



SOLDIER DEFECTIONS IN MYANMAR

Motivations and obstacles following the 2021 military coup

This report is written by Helene Maria Kyed, DIIS, and Ah Lynn, published by DIIS.

DIIS · Danish Institute for International Studies
Østbanegade 117, DK-2100 Copenhagen, Denmark
Tel: +45 32 69 87 87
E-mail: diis@diis.dk
www.diis.dk

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Abbreviations

CDF	Chin Defence Force
CDM	Civil Disobedience Movement
DSA	Defense Services Academy
DSTA	Defense Services' Technological academy
DVB	Democratic Voice of Burma
EAO	Ethnic Armed Organisation
KIA	Kachin Independence Army (KIA)
KNU	Karen National Union
NLD	National League for Democracy
NUG	National Unity Government
PDF	People's Defence Forces
RFA	Radio Free Asia
USDP	United Solidarity and Development Party

Abstract

Nine months after the 1 February 2021 military coup in Myanmar, an estimated 2,000 soldiers of the 300,000-350,000 strong Myanmar military, the Tatmadaw, had defected. This has occurred in the context of massive popular resistance to the coup, which the military leadership has tried to quell with large-scale arrests, killings of civilians and various forms of intimidation. Since the first defections in late February, resistance has shifted from being exclusively non-violent to waging a low intensity and defensive warfare against the Tatmadaw's troops. As a result, the gap between the civilian population and the armed forces has widened, with significant losses on both sides. Yet this trend has been challenged mainly by some of the younger, lower-ranking soldiers, who have joined 'the people's side'. Some defectors take part in the armed resistance, while others are actively engaged in campaigns to mobilise more soldiers to leave the army or to tacitly circumvent orders from within. Increasingly, these defector groups have been supported by the political opposition to the military. This report draws on the narratives of active defectors to analyse what has motivated soldiers to defect after the military coup, and to conversely understand what obstacles there are to an increased scale of defections. We argue that while moral concerns regarding the violence against civilians after the coup has been a strong motivating factor, defections are also driven by deep dissatisfaction with the internal workings of the military system that existed prior to the coup. The support mechanisms, exit options, and alternative visions of order proclaimed by the civilian opposition to the coup also play an increasingly important role and would likely be decisive in motivating more defections. Yet the obstacles to defection are also pertinent and are intrinsically woven into the fabric of the Tatmadaw's long tradition of nurturing cohesion and loyalty among its armed forces – e.g., through ideological programming, isolation, hierarchical patron-client relations and a stringent system of commands, rewards, and punishments. While defectors suggest that many more rank-and-file soldiers would desert or defect if they did not fear punishment and for their family's security, our analysis also points to the fundamental structural obstacles that likely inhibit the cultivation of wide-spread motivations to split from the Tatmadaw.

This report offers insights into the increasingly strong conviction that the disintegration of the Tatmadaw through internal splits and large-scale mutinies will be decisive in reversing the coup and for bringing Myanmar onto a genuinely democratic path. So far in Myanmar, there are no clear signs of impending major military splits, but the defections that have occurred can be considered a significant, albeit mainly symbolic, blow to the Tatmadaw's internal coherence and stability.



Translation:

Original text: 'Soldiers are serving the country'. (the word 'country' is crossed out with a green pen).

New text: 'Soldiers are serving Aba'. (Aba here refers to the Commander-in-Chief).

Illustration: MLO.

INTRODUCTION



Soldiers struggle to carry a large sack of loot.
Illustration: MLO.

The military coup in Myanmar on 1 February 2021 has been met with massive popular resistance across wide swathes of society, expressed in street protests, worker strikes and the development of an increasingly organised pro-democracy and anti-coup opposition. A core element of this opposition has been the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), comprising public and private sector workers who refuse to work under a military regime. The Myanmar military, known as the Tatmadaw has responded to this popular resistance with violent crackdowns, killings, arrests, and intimidation of civilians.¹ As a result, the resistance has gradually shifted from being exclusively peaceful to partially becoming armed, with a focus on defending civilians and targeting the military's personnel and property. This shift began in May with the emergence of the People's Defensive Forces (PDFs) and culminated in the declaration of a people's defensive war on 7 September by the National Unity Government (NUG) – a government that operates in exile and is membered by MP-elects from the National League for Democracy (NLD) and representatives from ethnic groups and civil society.

Despite the resilience and magnitude of the popular resistance, the military leadership has shown no signs of resignation or any intention of changing their course of action. Instead, there has been an intensification of military violence against civilians in the cities and rural areas of Myanmar. This co-exists with violent clashes between the Tatmadaw on the one hand and PDFs, people's militias and the ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) that oppose the military coup on the other hand. Superficially and in the upper echelons of its hierarchy, the Tatmadaw appear to be unified, and intent on holding onto power and waging a war against the people at all costs. Daily reports attest to rank-and-file soldiers actively participating in violent crackdowns, looting, and severe intimidation of civilians.

The violence waged by military personnel since the coup is undeniable, and yet there is another side to the story: an increasing number of soldiers and officers have deserted the army or explicitly defected to join the CDM. Internal forms of defiance and tacit resistance also seem to be growing among those in-service soldiers who are increasingly disgruntled with the military system and its course of action, but who for various reasons find it hard to desert.² This is based on information from those active defectors who have spoken up on social media and other media outlets. Since at least June, the defectors who call themselves CDM soldiers, have also become increasingly organised, forming online groups such as the People's Soldier Group and the People's Embrace, that encourage more defections and support defectors in various ways. Since August, they have also been supported by the political opposition to the coup, in particular the National Unity Government (NUG).

The lack of schisms at the top therefore appears to be increasingly counterbalanced by internal splits and acts of defiance at the bottom of the Tatmadaw's hierarchy. While the scale of military insubordination is impossible to verify, by early October the CDM soldier groups put forward an estimate of 1,500-2,000 defectors from the rank of major down. This number is arguably low for a force of up to 350,000 troops, but it has nonetheless been heralded as unprecedented in the history of the Tatmadaw, at least since its first coup in 1962.³ While desertions from the military have been commonplace in the history of Myanmar⁴, defections, implying that soldiers and other military personnel change sides and join the 'enemy', have been rare.⁵ Simultaneously, defections are taking place within a context where the Tatmadaw not only lacks legitimacy outside its own organisation, but also has proven incapable of controlling the country or running the state apparatus and formal economy.

Military defections have received considerable attention from analysts, observers, and journalists since March, when the first soldiers began to openly express on social media that they had joined 'the people' and the CDM.⁶ The widespread interest in the subject is partly motivated by an increasingly strong conviction that the disintegration of the Tatmadaw through internal schisms and large-scale mutinies will be decisive for reversing the coup and for bringing Myanmar onto a genuinely democratic path. This thesis is supported by comparative scholarship on civil-military relations, which suggests that security force defections are a key factor in determining whether pro-democracy popular uprisings against authoritarian regimes are successful or not.⁷ Based on a large set of cases from around the world, Marcos Degaut argues that defections of a regime's armed forces are a necessary condition for pro-democratic regime transition.⁸ To what extent this could happen in Myanmar is still uncertain, and would require a significant challenge to a military organisation that has a historical reputation of being both highly cohesive and economically and politically powerful. As Andrew Selth, a long-term analyst of the Tatmadaw has recently argued, 'the armed forces have long been, and remain the most powerful institution in Myanmar'.⁹

Currently, it is impossible to predict what scale of defections and forms of insubordination it would require for the higher echelons of the Tatmadaw to split, crumble or to withdraw from its current course of action. So far there are few signs of disintegration at the top, and by mid-October 2021 there had only been one example of a top-level officer – a regional commander – who had attempted to defect but without success.¹⁰ However, the stringent tightening of strategies to prevent military troops from defecting do seem to suggest that defections are

viewed by the military leadership as a serious threat to maintaining its power. It is also apparent that if defectors support the increasingly armed resistance to the coup, this could be detrimental to the military, as ex-soldiers would be able to provide valuable information (e.g. deployment patterns, location of weapons, and strengths of local commands) that could strengthen the armed resistance in an otherwise asymmetrical battlefield.¹¹ As noted by one of the most outspoken defectors on Twitter on 22 October: 'The generals' worst nightmare is our greatest dream: to see the people and the soldiers be united'.¹²

While the tipping point for defections to be a decisive game-changer in the current situation of Myanmar is impossible to predict, it is pertinent to investigate what factors and conditions might pave the way for a larger scale of defections to happen. More specifically this would require asking: what factors motivate and drive military personnel to defect? And what are the obstacles to defections?

In this report we engage with these questions by exploring the voices of those defectors who have spoken out about their departure from the Tatmadaw since the February coup. We draw on a wide set of data collected from May to October 2021, including our own interviews and numerous statements made by defectors on public social media platforms, YouTube videos, interviews with local and international media, and in a series of online CDM soldier dialogue meetings.¹³ Based on the defectors' voices and self-representations, we provide empirical insights into the reasons given for defection and the challenges defectors face.¹⁴ This allows us to analyse the multifaceted conditions and factors that can drive and motivate military personnel to leave the army, but also what the many obstacles are.¹⁵ We supplement our analysis by drawing upon comparative literature on military defections during mass popular uprisings and selected scholarship on the Tatmadaw in Myanmar.

