyota sedans or other up-market cars. In Burma/Myanmar, however, wealth and status were measured on a far more limited scale.

Today, colonels, like rock stars and business owners in Burma/Myanmar, wouldn’t be caught dead in a Mazda 323.<sup>6</sup> Now they drive at least what their counterparts in other Southeast Asian countries drive.<sup>7</sup> In 2006, the senior officer corps of the *Tatmadaw* lived far different lives from that of their predecessors, even those serving under the same military regime only a decade or so earlier. As weak as the Burmese economy is, it has produced opportunities for the scaling up of wealth/status measures across the board—in pop culture, business and the military.

The life of a senior officer is now typically one of great comfort, possibility and *kyay-zu*. Today's older, active-duty senior officers paid their dues on the battlefields of Burma's two generations of civil wars, and the mid-career officers were promoted for their service in the difficult reconstruction of the State in the post-1988 period. The past 18 years have provided extensive opportunities for accumulating wealth—not always for themselves, but certainly for their families and entourages. Along with those opportunities for wealth accumulation came chances to ascend (in some cases quite quickly) the ladder of social status. Like non-military *lu-gyi* ('important people' or 'big shots') in Burma/Myanmar, large numbers of officers have now become quite visible public figures in ways they weren't before 1988. They regularly show off their high status, driving around in expensive cars, eating at expensive restaurants, promoting their children in business or educational sectors, practising *kyay-zu* by providing largesse to monks and pagodas, inscribing their names on donation plaques at religious tourist sites and—most importantly—reminding the population and rank and file just who is in charge.

For the rank and file, however, the situation is comparatively grim, though a different kind of grimness from that existing 10 or 15 years ago. Soldiers live in some ways as soldiers always have, with livelihoods formally above, but not always far above, the poverty line. Opportunities for advancement and livelihood enhancement continue to depend on the goodwill of their commanding officers. Their lives remain difficult, although unlike before 1988, their lives are less frequently on the line during their service. Instead of constant fighting, they are tasked with the thankless job of providing the muscle to build a repressive state. Before 1988, soldiers cycled through frequent combat assignments, usually far away from their homes and often in areas where they didn't speak the same language as the locals or had little logistical support to sustain them. Given the outdated and weak equipment of the pre 1988 *Tatmadaw*, tens of thousands of them died in battles with a plethora of different armed groups fighting against the State. From 1989, many of these armed groups collapsed from within, concluded cease-fire

agreements with the government or surrendered. As combat contracted, the military inexplicably expanded.

Post 1988, soldiers thus found themselves in a new terrain, metaphorically (*kyet-su* plantations) and geographically. Most are no longer required to fight insurgents on a regular basis, and some have found themselves serving in units closer to home or at least are stationed at distant garrisons where they are not likely to be shot at. Their jobs involve new kinds of assignments, ranging from corralling local people into service on infrastructure and construction projects and collecting money at road check-points, to (in the past two years) planting or pressing others into planting the infamous *kyet-su* trees all over Burma. Although the *Tatmadaw's* acquisition of higher-tech weaponry since 1988 has ushered in a revolution (by Burmese standards) in military affairs, its institutional development has frequently failed to keep pace with the demands of sustaining its vastly larger rank and file. In other words, no comparable revolution in military social affairs has taken place.

### *Kyay-zu*: explaining the rising fortunes of senior officers

Two major changes in the political and economic environment of Burma/Myanmar account for the growth of opportunities for wealth accumulation for very senior officers. One is the explosion of rent-seeking opportunities that has emerged with the state rebuilding process from the late 1980s until today. The second was that changes in the world economy ushered in at the end of the Cold War—and particularly the expansion of neo-liberal institutions and policies—gave senior officers access to an unprecedented range of lucrative (and often informal) business partnerships.

First, the military take-over in 1988 was the take-over of only the shell that remained of the socialist state. The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) began a sprawling range of nation and state-building activities designed to maximise order and modernise Burma/Myanmar. To carry out this massive and often uncoordinated

set of state rebuilding programs, the junta undertook a huge expansion of the armed forces. From 1988 to 1996, the *Tatmadaw* probably doubled in size.<sup>8</sup> Local commanders in towns and villages throughout the country seized land to construct new army garrisons, while the numbers of naval and airforce bases also increased (Selth 2002). The military also expanded its economic and industrial base, and set up lucrative military corporate ventures, such as agricultural plantations, banks and holding companies such as the Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (UMEHL).

