

Will Myanmar's military exit the political stage?

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Author: Adam P. MacDonald, Halifax, Canada

Over three million Burmese have signed a petition by Myanmar's main opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), urging immediate constitutional revision. A significant cause for protest has been the political powers afforded to the country's military, the Tatmadaw, by the constitution.



Although the petition demonstrates the direction in which many want the country to go, such actions are unlikely to force the generals' hand. Aware of the dramatic changes to the state and society that the military has introduced over the last five years, and their subsequent [new role in the political architecture](#) ^[1], the generals remain unwilling to fully relinquish control.

What will promote the military's withdrawal from politics? Is the military leadership determined to play a [perpetual political role](#) ^[2]? It appears so, based on [comments by Senior-General Min Aung Hlaing](#) ^[3] justifying such involvement. Article 6 of the constitution also allows 'the Defence Services to be able to participate in the National political leadership role of the State'.

But there are important signs that the military is at least entertaining the thought of reform — both internally and in their relationship with the state.

The Tatmadaw, despite the transfer of power to a nominally civilian government following the 2010 elections, carefully cordoned off certain areas under its exclusive purview: security portfolios, guaranteed representation in cabinet and parliament, and a veto over constitutional change. The guarding of these selective powers, which stands in contrast to other widespread changes to the state and society, is promoted by an [entrenched praetorian ethos](#) ^[4] which has been at the forefront of the military's history of political involvement: a belief that they alone have the ability to determine who rules and how, which has usually meant themselves.

Since the construction of the new political system, however, their role has changed significantly.

Most importantly, the military generals have become ‘guardians’ or ‘mediators’ instead of direct rulers. They remain interested and powerful political actors but have retrenched from many areas of governance and administration — and by and large they allow the political architecture to function free from any interference other than their constitutional representation. And, though there remains a large number of military (current and retired) personalities running the state, there appears to be a formal demarcation between the military, as an organisation focused on national defence, and the political apparatus responsible for the governance of the state. This distinction did not exist during the previous junta-led regime where politics and the military were indistinguishable.

The Tatmadaw, furthermore, is retreating not only from the political sphere (albeit selectively) but also from other important sectors as well. Economically, the [monopolies enjoyed by the Tatmadaw’s two conglomerates](#) ^[6] — the Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings and the Myanmar Economic Corporation — are waning as the economy continues to liberalise. The generals are contemplating the companies’ eventual privatisation if not total disbandment.

Within the security sector, the Myanmar Police Force is slowly developing the [competencies of a professional security service](#) ^[6] focused on law and order, part of a power shift from ‘green (army) to blue (police)’. The military has even accepted a reduction in their [budget allocation](#) ^[7], not in real dollar terms but as a percentage of the national revenue (from approximately 20 per cent to 12 per cent) — though this still dwarfs other departments such as health and education.

Significantly, military concerns about allowing the new polity to evolve have relaxed, as [threat perceptions](#) ^[8] of civilian opposition parties, ethnic groups and Western states have changed. The softening of these previously antagonistic relationships, furthermore, neutralises the national security narrative commonly employed to justify the military’s political involvement.

The [recent appointment](#) ^[9] of General Maung Maung Ohn as the Chief Administrator of the restive Arakan State (centre of the [ongoing violence](#) ^[10] between Burmans and Rohingya Muslims), though, demonstrates the potency of such a rationale reifying their political role. Feeling less threatened is an important development but does not necessarily mean that the military now views these groups as equal partners or potential political leaders.

Perhaps the greatest surprise has been the calculated opening of relations with the West and their militaries. US Undersecretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Tom Malinowski recently met with Senior-General Min Aung Hlaing. Also, [US Pacific Command Deputy Commander Lieutenant-General Crotchfield](#) ^[11] gave a lecture to the Myanmar National Defense College promoting the legitimacy and benefits of civilian rule and control of the military. These events may not convince the Tatmadaw senior leadership to change their attitudes right away, but they do demonstrate a new willingness to hold such discussions.

The military’s removal from politics is essential for a strong democratic system to take root in Myanmar. For the NLD, their focus should be on winning in the current system (despite its flaws and biases in favour of the military-supported political entities) and then on moving to [change](#)

[the constitutional rules](#) ^[12] of the game.

If the civilian NLD assumes power, as is likely, the military will want to retain their political position even more. So, it is expected that the 2015 elections will produce a truly hybrid civilian-military government. Such an arrangement would usher in [a new era](#) ^[13] in civil–military relations, facilitating needed changes such as greater civilian competency and legitimacy in security matters, discussions on military reporting to parliament, developing pension systems for military members and eventually addressing the Tatmadaw's history of rule.

This will take time.

It may take a new generation of military and civilian leaders, working within this new configuration, for a lasting and permanent demarcation between them to emerge. A slow and gradual reconfiguration of responsibilities and identities would be the most effective route to enact such changes and ensure the wider reform and transition process remains on track.

Adam P. MacDonald is an independent researcher based in Halifax, Canada.

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[1] new role in the political architecture:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/05/01/the-tatmadaws-new-position-in-myanmar-politics/>

[2] perpetual political role:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/11/08/what-does-myanmars-military-want/>

[3] comments by Senior-General Min Aung Hlaing:

<http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF16/C-in-C-27032014.pdf>

[4] entrenched praetorian ethos:

<http://www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/private/apb233.pdf>

[5] monopolies enjoyed by the Tatmadaw's two conglomerates:

[http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/south-east-asia/burma-myanmar/b143-myanmar-s-military-back-to-the-barracks.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/south-east-asia/burma-myanmar/b143-myanmar-s-military-back-to-the-barracks.pdf)

[6] competencies of a professional security service:

http://www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/559127/Regional-Outlook-Paper-45-Selth.pdf

[7] budget allocation:

<http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/10000-military-spending-still-dwarfs-education-and-health.html>

[8] threat perceptions:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/05/27/myanmars-military-from-menace-to-mediator/>

[9] recent appointment:

<http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/new-arakan-chief-minister-pledges-zero-tolerance-rohingya-smuggling.html>

[10] ongoing violence:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/07/04/myanmars-religious-violence-a-threat-to-southeast-asias-security/>

[11] US Pacific Command Deputy Commander Lieutenant-General Crotchfield:

<http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/us-military-officer-gives-speech-burma-defense-college.html>

[12] change the constitutional rules:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/03/27/road-to-constitutional-amendment-in-myanmar-going-nowhere/>

[13] a new era:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/05/22/reforming-civilian-military-relations-in-myanmar/>