Our analysis of defections underlines that it is problematic to understand the Tatmadaw as a 'homogenous organisation that thinks and behaves as one'.¹⁶ Although, as Andrew Selth has convincingly shown, it is possible to detect specific characteristics of the Tatmadaw's internal system and ideological foundation, he also warns against making sweeping generalisations.¹⁷ Similarly, the comparative scholarship on military defections highlights that even the most cohesive and strong militaries constitute complex and multi-layered organisations with different sectors and agents who 'have discrete incentives and capacities to follow their interests amid present opportunities and constraints'.¹⁸ When exploring defections (and desertions), it is therefore insufficient to ask whether an army as a whole is loyal (or not) to the incumbent authority – in Myanmar's current case, the military's

own coup leaders.¹⁹ Instead, defections are often driven by varied individual reasons and motivations, which may be linked to rank and status within the army, but also to personal convictions and experiences. This also means that there is seldom one single determining factor for defections in a particular context, albeit we may be able to discern some significant patterns.²⁰ Understanding the heterogeneity of drivers and obstacles to defection in Myanmar – as elsewhere – not only reflects the multi-layered composition of the military but is also significant when discussing possible avenues and mechanisms to catalyse a larger scale of defections.

In this report, our analysis has identified a wide spectrum of partly overlapping drivers and obstacles to defection, including inter alia moral, ideological, informational, personal/family security, and pragmatic factors – the latter spanning from concerns for and often quite calculated risk assessments in relation to survival and access to benefits, economic interests, positions/status, to beliefs in the relative victory or defeat of the resistance to the military. When looking into these drivers and obstacles, it is necessary to distinguish between defectors who have already left the army; those who remain in the army but who have a desire to defect, but who for various reasons do not; and those military personnel who have no desire to defect and remain loyal to the military.

In our analysis of defector narratives, we found that morality has played a key role in catalysing defections. Most defectors have expressed that they left the army because they were morally appalled by the widespread military violence against civilians who oppose the military coup. This moral drive is reinforced by the fact that the popular resistance to the coup has been both large and broad-based, cutting across various groups in society, which amplifies, we suggest, the feeling among soldiers that they are ‘killing their own people’. Some defectors more explicitly express a deeper sense of demoralisation with a military leadership that they describe as unjust, corrupt, self-interested, and as lacking popular legitimacy. The split that this has caused between the military and the people here becomes a catalyst not simply for deserting but for defecting to ‘the people’s side’. In the narratives of defectors, we simultaneously trace a deeper ideological critique of the internal military system that also existed before the coup, which partly overlap with pragmatic concerns. Defectors here highlight mistreatment, control, isolation, and economic exploitation of lower ranks by their superiors. In this light, defecting becomes not only a matter of ‘joining the people’ or avoiding complicity in violence, but also an act of escaping exploitation. Among some defectors, the ideological driver also includes support for democracy, human rights and freedoms, which defectors associate with the developments they have seen in the pre-coup period

and which they pit against military rule. However, we also found that party political affiliation seems to play a minor role in driving defections. Some defectors stated explicitly that they did not defect because they are NLD supporters, but because they wanted to join the people's broader struggle against military dictatorship.

Simultaneously, ideological factors constitute a significant obstacle to defection. As we trace in the report, the Tatmadaw's nationalist ideology and self-portrayal as the guardian of the nation's stability and the Buddhist religion, plays a strong role in instilling loyalty within the armed forces. This is reinforced by consistent propaganda and the control of informational flows from the time of military training. Military ideology also rests on a pervasive construction of the people who oppose the military as existential enemies, which is also used to justify violence against civilians. In the report, we suggest that this ideological factor constitutes a structural obstacle to defection, in that it likely affects the moral compass of (at least some) military personnel. As such the moral drive to defect cannot be generalised across the army, even if it is prevalent among defectors. Military ideology co-exists with an internal system of patron-client relations and of rewards, promotions, and punishments, which ties soldiers and officers to the Tatmadaw in various ways. This internal system is closely connected to the Tatmadaw's massive economic holdings and activities, which it has built up since the 1990s. It is evident that the officer corps benefits most significantly from this system, and thus would also stand to lose more from defecting, at least on pragmatic grounds (e.g., in terms of positions, status and economic interests). However, our analysis suggests that this internal system also works as an obstacle to defections among lower ranks: fear of losing pensions, means of survival, and access to future and current benefits, for soldiers and their families are key pragmatic factors that inform this obstacle.

In terms of informational factors, the report highlights how information flows, and how access to the internet and social media not tied to the military significantly facilitate defections. This has been widely used by organised groups of defectors to mobilise more soldiers to join the CDM. Simultaneously, the control and isolation of information within the Tatmadaw work as a significant obstacle to defection. Control of information has persisted for a long time, but has increased since the coup, according to the narratives of defectors and wives of soldiers. It co-exists with pervasive restrictions on movement and connections to civilians in army bases, which also make defections practically difficult.

Another pervasive factor that affects defections is personal and family security. Defecting from the army is associated with severe forms of punishment and high risks of being captured. They also put families at risk. Numerous defectors relate how the Tatmadaw systematically threatens and targets family members in the event of desertions or defections. In many instances, an important pre-condition for defecting is therefore family safety.

The report further discusses how initiatives by the political opposition and the CDM soldier groups facilitate defections, essentially by appealing to the main drivers of defection and by tempering or repealing existing obstacles. We argue that such organised efforts to mobilise defections constitute potential 'escape routes' and 'exit options' for soldiers who desire to leave the military. Becoming a CDM soldier is a space for a new form of identification, which serves moral and ideological drives to 'join the people's side', while support and alternatives provided by the opposition also appeal to pragmatic concerns for safety, survival, and future position/status. Less evident from our analysis is the extent to which the increasingly armed resistance constitutes a driver for defections. Indeed, the emergence of People's Defence Forces has appealed to some defectors and in-service soldiers, and defections have not decreased since the violent clashes intensified. However, there is also a risk that the violent resistance deepens the rift between 'the people' and 'soldiers' to such an extent that it may impede soldiers from leaving the army, both for security reasons and on moral grounds. Presumably some soldiers and officers would take a more pragmatic stand, weighing the extent to which they perceive the resistance to be able to defeat the army or not.

Being based mainly on the voices of defectors, this analysis of defection drivers and obstacles is necessarily biased towards understanding the current situation from the perspective of people who are already opposed to the military coup and the Tatmadaw leadership. This bias is partially addressed by including the voices of in-service soldiers who have participated in CDM soldier dialogue meetings and by including the narrative of a wife of a retired soldier, who is still deeply tied to the military. Another limitation is the lack of access to the voices of those soldiers who have simply left or deserted from the army since the coup. These limitations are acknowledged and thus compel the reader to recognise that there are significant knowledge gaps in any interpretation of military desertions and loyalties in Myanmar.

To explore defections in Myanmar, and what could motivate them, first requires a short background introduction to the Myanmar military, and its ideological and historical foundation. The remainder of this introductory chapter serves this

purpose. Chapter 2 offers an overview of current knowledge regarding defections based on the voices of defectors. Chapter 3 addresses the reasons given for defections, where an in-depth analysis of the various potential drivers or catalysts of defection is presented. Chapter 4 questions why soldiers remain in the army, exploring both the immediate and structural obstacles to defection. Chapter 5 provides a conclusion by revisiting the question of what conditions would likely be necessary for large-scale defections to occur in Myanmar.

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE MYANMAR MILITARY

Since the first military coup in 1962, the Myanmar military or Tatmadaw, has grown and prospered as a strong and pervasive force, not only in military and security affairs, but also in the arenas of politics and economy.²¹ While figures are unverifiable, analysts put the total current strength of the armed forces at between 300,000 to 350,000.²² For over 60 years (1962-2010) the Tatmadaw's top generals governed the central state, and even after the introduction of multi-party elections and quasi-civilian government in 2011, it has continued to exercise control over the political system and elected politicians. This political role is enabled by the 2008 military-drafted constitution that supports the military's model of 'disciplined democracy', and among other privileges grants the Tatmadaw 25% of parliamentary seats and control over four ministries. A long history of military rule has resulted in the Tatmadaw permeating many spheres of Myanmar society. As once noted by Martin Smith, the Tatmadaw constitutes a kind of 'state-within-the-state', with its own companies, banks, media outlets, educational institutions, hospitals and so forth.²³ Since the 1962 military coup, the Tatmadaw has not been under any civilian control but constituted itself as an institution that is above competitive politics. Simultaneously it has never separated its military and political roles.²⁴

Ideologically, the military has consistently represented itself as the 'father' and defender of the nation, and as the only institution that can save the country from chaos and disintegration.²⁵ This self-portrayal has consistently relied of the construction of both external and internal enemies, and is further informed by the idea of a distinctive Burmese culture and the country's unique geopolitical position.²⁶ Based on its legacy of anti-colonial struggle against the British, the Tatmadaw has promulgated the idea that it continues to protect the country from various external pressures and interference.²⁷