The junta delegated the day-to-day administration of this emerging behemoth to its regional commanders. Regional commanders have supervised the construction of roads, housing, suburbs and markets; rearranged and displaced urban and rural populations to accommodate tourism, military expansion and other state priorities; and expanded surveillance and crowd-control capabilities. With administrative, military and political jurisdiction over their geographically vast command areas, regional commanders have amassed enormous wealth and power, especially when posted to the commands flanking Burma/Myanmar's borders with China and Thailand. There, they oversee formal and informal trade, investment, transport and border crossings—all of which provide ample opportunities for personal and institutional enrichment.

The expanded presence of the *Tatmadaw* is visible throughout the country. In addition to the ever-present but by now often peeling red-and-white propaganda billboards exhorting locals to support the Rangoon-based state, evidence of increased military presence includes (but is not limited to)

- massive expansion of army garrisons, often set up on land requisitioned from farmers or local businesses with little or no compensation
- the initiation of large, flashy infrastructure construction projects—such as oil pipelines, microwave stations, universities and hydroelectric dams—that typically rely on conscripted local labour and taxation<sup>9</sup>

- increased numbers of road check-points or toll gates at which proceeds benefit army units, as well as local Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA) groups or line ministries
- increased kinds and amounts of business licence fees and levies on all civilians. Most are payable either directly to military units or indirectly channel some of the money to the *Tatmadaw* through USDA, police and line ministry offices. According to the Karenni Development Research Group (2006:41), since 1988, Kayah State has been subject to ‘porter fees, gate fees, military fund contributions, sports fees, road and bridges fees, fire sentry fees, labour contribution fees, and levies on farms, farm water, and crops’
- direct army ownership of plantations and agricultural land (usually marked by official signage), where nearby villagers are expected to ‘donate’ their labour
- increased pressures on farmers to expand areas of cultivation or plant crops defined by the SPDC as national priorities
- expansion of the number of model villages. In some areas, such as northern Rakhine, these approximate strategic hamlets—arrangements that are largely involuntary for social control of potentially hostile populations (usually ethnically defined) or involve resettlement of displaced populations for counter-insurgency purposes. In other areas, villagers apply for model village status to obtain some government services in exchange for adhering to strict planting and production schedules set by local and ministerial officials from the Ministry for Progress of Border Areas or the relevant line ministries.<sup>10</sup>

Commanding officers, who oversee all of these major state-building enterprises, thus have access to a wide range of daily rent-seeking opportunities of which they can take advantage—either directly for themselves or their directorate or command or indirectly by their families or *ta-bye* for a variety of different purposes. It appears, however, that the greatest sums have flowed to the top of the chain of command largely because of changes in the global environment.

## The world economy

To an unprecedented degree, populations living in Burma/Myanmar have been affected by the increased ease with which capital, legal and illegal commodities and people could move in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Since the British era, the formal financial system of Burma/Myanmar has never reached most Burmese in the central or border regions. Most instead rely on friends or families for credit or on money-lenders charging extremely high interest rates. According to Turnell (2006), 80 per cent of the country's farmers have no access to banks or other forms of formal credit whatsoever. Moreover, given the decades-long civil wars that have occurred in the border regions, the country has always been home to shadow economies and trans-border networks of brokers, traders, money-lenders, traffickers and militias.

In the past decade, these regions have seen a dramatic deepening and thickening of these networks. What is different now is that the deregulation of much of the world's financial system since the 1980s has broken down many barriers to illegal and legal trade in the commodities produced in the country's resource-rich border regions. Additionally, the cosying up to China of former General Khin Nyunt and his decision to grant National Registration Cards to Kokang Chinese within Burma/Myanmar has probably hastened the pace of formal and informal Chinese investment in and exploitation of natural resources. In the states sharing a border with Thailand, there has been a considerable increase since 1988 of traffic going out, as young people especially traverse the porous border to seek work either in the many sweatshops and factories along the border or in Chiang Mai and Bangkok.<sup>11</sup> Globalisation has thus brought about a considerable transformation in social relations in the border states as well as the rest of the country.