For decades, the Tatmadaw drew its domestic legitimacy from the majority Bamar-Buddhist population residing principally in the centre of the country, while the ethnic minority groups were both constructed as internal enemies and subject to various strategies of Burmanisation.²⁸ However, after the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, which led to brutal military crackdowns on civilian protesters, the domestic legitimacy of the Tatmadaw among the majority Bamar population was severely challenged. After this period, the pro-democracy party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, also became a clear threat to the Tatmadaw and its version of a Burmese nation. These enemy lines were partly tempered after 2011, when the Tatmadaw allowed a quasi-civilian government to take power and for Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD to again engage in politics. Since that time, and following the 2015 electoral victory of the NLD, until the 1 February coup, the Tatmadaw continued nonetheless to position itself in a political guardianship role and to block any constitutional and reform changes that would reduce its political role and hamper its economic interests.²⁹

Despite its strong hold on central state power over many decades, the Tatmadaw has never succeeded in controlling and establishing authority over the whole country. It has in fact been in a state of near-constant war with often well-equipped ethnic armed organisations and communist guerrillas in border regions, some of whom were aided by foreign states and funders. Even when ceasefires have been brokered with these organisations, this never paved the way for any complete or successful central state expansion and control of ethnic border areas. In short, the Tatmadaw, while being a large force and exercising centralised political power, has a history of continuously struggling to achieve nationwide territorial control.³⁰ Simultaneously, as noted above, since 1988 in particular, the Tatmadaw has faced significant opposition from within civil society and among pro-democracy political parties.

In contrast to these contested civilian-military relations, various scholars and observers have conveyed the Tatmadaw as exerting a high degree of internal cohesion and stability, especially among its officer corps.³¹ This internal cohesion has been used to explain why the Tatmadaw, despite many external challenges, has been able to hold onto power for so long and has avoided any major mutinies and splits.³² The Tatmadaw's internal cohesion has been facilitated by rigorous indoctrination and a strong system of rewards, promotions and punishments that are embedded in hierarchical patron-client relations, and which also aim to prevent insubordination and defection.³³ Since the 1990s' transition to a market economy, this institutional unity has been reinforced through economic interests and

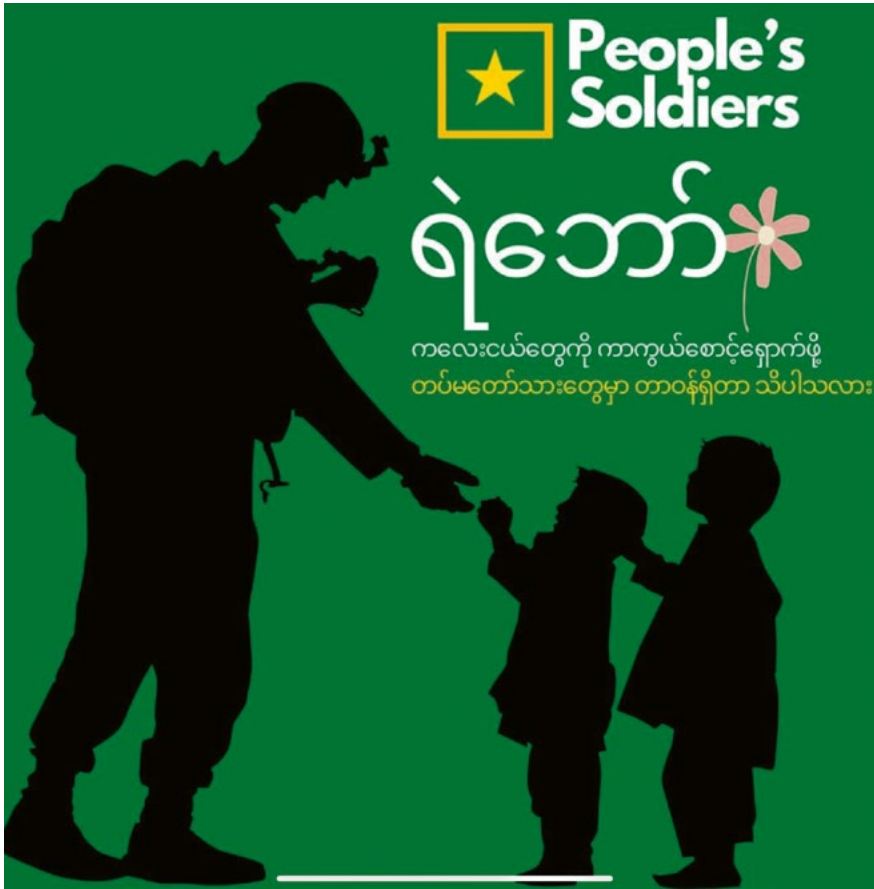
patronage, whereby connections to, and membership of, the Tatmadaw also became a route to wealth and enrichment.³⁴ Simultaneously, the Tatmadaw has always been known to be a highly secretive organisation with harsh punishments for those who divulge confidential information.³⁵

This does not mean that desertions and defections have been absent in the Tatmadaw's history or that there have been no internal frictions. Indeed, major defections happened shortly after independence and prior to the 1962 coup, when officers and soldiers – along ideological and ethnic lines - joined either the Communist Party of Burma or the ethnic insurgents, leaving the Tatmadaw with only a strength of 2,000 personnel. From that early crisis, the Tatmadaw nonetheless managed to rebuild the army and develop strategies that prevented defections at officer levels that could split it internally.³⁶ Desertions of lower ranks continued to be commonplace after the 1962 coup and during the socialist military regime (1988-2011), which did challenge the fighting capacity of the Tatmadaw. Yet splits and defections at the top were prevented through the internal system of patronage, promotions and the granting of official positions to officers in the political apparatus.³⁷ Some desertions also happened after the pro-democracy uprisings in 1988 and during the Saffron revolution of 2007. However, these never resulted in large-scale mutinies or schisms that significantly undermined the power of the Tatmadaw as an institution.

With this history of institutional cohesion seasoned scholars of Myanmar have, largely discounted the possibility of a major split within the Tatmadaw that could make it crumble from within.³⁸ Yet the defections since March 2021 in particular have revived a debate about the level of cohesion of the Tatmadaw and the possibility that it may disintegrate in the face of mass uprisings and an increasingly armed opposition.³⁹ The next chapters will relate the various examples of defections since the coup before addressing why soldiers have left the army and what obstacles are in place for more defections to occur. In these chapters the internal institutional makeup of the Tatmadaw and the nationalist ideology that it relies on will also be further examined.



Translation: 'Choose this path if you want to stand with the people'. Illustration: Moe Thwin.

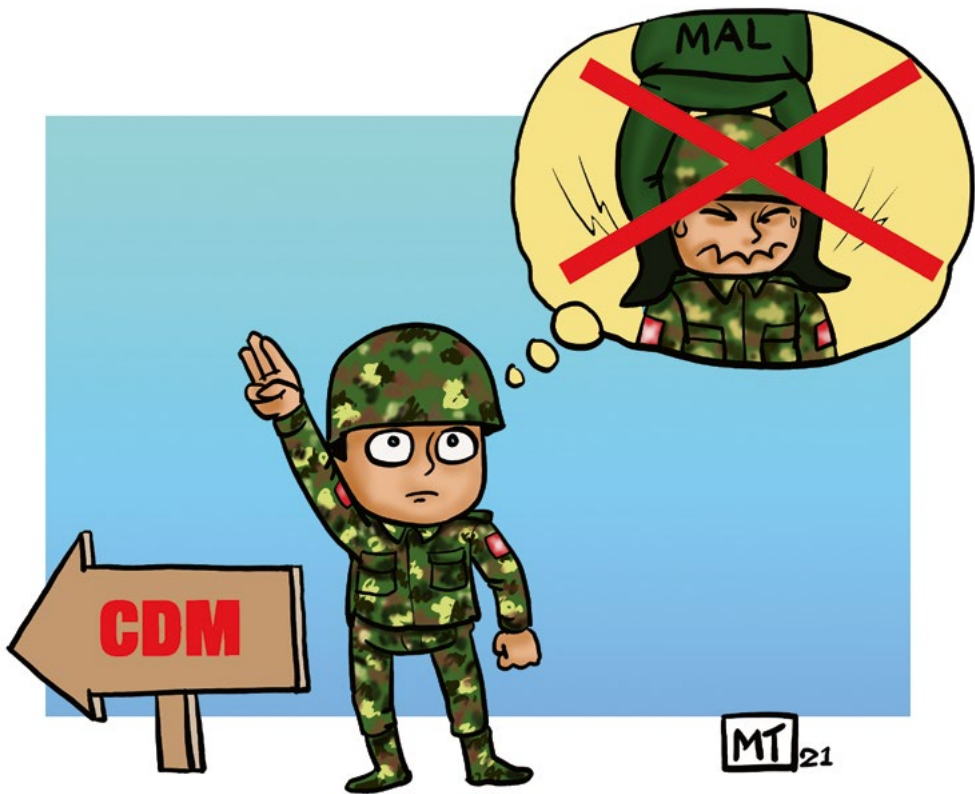


Soldier reaching out to children, posted on the People's Soldier group public Facebook page.

Translation: 'Soldier, do you know you have a responsibility to protect the children'.

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/peoplesoldiers> 2021/?ref=page_internal)

DEFECTIONS SINCE THE COUP



Soldier next to a CDM sign and a bubble showing the Commander-in-Chief, Min Aung Hlaing (also known as MAL), standing on the shoulders of another soldier. Illustration: Moe Thwin.

The exact number of defected soldiers since the 1 February coup is impossible to verify, while the number of military personnel who have simply left the army is even more uncertain. According to those defectors who have organised themselves into CDM soldier groups and who are in regular contact with other defectors, the figures range from a prediction of 300 defectors by May⁴⁰ to 800 by June⁴¹ and to 1,500-2,000 by mid-October.⁴² In addition, to these unclear figures, there is no reliable knowledge of how many soldiers are discontent with the coup and would be willing to defect if they felt they could. Active defectors have, however, claimed that they believe that between 75% and 90% of lower-ranking soldiers have a desire to leave.⁴³ Any analysis of defections can therefore not rely on statistics or quantifiable data, but must rely on the voices of those defectors who have come forth in the media and on social media platforms.

Known defections began in late February and increased in the days and weeks after the Armed Forces Day on 27 March, which saw the highest number of civilian casualties caused by security force crackdowns on protesters. The first known to leave were 12 soldiers from a Light Infantry Battalion, based in Dawei, south-eastern Myanmar, who turned themselves in to the Ethnic Armed Organisation (EAO), the Karen National Union (KNU) at its Brigade 5 (Hpapun/Mutraw district). Photos of the 12 soldiers went viral on social media shortly after the Armed Forces Day, and a spokesperson from the KNU confirmed that they were under the protection of the KNU.⁴⁴ A few days later the same KNU spokesperson posted a video on Facebook with six of the soldiers, who declared that 'military dictatorship must fall' and who encouraged other soldiers to join the CDM.⁴⁵ 80 members of the army's air force across five air force commands in the country also reportedly left their service during March and April, but it is unclear if this was collectively coordinated and if they defected to join the CDM. The air force's central command declared them deserters. A sizeable number of deserters also come from the navy.⁴⁶

By far the most vocal defectors that joined the CDM in late February-March are Captain Lin Htet Aung (29 years old) and Captain Nyi Thuta (32 years old). Since their defection they have openly declared their support to CDM and have been actively engaged in encouraging and supporting other officers and soldiers to defect by using social media groups, video clips on Facebook, Telegram groups and by giving interviews to national and international media such as CNN.⁴⁷

Captain Lin Htet Aung defected to the CDM in mid-March from battalion 528 of Triangle Region Command, Eastern Shan State. He is apparently now hiding in an EAO area. He was the chief administrative officer of all the soldiers' families. He

joined military training in 2008 at the age of 16 after he passed Grade 11 and he is from Yangon.⁴⁸ Captain Nyi Thuta, who is a graduate from the Defence Service Academy (DSA), defected from Naypyidaw on 28 February, where he was working in the army's Information Production and Public Relations Department, a military-run media network. Prior to this he was in a Light Infantry Battalion and in a Military Operation Command. He also joined the Tatmadaw at an age of 16. According to his own information, he was the first defector to publicly speak out via social media against the military coup.⁴⁹

Two other early defectors to have disclosed themselves to the media are Myo Min Tun (40 years old) and Phyo Wai Oo (26 years old). They are both ethnic Shan and defected together from the Special Construction Operations Command Headquarters in the capital Naypyidaw, according to an interview made by Radio Free Asia (RFA). They fled to Shan state and said they joined the CDM.⁵⁰ Another early defector who has spoken to the media is Lieutenant Htet Naybla (24 years old) who defected on 7 March. He said he fled the 269th Infantry Battalion in Chin State after the regime ordered attacks against peaceful protesters across the country.⁵¹

In late March, the first known major to defect was Hein Thaw Oo. At the time, he was the highest ranked person to speak openly about his defection. The major defected from his army base in Meiktila, Mandalay region, and was part of the military's 99th Light Infantry Division, which is notorious for its involvement, along with the 33rd Light Infantry Division, in the brutal crackdown on Rohingya Muslims. He declared that he joined anti-junta protesters in northeast Shan state. He has appeared in the media several times and is said to have engaged in training new anti-coup fighters in an EAO controlled border area.⁵²

In addition to Lin Htet Aung and Nyi Thuta, there are several other examples of captain-level officers who came forth as defectors between May and July. One is Captain Aung Sin Phyo, who defected from Eastern Shan state and fled to an EAO controlled area with his wife, who worked at a hospital but who also joined the CDM. He has also been in contact with the NLD's post-coup parliamentary committee, the CRPH (Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw)⁵³ after coming to the EAO area. He defected in April. He said that he joined the anti-coup armed People's Defence Force.⁵⁴ Another is Tun Myat Aung, who joined the CDM on 9 March⁵⁵, and who is ethnic Chin.⁵⁶ He was in Division 77, which had previously been involved in army attacks in Kokang, but at the time of Tun Myat Aung's defection, the Division was involved in violent crackdowns in Yangon townships, such as North Okkalapa

and Tharke Ta.⁵⁷ He served on the front line for eight years and has a degree from the Defence Services Academy (DSA).⁵⁸ In March, he openly explained his story of defection to the New York Times.⁵⁹ A third example is Captain Khant Ko, who defected in May and who served at a Military Equipment factory and is trained as a mechanical engineer at the Defence Services' Technological academy (DSTA). He graduated in 2014. He fled the army with another captain and later joined one of the CDM soldier groups.⁶⁰ Captain Htet Myat (a 31 years old Bamar), who we interviewed in October, fled the army alone and joined the CDM in June, having served in the 21st Operations Command Headquarter in Kachin State. He joined the army at 16, was trained at the DSA, and became an officer when he was 19. After defecting, he joined the People's Soldier group, coordinated by defector Nyi Thuta.⁶¹ On 7 July, a military surgeon, Captain Min Maung Maung, also declared that he had defected and joined the CDM.⁶² On the same day a Deputy Investigator of the Bureau of Special Investigation (BSI) situated within the Ministry of Foreign affairs, but held by army officers, defected. He has also joined the CDM and calls himself Special 007 for security reasons. He wanted to defect in March but had to wait until July before fleeing on a motorbike and then taking a bus to Karen state.⁶³

In August, September and October new examples of defectors and groups of defectors were advertised in media outlets and on the CDM soldier platforms. For instance, on 12 September a sergeant, calling himself Ye Khae, defected from a military communication unit, after having been in dialogue with other defectors in the People's Soldier group.⁶⁴ It was also reported that in August, around 30 soldiers defected to join the Chin Defence Force (CDF), an armed group fighting the army.⁶⁵ In October, a defector with the rank of sergeant from Light Infantry Department 268, also defected from Chin state where he had seen intensive crackdowns on civilians, as he explained.⁶⁶

On 19 August the Irrawaddy news outlet (supported by social media postings by other CDM soldiers) reported that 25 soldiers abandoned their posts with firearms from Dawei Township in Tanintharyi region. On the same day, 15 personnel from a military weapons factory in Magwe region defected, also with weapons.⁶⁷ On August 23, another five Light Infantry Battalion soldiers in Dawei also fled their units, but three of them were caught by the army and one was shot dead.⁶⁸ In addition, Paung Laung Media reported on 24 September that a captain and some soldiers from battalion 599 in Bago region left the army to collaborate with the people and surrendered their weapons to the KNU's Brigade 3.⁶⁹

MIXED PATTERNS OF DEFECTION

The available data suggests that defections transverse different army sectors and ethnicities, but also that those who defect tend to be lower-ranking military personnel. This has been confirmed by Captain Lin Htet Aung, who has tried to keep a record of defectors in his efforts to mobilise more soldiers to join the CDM. He explained to Myanmar Now that most defectors are of lower-ranks and aged between 20 and 35. In June he claimed that about 100 of 800 defectors were officers with ranks including major, captain, and lieutenant, but that no one above the rank of major had defected.⁷⁰ This pattern also seems to have persisted after June.

The apparent lack of defectors among higher ranks does not necessarily mean that there is no dissatisfaction regarding the coup among top Generals and others at officer levels, but it does reflect how obstacles to defection may be linked to degrees of difference within the army hierarchy in terms of status and relations (see also Chapter 4, this report).⁷¹ There also seem to be higher security risks associated with defections for high-ranking officers. This became apparent in early October when Brigadier-General Phyo Thant, commander of the army's North-West command, was detained and replaced by the military regime for allegedly planning to defect to the CDM by taking refuge in an EAO controlled area. He had, according to a statement made to the Irrawaddy by a member of this EAO, hatched a plan to join the EAO with a group of his troops, but the plot was uncovered and he was subsequently arrested. Rumours have circulated on social media that he was tortured to death, but this information cannot be verified. The Brigadier-General was operating in one of the strongholds of the armed resistance to the military in Chin state and Sagaing region.⁷²

Another important pattern to note is that most defections occur as one-off individual departures, and there are few examples of collective defections since August. This is likely due to the security risks association with defections, as collective defections are likely easier to detect by superiors.