While senior officers do not directly run or control these networks of economic linkages, they have certainly benefitted from the reinsertion of Burma/Myanmar into the world economy. Wives, sons, daughters, in-laws and cousins of senior officers have seized business opportunities that involve the purchase of undervalued land, gem production, hotels

and tourism businesses, monopolistic access to economic assets and extortionary joint-venture requirements for foreign investors.

Whereas the families and *ta-bye* of *lu-gyi* expected comfortable but not necessarily luxurious living standards in the past, now they expect nothing less than the mass consumerist luxuries that they imagine élites everywhere else have. They also expect and demand new degrees of deference. They often accompany senior officers to the frequent processions through towns and villages where the officers open roads, schools, plantations or bridges or make donations at pagodas (often with cash appropriated informally from businesses). Local government officials and army commanders oversee the production of these pageants and assure that villagers and townspeople exaggerate their gratitude and loyalty to the *lu-gyi*. Few inside the country can mistake the *kyay-zu* performed by senior officers in the past 18 years.

### *Kyet-su*: the misfortunes of soldiers

Mismanagement of the expansion of the military and the economy led the War Office to declare in the late 1990s a policy of self-reliance for local military units. At that moment, military leaders threw up their hands at the logistical nightmare they had created and directed local units to raise operating revenues from whatever the local economy could provide. Self-reliance, however, did not mean much in the way of autonomy, as local units remained subject to macroeconomic, fiscal and planning policies—like the required cultivation of *kyet-su*—that often redirected soldiers' efforts away from whatever economic efficiencies they might have been able to achieve.

The *Tatmadaw* grew from 180,000 in 1988 to about 300,000 in the mid 1990s. There was and is no official military conscription in Burma/Myanmar. In the early years of this junta, some families sent their sons off to join the military, often attracted by promises of access to subsidised petrol, rice and cooking oil. Other, very poor families sent sons to join the military because they had no alternative. Additionally, various levels of military officials have periodically set

quotas for township and village leaders to send young men to the rapidly expanding military. Nonetheless, there is ample anecdotal evidence that today many units (including those involved in combat) are considerably under-strength and that unit commanders have great difficulty recruiting and preventing desertion.<sup>12</sup>

The expanded range of economic opportunities that accompanied the so-called opening of the economy after 1988 has brought resources into the *Tatmadaw*, but relatively few are directed at improving the lives of the soldiers. Instead, military leaders have prioritised the purchase of an extensive (though not necessarily integrated) range of modern weapons from abroad (Selth 2002). Moreover, they have created an almost parallel state service sector that provides relatively high-quality opportunities for health care, education and other social services for the officer corps and their families. In some parts of Burma/Myanmar, soldiers' rations, allowances and wages are not enough for a single soldier to live on, much less to support their families. As a result, underpaid soldiers can feed their own families only by participating in the informal and illegal economy, levying informal taxes, stealing villagers' harvests and collecting unauthorised road tolls.

In mid 2006, the SPDC announced a raise in salaries for all government servants including those in the military. It subsequently undertook a crack-down on informal wealth generation by civil servants, starting in the customs department. It is not clear whether the salary increases are adequate for the needs of most soldiers, or whether indeed they will ever receive the full raises. Unit commanders themselves are reported to tax soldiers' wages to finance unit requirements (such as the purchase of shares in UMEHL, often required by regional commanders) as well as their own personal needs. Additionally, in the 2006 salary hikes, soldiers' raises were proportionately smaller than those of more senior officers.

Why hasn't the War Office done more to address the impoverishment of its rank and file? As seems to happen in other agencies of the SPDC state, junior and mid-career officers probably are disinclined to report problems up the chain of command. If the policy of the junta and the War Office is one of local self-reliance, that represents an order to be

carried out, not one to be renegotiated because it is difficult to carry out. Battalion commanders might have opportunities to raise their concerns about this at quarterly regional command meetings, but it seems unlikely that regional commanders would transmit this information up the military chain of command given that it reflects poorly on their management of troops and their areas of operation.