In terms of gender, by late August only one young female defector named Sergeant Yin Lei Lei Tun had openly declared her defection to the media and in social media debates.⁷³ She only knew of one other female CDM soldier but believed there could be more female defectors who were in hiding.⁷⁴ Yin Lei Lei Tun joined the army in 2016 and defected from the Armed Forces Records Office in Yangon Command. She joined the CDM in April, she told Irrawaddy in August in an article where she also appears in a photograph.⁷⁵ In a CDM soldier group debate in September, she

explained how she had attempted to defect in February, but this proved difficult due to movement restrictions within the barracks. She finally left with the assistance of other CDM soldiers. She also said that she comes from a military family: her grandfather and two of her uncles are soldiers.⁷⁶

DIFFICULT AND DANGEROUS ESCAPE ROUTES

For defectors, the escape routes and pathways to secure locations vary considerably, but are risky and tend to depend on help from civilians, including in some cases, family members. The first defectors after the coup appear to have left of their own accord, with very few support networks, while those who left subsequently have been assisted more directly by groups of CDM soldiers that have gradually developed over time. Also, there appears to be a tendency for defectors to eventually seek refuge in ethnic border areas, after having first hid in various places along dangerous routes. They specifically seem to find safety in areas under the control of those EAOs that have taken a critical stance towards the military coup (like the KNU). These areas are commonly referred to by defectors as 'liberated areas', that is, as areas where the Tatmadaw has little outreach and where anti-coup protesters have also sought refuge.⁷⁷ According to interviews conducted by Deutsche Welle (DW), some soldiers also fled into northeast India, while others remained in mainland Myanmar but are moving from safe house to safe house.⁷⁸

A common pattern is that defectors, while leaving by themselves at first, have relied on extensive help from civilians to hide and move to safe places, including in some situations people they did not know beforehand. After getting help from civilians, some were able to make contact with the online CDM soldier groups created by other defectors, such as the People's Soldier group and the People's Embrace. Kaung Win Thant's story of escape reflects this pattern:

I deserted from the Tatmadaw on 27 April. It was after Thingyan and I did not yet get the salary, so I was not able to bring any travel expenses and it was also difficult to get to the highway from my military troops. I started walking at about 12 noon and walked until 9 pm to reach the highway. I could not walk anymore because I had not eaten anything all day. I decided to stop and ask for a ride. A car driven by a Muslim stopped. I explained my situation and then he responded that he was glad to help a CDM soldier. He treated me at a noodle shop and let me sleep in his car and then dropped me in a secure place. I did not know

before that there is a group that is helping CDM soldiers. When I arrived in a safe place, I contacted People's Soldiers Facebook page and they helped me.⁷⁹

Another defector who has joined the CDM provided greater detail of how he and his wife were able to leave the army base, but like Kaung Win Thant, they also received help from civilians and the CDM soldier group:

I went and told the major. "Major, give us permission to go to the clinic with my sick child". The Major did not agree and said that we should just go to the military clinic in the military compound. I explained that we need to do some Yadayar [spiritual protection] for my son. Then he said yes and asked how long I would go. I told him just about an hour. Then he said "Well, you have to get back within an hour". My wife and I were not able to bring anything with us. Just as a normal going out, we had only one piece of clothing and we could bring only one bottle of milk for the baby. When we left the army, we linked up to the People Soldier group [a group helping defectors] and [normal] people also helped us in many different ways [he did not mention in detail how people helped them]. The army kept calling us all the time. I just replied "I am coming, Major". That's how I got to the liberated area [area with an ethnic armed group].⁸⁰

His wife continued:

All night long we struggled to get to a safe place with just one bottle of baby milk. We moved from place to place for safety. Now we have moved five times [...]. People helped us with everything. They linked us all the way to get to the safe areas.⁸¹

In what appears to be a rarer case, Captain Htet Myat explained to us that his escape was not only facilitated by civilians and his wife, but also at first by those soldiers who were serving under him:

Some of my soldiers were preparing to go out for security duty. Before they lined up [for the duty], some of my soldiers accompanied me outside. Another soldier was waiting on a motorcycle on the road and took me to a civilian's home. At that time, people in the army thought that I had returned to my room to rest. Only at the next security line up

at 7 am did the others realise that I was not there. All my soldiers said the same thing when they were asked about me: that they did not know where I was [...]. The people [civilians] helped me a lot. They took care of me like their own child. Some went in advance to observe whether the route that I had to go was clear or not. Some escorted me from behind. In that way, I came to Yangon. When I arrived in Yangon, I did not go to my wife, but lived somewhere else. I did not go out. My wife, despite being a woman, inquired about this and that and managed everything for our travel [escape]. I spent more than a month in Yangon. Then I disguised myself and came here with the help of my adoptive parents with fake IDs and connected with the ethnic armed groups. After arriving in the liberated areas, I got in touch with the People's Soldier group. This was about three months after I left the army. To get to the liberated area, I had to go through many checkpoints on the road. But I had to stay calm. However, as COVID-19 was so infectious at that time, people at the checkpoints were reluctant to check thoroughly. Therefore, it was not that difficult for me to get to the liberated areas.⁸² ,

It is evident that while escape routes vary, they are all associated with extremely high security risks and costs. Captain Khant Ko explains his fear of being watched and caught:

After the military coup on 1 February, I could not accept the injustice [of the military] and tried to break out from there but I had many difficulties. One of the captains, who spoke out that he did not accept the military coup, was detained for a while. Therefore, I did not tell anyone that I also did not accept the military coup and had to prepare carefully. I managed to go to the nearest town about 30 miles from the [army equipment] factory [where he was working]. I had to take care as I was on [the army's] watch list and my mobile phone was checked, and I was warned by my senior.⁸³ ,

Defector Special 007 also explained his fears and the risks and costs he faced, including how he worried about his family's security:

Two or three days after the coup, two of my friends and I, who did not accept the coup, were in a staff hostel drinking beer. We discussed the CDM. At that time, a daily-wage worker heard our conversation and reported it to the Chief Officer of the State. The three of us were then

interrogated and got warning letters. At the end of March, one of my friends and another three staff joined the CDM. At that time, I had many difficulties to join [the CDM] as my parents are living in that state. I tried many times and finally I had a chance on 7 July. I left my motorbike at my friend's house and took a bus to Myawaddy. On that day, I had only 50,000 kyats and some small change in my pocket. The bus was waiting for the passengers, but I was in urgency to leave from my hometown, so I negotiated with the driver. We agreed to pay 25,000 kyats and leave with the bus immediately. When I arrived in Myawaddy, there were many restrictions due to Covid-19 so I had to stay in a guest house which cost 25,000 kyats so there were only 200 kyats and some cigarettes left in my pocket and I had not eaten yet. I understood that staying in a guest house was not safe for me. That evening, my friend's mother gave me a call and asked about my situation. When she heard about my situation, she asked for help from her friend in Myawaddy. Her friend took me from the guest house and let me stay in a warehouse for a while and gave me 1 lakh [100,000 kyats]. Then, I made a connection with a member of team [People's Embrace soldier group that helps defectors].⁸⁴ ,

The dangers of defection are clear from these accounts. It is well-known to soldiers that the army actively tries to track down defectors. Importantly, they often do so by contacting their family members, for instance with threats of persecution or with appeals that soldiers return to the army. It is therefore unsafe to hide with family members. On this point, Captain Lin Htet Aung explained in an interview that defectors must disconnect from their families, otherwise, their families may face dangers. He said that for him it was easier to defect because he is single and has no children. Another defector, Major Aung Sin Phyo, said that he had changed his phone cards, but the army had called his family and said that they should inform on him as soon as they got any news. They said that if he returned, he would be punished lightly rather than under the state treason act. He did not believe that.⁸⁵ The sister of another defector, who lives in Dubai, received aggressive threats when her brother defected. A high-ranking officer contacted her by phone and said that if she did not inform on her brother, they would warrant and arrest her. The second time they called they tried to persuade her by saying that if she wanted to return to Myanmar they could arrange for her flight ticket, but when she refused, they again threatened her, saying that if she did not inform on her brother, she would be charged under the article that deals with enemies of the state. She was contacted three times before they stopped.⁸⁶



Defector Captain Htet Myat with a message in English, posted by the People's Soldier group on its public Facebook page.

Source: https://www.facebook.com/peoplesoldiers2021/?ref=page_internal



This picture is from the People's Soldiers Facebook page.

Translation: 'I love the military very much, but my husband and I stand with the people'. A medical sergeant and his wife.

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/peoplesoldiers2021/photos/17060749521335387>

When Htet Myat defected, his wife, who lived in Yangon at the time, was also contacted by phone several times by his superiors: 'She was told that no action would be taken against me. That I will no longer be asked to do what I don't want to do, and that I would be well cared for. My wife made up a story and told them "I don't know about him. We are not in a good relationship since last year and he did not tell me anything. I also didn't think he would join CDM. We already planned to get a divorce". Then, they comforted her not to be impulsive [not to get divorced] and said they would help find me'.⁸⁸

The Tatmadaw's tactics of dealing with defectors by trying to both appeal to and threaten family members, makes defections risky beyond the personal security of defectors. It also reflects the strongly negative view the army has of defectors. As Captain Lin Htet Aung explained in a video interview on 8 June, CDM soldiers are harshly portrayed as traitors. He recounted one superior officer telling his soldiers about defectors: 'Those who ate the food provided by the Tatmadaw and betrayed the Tatmadaw will die soon'.

With all these risks associated with defection in mind, we now turn to the question of why soldiers and officers have left the army since the coup.

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Translation: 'There is no pride in wearing military uniforms anymore. Our people don't accept us. We need to reconsider wisely'. Illustration: Hel Mar.

WHY LEAVE THE ARMY – REASONS FOR DEFECTION?



Translation: 'My son, I have decided to join the CDM because your future is more important than my possessions'. Illustration: Hel Mar.

This chapter analyses the motivations and drivers of defection since the military coup, taking the reasons that defectors have given for why they left the army as a starting point. In agreement with the comparative literature on soldier defections, our analysis underlines that there is no singular determining reason for defection, but rather a wide variety of drivers that may be partly overlapping and mutually reinforcing, depending on the individual in question, his or her position in the army, convictions, and experiences.⁸⁹ We may nonetheless discern certain patterns and tendencies which need to be understood contextually.

Despite ongoing debates about what drives defections in specific situations, scholars on military desertions and insubordination largely agree that a broad-based and large-scale popular resistance – as we have seen in Myanmar - creates fertile conditions for soldiers to leave the army. This is amplified when military branches are ordered to quell civilian protesters with violent means. Violent crackdowns on protesters may not only make soldiers question the army's legitimacy, but also arouses moral concerns about soldiers' complicity in violent responses.⁹⁰ Albrecht highlights that personal risks associated with participating in violent crackdowns play a role in motivating defections, especially if there is a likelihood of escalating violence on both sides.⁹¹ Other drivers include political disagreement with the incumbent authority's political order, viable and secure exit options, and reliable promises of protection and sustainable futures by an opposition to the regime.⁹²

Similar to these insights, defectors in Myanmar specifically mention the violent crackdowns and killings of civilians as an immediate motivator for defecting. This is based on moral concerns with being complicit in the violence, but for some defectors this is combined with a deeper concern that the violence has eroded the military's legitimacy in Myanmar society as the institution which they believe should protect the people.⁹³ This latter concern is reflected in anger and resentment towards military leadership, who are portrayed as serving their own power interests at the expense of the army as an institution. A third driver is a deep dissatisfaction with what defectors highlight as internal corruption and mistreatment within the ranks of the Tatmadaw, which also existed prior to the coup. Ideological views and disapproval of the military's recent reversals on issues such as democratic transition and opening-up to the outside world, has also motivated some soldiers to join the 'people's side', but with a very few exceptions this is disassociated from any explicit political affiliation to the NLD party. Another key driver is the existence of the CDM as an exit option that allows soldiers to join the anti-coup movement, which is strongly facilitated by social media and the emergence of organised CDM soldier groups. It is postulated that the mobilising and supportive role of these CDM soldier

groups is significant, not as an immediate reason for defecting, but as an enabling factor. The supportive role of organised political opposition to the coup, notably the National Unity Government, has also been identified as potentially motivating more defections. In the final section of this chapter, the role that increasingly armed resistance may play in motivating and demotivating defections is discussed.

AGAINST THE VIOLENCE AND SELF-INTERESTED ARMY LEADERSHIP

Most defectors, when first asked why they left the army or joined the CDM, immediately highlighted their anger and moral disdain for the violence against civilians since the coup. Here are some revealing examples:

‘ I felt very upset when I saw all that was happening. I felt so sorry... especially when the military was treating civilians like that. It got to be worse and worse [the violent crackdowns on protesters], so I contacted some people to join the Civil Disobedience Movement. We will work together with the people to overthrow the dictatorship.⁹⁴ ’

‘ I did not support the coup. What good is it if the people die? I do not like the army shooting at people protesting. When the death toll rose higher and higher, my thinking [about staying in the army until retirement] changed. I felt very bad.⁹⁵ ’

‘ The main duty of the Tatmadaw is to protect the country but in Myanmar, they killed the people and always try to rule the country. I do not want to be hated by the people and that is why I chose to stand on the people’s side. Killing the people is like killing my family members.⁹⁶ ’

Some defectors decided to join the CDM after they themselves had been ordered to participate in the violent crackdowns, as related by Captain Thet Myat who defected in June:

‘ The reason I was thinking of doing the CDM was because one of my senior officers ordered us to crack down on the protest. The officer told us, “You shoot into the air. I will shoot and play depending on the situation”. So, we shot into the air. I was shocked when the officer shot the people with real bullets. From that day on, I was thinking of participating in CDM.⁹⁷ ’

Other defectors more explicitly link their moral concerns with the violence against civilians and their dislike of the coup to the behaviour and self-interest of the coup leaders:

‘ They [military’s senior leaders] only work for their own interests, to protect their own businesses. They kill the people, they don’t protect the people, that’s why I want to eliminate the Tatmadaw. (Warrant officer, defected from Yangon, interviewed by the Globe)⁹⁸ ,

‘ Since the military takeover on 1 February, I’ve been seeing on social media the junta’s inhumane killing of innocent people. I felt very upset and angry seeing these reports every day and that’s why I left the military. The junta are wicked and will do anything to stay in power [...]. They are using the name of the Tatmadaw for the benefit of themselves and their relatives. It is like we [soldiers] are serving them, not the country.⁹⁹ ,

Captain Nyi Thuta, further links his defection to how the coup and the junta’s brutality has eroded the army’s legitimacy among the people:

‘ [My] reason for standing with the people [i.e., joining the CDM] is that in the eyes of the people we [soldiers] are seen as the conspirators of our generals [...]. We [soldiers when we joined the army] wanted the honour of being a good citizen who loves the people and the military, but now we do not have the respect and trust of the people [...]. The image of the military has also declined. The declining image of the military is very detrimental to the country. Now the whole country is grieving. I am not happy. The future is lost.¹⁰⁰ ,

He continues to explain that he left because of the corrupt and unjust actions of the coup leaders:

‘ I do the CDM because I love the military. I do not like doing the corruption of my organisation. I do not accept such injustice because I love my organisation so much. And I feel we soldiers are exploited by the leaders for their benefit. If he [Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing] wants to be a king of criminals, he must stand on his own two feet. I do not let him stand using my shoulders as his footstep. Therefore, I decided to do the CDM.¹⁰¹ ,

Nyi Thuta further accentuates his moral disapproval of the violence against civilians and the loss of the military's legitimacy:

‘The military has been deteriorating morally and ethically. The current soldiers and officers are not living happily. But this is an internal problem, so let it go. The Tatmadaw will one day be damaged beyond repair. In the whole world it is the one army that made war with its own people. It is the most shameless army. That is why I left the army.’¹⁰²

Captain Tun Myat Aung, who was on the frontline in the first violent crackdowns in Yangon after 27 February also claims that his immediate impetus to defect and join the CDM was participation in the violence against protesters. ‘After that experience’, he explains in a video interview, ‘I joined the CDM, as I do not want to kill my own people who should be protected by us [the army]’. At the same time, his motivation to leave the army also seems to be based on a much deeper dissatisfaction with the army’s longer-term lack of popular legitimacy. In this quote he reflects on how the army was already feared and distrusted by the people long before the coup:

‘It is hard to say that the present Myanmar military represent the people and the country. That is not just after this military coup. Since about 2009 when I practically served for the military, I noticed that when we go out, soldiers do not want to wear their uniforms. Since then, the army uniform is kind of a hostile thing to the people. They don’t like it. That’s why we wanted to go out only with civilian clothes. Everyone who has ever served in the army knows that. At least police can go around with their uniforms. But for soldiers, we feel embarrassed and unconfident to go around wearing our soldier uniforms because people feel something bad as they see us in uniforms. I felt like this throughout my service in the army. I had to go to the front line in Shan state and when villagers saw us [soldiers], they all ran away. They don’t want to have any relationship with the army. [S]ince I joined CDM, I am loved, respected, and supported a lot by the people. I feel like coming out of the darkness into the light.’¹⁰³

The notion that the army is ‘killing its own people’ rather than protecting them has been reiterated by several defectors, as a reason for defecting. As noted in the statements above, this is deeply associated with a moral concern for being complicit not only in the violence committed against civilians, but also in the self-interested power games of the military leaders. Defecting and ‘joining the people’ in this light

also becomes a personal moral act of contributing to minimise the military leaders' destruction, exploitation and killing of civilians. Some defectors, like Htet Myat, have framed this moral act as that of making a choice between following a just or an unjust order or of adhering to dharma vs. adharma.¹⁰⁴ This point, which is also embedded in religious ideas, was echoed by a sergeant defector, who left his position in Chin state: 'I could not live in an organisation that does not respect Buddha and his teachings'.¹⁰⁵ Thus, as argued by Tun Myint and James C. Scott, refusing to take part in violence against civilians not only 'helps the targeted but also helps those who would commit such heinous acts'.¹⁰⁶