## Implications of the gap

To be clear, I am not suggesting that the widening of the gap between the very rich in the *Tatmadaw* and the rank and file will finally be the internal split that will bring down the military government. Throughout its several decades of rule, the *Tatmadaw* has weathered many internal problems and personal infighting, but the leadership has always successfully held it together. Junior officers might bristle at the current inequities; however, for 18 years under SLORC/SPDC management, these same junior and mid-career officers have regularly been promoted into positions where they can take their shot at the remaining spoils, rather than upending the system that served them poorly at lower ranks.

At some point, however, future governments of any stripe—military or civilian, authoritarian or democratic—will inevitably need to confront the problems of a system of wealth generation that directs state resources into unproductive endeavours and enterprises. Any move to a political system that enshrines security of contract and rule of law will inevitably weaken the patron–client, entourage modes of dividing up the thus far expanding spoils (likely to continue to expand in the near future, at least in the natural resources and energy sectors). The maintenance of such a large, unwieldy force structure of about 300,000 will also be a drain on public coffers, and it seems inevitable that at some point, the *Tatmadaw*, like the rest of the armed groups<sup>13</sup> operating inside the country's borders, will have to demobilise many soldiers. Such a move will unleash tens of thousands of men trained in violence into an economy incapable of absorbing these newly jobless.

## Notes

- 1 This can be translated as ‘good deed’ or ‘benefit’, or sometimes ‘gratitude’.
- 2 Physic nuts or castor-oil trees. The Burma/Myanmar government has been promoting the cultivation of physic-nut trees throughout most of the nation. According to Brigadier-General Hla Htay Win, Yangon Regional Commander and Chair of the Yangon Division PDC, ‘Physic nut oil can be used to meet the fuel needs of the nation to some extent and it will be useful for the people in the long run and it is necessary to grow the plant widely throughout our country’ (*New Light of Myanmar*, 8 February 2006). The newspaper reported that Yangon Division alone was planning to collect grafts and cultivate 500,000 acres of *kyet-su* between 2006 and 2009.
- 3 Headline from Democratic Voice of Burma radio, 16 May 2006.
- 4 It should be noted that immigration is an increasingly powerful portfolio, given the expanded numbers of Burmese workers now emigrating (or being exported) for labour abroad.
- 5 Military Affairs Security has assumed many of the responsibilities of Khin Nyunt’s military intelligence departments (which were disbanded at the time of his sacking).
- 6 A stark example of the elevation of expectations can be seen in a *Myanmar Times* story (Puii 2006:29), which reports that musician DJ Thxa Soe ‘says he drives a pick-up instead of a Land Cruiser because all the profits from his music are eaten up by VCD piracy’.
- 7 Officially, the military allows colonels to drive saloon cars (sedans) with the military-star licence or number plate. Privately, they can purchase and register their own cars. Most colonels are probably not driving makes such as Mercedes and Lexus, but they and their families are seen around Yangon and other areas in four-wheel drives and other up-market automobiles.
- 8 In its first decade, the junta also spent more than \$1 billion on 140 new combat aircraft, 30 naval vessels, 170 tanks, 250 armoured personnel carriers, as well as rocket-launch systems, anti-aircraft artillery, infantry weapons, telecommunications surveillance equipment and other hardware. See Brooke 1998 and Davis and Hawke 1998. See Tan 2004 and Aung Zaw 2006 for updates.
- 9 See, for example, EarthRights International 2001 and Karenni Development Research Group 2006.
- 10 Human Rights Documentation Unit 2003; Loo 2004:168–9; Amnesty International 2004:22–4.
- 11 From General Chaovalit’s visit with Senior General Saw Maung after the September 1988 coup through to the mid 1980s, Thai companies landed the

lion's share of timber concessions along the border between the two countries. Since then, Thai investment has waxed and waned, given competition with other sources of capital (China, India) and fluctuating relationships between the junta and successive Thai governments.

- 12 See, for example, ALTSEAN 2005; Amnesty International 1989a, 1989b, 1991, 1996; Global Witness 2003, 2005; Karen Human Rights Report (various issues of News Bulletin at <http://www.khrg.org>); Project Maje 1996; Risser et al. 2004; Sakhong 2003; *Shan Herald Agency for News* 2005; Smith 1991; Thailand Burma Border Consortium 2005.
- 13 Here, I am thinking of the ethnic armed cease-fire groups, who have been allowed to retain their weapons and sustain armies.

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