CORRUPTION AND MISTREATMENT WITHIN THE ARMY

Several defectors have highlighted a deep dissatisfaction with the military's internal treatment and exploitation (especially of lower ranks) as a reason for defection that goes beyond discontent with the coup itself and the violent crackdowns on civilians. Htet Myat for instance highlighted the inhumane treatment of soldiers by their superiors: 'When I stayed with a military officer who was supervising a battle with an armed group, I experienced the military officer's inhumane orders. Their main priority was to win the battle. They did not care about the soldiers at all. They forced the soldiers to fight against the enemy by saying: 'Don't you dare to fight? Are you a woman?' He continues later in the interview: 'Some soldiers' families do not even get the opportunity to see the dead bodies of the soldiers. Many dead bodies [of soldiers] are abandoned carelessly in the jungle. There is no humanitarianism in the army'.¹⁰⁷ Defector Captain Zarni Aung confirmed this view when he was asked what he thought about the military Commander-in-Chief, Min Aung Hlaing:

' There is no human rights and humanitarianism in the army. The lives of soldiers are not valued. Even when soldiers are dead, their family members are not allowed to see the dead body. Therefore, I think it is time to reconsider whether he is a good leader and to question his duty and responsibility.¹⁰⁸ '

Other defectors, like captain Aung Sin Phyo, have specifically highlighted the economic exploitation of soldiers as a source of discontent with his life in the army:

' In the army soldiers have to buy shares in the [military owned] U Paing Company, but they [army leaders] are the ones who take the profits and do not share with the soldiers. We also heard that they are involved in



Translation: 'For a better future for the country and us, let us cooperate with the people and join the CDM! Welcome! Now you are a good citizen'. Illustration: Moe Thwin.

the jade trade in Hpakant and involved in drug distribution across Myanmar. Compared to General Aung San [Aung San Suu Kyi's father who formed the Burmese army] they [current leaders] are like shit. There is no comparison. What they are doing is working for their wealth and their greed or profit by abusing the name of the Tatmadaw. That is why I felt I was not working for the good of the people and the country.¹⁰⁹ ,

Captain Htet Naybla similarly expressed his views in a Facebook posting, where he encouraged other soldiers to leave the army:

Our army has been big-headed with a small body for a long time. There has been no opportunity for those of us who are lower ranks. We have not been living like human beings. We could not participate in people activities. We have never been to a beach or a party with the family. On the one hand, the higher-ranking officers and their relatives i.e., father, grandfather, sister, aunty, son-in-law, daughter-in-law, mother-in-law, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, cousin, brother-in-law are already billionaires. There is no equality in our army. We all are soldiers. We [all soldier ranks] are serving the country. But what is the difference among us? Previously, such [inequalities in the army] were unknown since the information was controlled. The military is now like an unpleasant fruit among the people. Only good soldiers can save the image of the military by leaving the army [standing with the people] and by retaliating against the army.¹¹⁰ ,

Major Hein Thaw Oo similarly explained in an interview that he defected after the coup due to the corruption within the army that also existed prior to the coup:

The new officers who were appointed recently are pretty corrupt. They oppress the staff below them no matter how upright they are. If you are upright, it's certain that you will never get promoted [...] All the officers [of higher rank] resort to corruption and take bribes as they continue their service. I decided that I could not continue that way any longer, so I left.¹¹¹ ,

Other defectors have also highlighted the poor conditions and undignified treatment of lower ranks and their families within the army as a condition that motivates defections:

' The raw rice that the outpost soldiers eat is the kind of rice that is not eaten by the local people [but by pigs]. It is very sad [...] The military leaders are aware of such shortcomings of the soldiers. But they ignore it knowingly [closing their eyes].¹¹² ,

' [Soldiers in our army are paid just over 100,000 kyat [per month]. If you have a family, you only get 160,000 kyat. And even such an amount of salary is deducted for various reasons, such as to pay shareholding to the U Paing [military owned] company. Therefore, on pay day only around 130,000 cash are received in hand. It is not enough to eat. I have a lot of resentment. The leaders in the military are stepping on the backs of their subordinates' shoulders like us to serve their own interests.]¹¹³ ,

' It is clear that not only soldiers, but also their families and wives are mistreated in the army camps. Wives of lower ranks are enslaved in the homes of higher-ranking officers and commanders, to an extent that they can barely care for their own children: they have to cook, go to the market and wash clothes. They work for free. This is part of the bullying of lower ranks, and if the wives do not follow orders, the husbands can have problems too, for instance in terms of losing the option to get promoted. The wives cannot leave the camps unless the officers' wives permit them to do it.¹¹⁴ ,

These narratives, expressed by soldiers who have already defected, suggest that while the violence associated with the coup and a return to military dictatorship have certainly triggered defections, there is also a push to defect based on a longer-term dissatisfaction with the military among lower ranks. This interpretation is confirmed by a pre-coup deserter, who we interviewed in June 2021:

' Soon after I joined the army [in 2012], I wanted to leave again. But I could not flee because I was afraid of imprisonment, but I tried. I worked at the air force. I was single so I lived at the Bachelor hostel where we were fed with the food given to us by the army. We had no choice for food. They cut the salary every month to cover for those foods. The most inconvenient issue for me was that we were tightly restricted from going out [of the camp]. The officers like major, captain and lieutenant could go out for any reason, but lower ranks could not. I felt that I was kept in

a cage [...]. In August 2020 I fled away and hid, but I was arrested soon after and punished with one year in prison. After the coup Min Aung Hlaing gave amnesty and I was free since April [2021].¹¹⁵ ,

When we asked this deserter what he thought about the coup, he was reluctant to offer full answers and clearly showed signs of concern about his security. In his brief answer on the mobile phone, he stated: 'The military should not have seized the power, but I cannot explain why, because I have little knowledge about politics'.¹¹⁶ Also he did not reveal whether he was contemplating joining the CDM. For him, the main driver for leaving the army was the poor conditions within the army. For defectors who have deliberately joined the 'people's side', such poor conditions may be viewed not as the decisive driver of defection, but as a factor that adds to their moral evaluation of the military as representing an unjust order.

Sai Latt's (2016) doctoral research confirms that the poor conditions for lower ranking soldiers and their family members have existed within the army for a long time. However, while such conditions have stimulated some pre-coup desertions, it has rarely led to defections in the past.¹¹⁷ In fact, his findings highlight that the internal exploitation of lower ranks has to a large degree worked to prevent soldiers from leaving the army and rebelling against their superiors. Instead, many tended to reproduce the abusive practices of their superiors in their treatment of civilians, both violently and through the looting of food and property.¹¹⁸ As noted in Chapter 4 (this report), it is likely that many lower ranks in the current situation are also blinded to their own oppression, and that this prevents defections. This has at least been highlighted by active defectors like Lin Htet Aung and Nyi Thuta, who in their efforts to mobilise more defectors, have put much emphasis on informing and enlightening other soldiers about the exploitation, corruption, and oppression that senior officers impose on them. As Nyi Thuta expressed in an interview, he was not himself fully conscious of these conditions before he went to live with the people – i.e., when he joined the CDM.¹¹⁹ As such, the deeper structural conditions within the army will likely only become a widespread driver of defection when combined with awareness raising and, we suggest, possible exit options.

Ideological support for democracy and freedom from dictatorship

While not absent, few defector narratives explicitly convey ideological support for democracy as a primary reason for defection. Even less present is an expression of political allegiance to the NLD or other anti-coup political parties. In a post on his Facebook page, where he encouraged other soldiers to defect, Nyi Thuta in fact underlined that political party affiliation is not key to defection:

Most of the soldiers who left the Tatmadaw did not do so because of uniting with any political parties or groups. I want to make clear that defecting does not mean you have to work for the other side or other parties. What matters is not if you decide to fight back [fight against the Tatmadaw] or not fight back. What matters is defecting. The main thing is to oppose the coup military junta that does injustices. As long as you work for that organisation [Tatmadaw], you are complicit in the violence. You will regret it for the rest of your life.¹²⁰

At least for Nyi Thuta, who defines himself as a ‘people’s soldier’, defection is understood more broadly as taking an anti-coup position and standing with the people than as having an explicit party-political affiliation. When speaking about this joint struggle, Nyi Thuta frames it as a matter of fighting for a just order. In some of his talks he has also linked this notion of a just order to human rights:

Human rights violations are happening to soldiers. And also, the people and the ethnic people are being violated by the military. So, we all are the victims. Therefore, I see this battle as a collective struggle for all the victims to fight back against the generals who are oppressing us. That’s why soldiers and wives of soldiers in the army also need to be courageous this time. This struggle is not only for the people but also for the soldiers and their wives who are being oppressed in the army.¹²¹

Defector Htet Myat also rejected the idea that party political affiliations drive defections. When we asked him if he thought any soldiers defected due to support for the NLD he said:

It does not matter whether you support the NLD or not. Soldiers and lower-ranking military officers have suffered human rights abuses and oppression in the army so much and for so long. Therefore, many leave because they do not like the injustices of the military. If they could come out, they would all come out. There is no one who came out in support of the NLD.¹²²

A contrasting example is Captain Lin Htet Aung, who has also been very active in encouraging other soldiers to join the CDM.¹²³ In an interview with a National Unity Government (NUG) deputy minister, he underlines that he voted for the NLD in the 2020 elections, even though the military superiors tried to compel all soldiers to vote for the military-proxy party, the USDP.¹²⁴ He says that he defected because he

is against the coercive seizure of power and because he does not accept the coup leaders' allegations of electoral fraud and a return to military dictatorship. He states that since 2015, Myanmar has embarked on the democracy path, and this had also brought many soldiers closer to the people in terms of sharing the benefits of the democratic opening.¹²⁵ In another interview, he highlights how the self-interest of the military's Commander-in-Chief is eroding the legitimacy of the army:

Min Aung Hlaing gave the reason of electoral fraud [when he took power]. But he can see what the people want after his coup. He did not compromise with what the people demand. Therefore, this coup is for his own benefit. The coup is not good for the military either.¹²⁶

In another video interview also featuring Lin Htet Aung, Captain Tun Myat Aung similarly declared that he voted for the NLD back in 2015, going against the majority of his comrades in the army. He explained his disappointment with the army, saying he had hoped for a change where the military no longer would be involved in politics. He said that he was happy to see that there was an elected President, but when this ended with the coup, he lost hope. This loss of hope, he said, motivated him to stand with the people against the army, e.g. by joining the CDM.¹²⁷ In the same video interview, Lin Htet Aung noted, while referring to himself and Tun Myat Aung: 'We are the ones who served and became Captains in the military during the democratic rule, so we can understand to some extent, even if not all, the democratic rules and principles. During the past 10 years of democratic rule, we worked together with the people'.¹²⁸

As alluded to by Captain Lin Htet Aung, it is very likely that army defections are also partly motivated by the fact that, like their civilian counterparts, some soldiers have experienced the benefits of the past five to ten years of openness, including the novel access to the rest of the world via the internet and social media. They too do not want to return to the isolation associated with the previous military regime.¹²⁹ As expressed by vocal defectors, younger soldiers in particular feel that the past ten years had brought them closer to civilians and allowed them to become more familiar with human rights and democracy. They want to see the Tatmadaw develop into a professional army, where the military and the government are separate. These views have also been expressed on the Facebook pages of the People's Soldier and People's Embrace groups.¹³⁰ The extent to which such views initiate and motivate defections is hard to discern from the available data. It is even more unclear whether soldiers' ideological inclinations to support democracy are linked to political allegiance to the NLD and how widespread this is among defectors. However, from

available data, it does seem probable, that there is growing political awareness among those who have defected. This was for instance evident in our interview with Lieutenant Zar Ni, who stated that he was the youngest defector to have joined Nyi Thuta's People's Soldier group, and did so because he disapproved of the killings of civilians by the army:

‘ To be honest, I was not interested in politics before. I just knew that during the rule of the civilian government period, in the past five years, the country's economic sector improved, and the country was prosperous. So I would like to get back that situation and I have defected from the army. I have no plan to get into politics. But what I do think is that if we get back democracy, our country will be healthy and wealthy again.¹³¹ ’

Ven Detta (pseudonym), who has closely investigated dynamics within the army, underlines in an Insight Myanmar podcast that it is important to understand the heterogeneity of experiences and political views within the Tatmadaw:

‘ Yes, some live in bubbles, but not the entire military. There are even differences within the top brass and internal rivalries are there. If we look at lower ranks, there are captains and others who have lived under the transition. Even if they are more isolated than others, they also had access to freedoms and social media. You were still able [prior to the coup] to express views on Facebook. And these freedoms have also been taken away from soldiers. There are not too many defectors, but more captains are now defecting, and these are captains who are on the frontline in active battalions. They do not want dictatorship that takes away their freedoms. They are not blind and ideologically brainwashed. They also want democracy. But the challenge is: where do I go if I defect?¹³² ’

The CDM as an exit option and the mobilising role of social media

The issue raised by Ven Detta about exit options from the army may not in itself be the primary driver of defections, but it is, we suggest, crucial for understanding the actual possibilities for defecting. Some of the defectors who have spoken out, have stated that they believe the role of the CDM for state employees and others has also encouraged soldier defections. This has been aided by social media providing an integral resource for soldiers to defect, connecting them to a large network across the country and mobilising new defectors. Seeing some soldiers defect and

encouraging others to do so, could in this regard be seen as a multiplying driver for defections among those who are discontent with the coup, the violence, and the conditions within the army. In addition, as defector Pyae Sone Tun told the *Globe* in an interview in May, social media has made defecting easier than it may have been during past military coups, also in helping newly defected soldiers find safe places to hide.¹³³

Whether ideologically and morally motivated or not, the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) can be seen as an important exit option for those already discontent with their life within the army, including prior to the coup.¹³⁴ The CDM presents an avenue or opportunity to get out that simultaneously has strong popular support in Myanmar. It is nonetheless important to note that the CDM is not necessarily a safe and easy exit option, as it has no clear leadership or protective system in place. For some soldiers who are keen to defect, it has also proved difficult to know precisely how to make contact with the CDM, as noted by a defector in a Telegram group debate on 15 August. He explained that he merely defected and went into hiding with his family, but was uncertain of how and whether to contact the CDM. Other defectors like Captain Tun Myat Aung found it relatively easy to contact other CDM soldiers and get help through networks to find safe places to hide.¹³⁵

Since the first defections in March, there has been a continuous development of support for new defectors to join the CDM, where social media and encrypted communication apps have played a strong role both for soldiers and police officers. Central to this development have been active defectors like Captain Nyi Thuta and Captain Lin Htet Aung. Since mid-March they have used Facebook and Telegram Groups to encourage more defectors and to tame the uncertainties associated with defecting. Gradually they have built up support groups for CDM soldiers and police and begun to engage with the National Unity Government (NUG) to ensure better conditions for defectors.

Nyi Thuta was the first known defector to use his personal Facebook page to encourage other soldiers to join the CDM.¹³⁶ He told them to join the people's side, to become what he calls people's soldiers, and to not accept the conditions within the army and the unjust violence against the people. He has tried to motivate others to defect by stating that they will regain their individual freedoms rather than being kept in what he has called the army's mafia-style slavery. To motivate further defections, his postings have highlighted that many soldiers have already left, and that more are on the way.¹³⁷ Some postings are erased after some days, likely for security reasons.

Nyi Thuta subsequently created another Facebook page titled 'People's Soldier', which since August has developed into an actual CDM soldier support organisation. He also organised discussion groups between soldiers and the public through his Telegram group 'CDMSoldiers' (advertised on his personal Facebook page), and every Sunday since 22 August has hosted webinars where defected soldiers, the public and serving military personnel discuss their views.¹³⁸ Furthermore, Nyi Thuta has held Wednesday evening webinars for defectors to engage in more relaxed Q&A sessions.¹³⁹ During the exchanges, Nyi Thuta actively encourages soldiers to defect and explains how the group can support them. On his Telegram group he advertises how the People's Soldier group has been helping defectors with food and medical expenses. On 18 September, the group opened a Twitter account, where it actively encourages interviews from journalists and publications on the topic of defections. Whereas postings on the Facebook page are in Burmese, those on Twitter are in English, thus appealing also to a more international audience. Within a couple of days, the twitter account gained more than 2,000 followers and by mid-October it had 5,681 followers. The People's Soldier Facebook page had even more followers – 260,000 by mid-October. According to the group, its Sunday-morning webinars have received up to 500,000 views.¹⁴⁰ In October the group also set up a system for online donations to help defectors.

As related by sergeant Ye Khae, who defected in September, the campaigns and dialogues made by the People's Soldier group have been encouraging. In an October dialogue meeting, he explained that he had been wanting to defect since March due to the military crackdowns on civilians, but that he did not know where to go and how to get support: 'At that time there was no People's Soldier group, which was helping and supporting the CDM soldiers'.¹⁴¹ When the People's Soldier group dialogues commenced, he started to listen in: 'As a result, I got some encouragements and thoughts. I learned that even captains are joining the CDM and this encouraged me. Also, the words of Nyi Thuta, "the military, which is at war with its own people, is the most shameful thing in the world" made me think a lot'.¹⁴² At the same dialogue meeting in October, it was declared that a Wives of People's Soldier Group had been established. The wife of defector Captain Thet Myat, who had been instrumental in encouraging her husband to join the CDM, urged the wives of in-service soldiers who wanted to join the people to contact the group for advice and support. This initiative has likely been informed by the notion among many defectors that family support and security are key to enable soldiers to defect – a matter that we return to in Chapter 4.¹⁴³

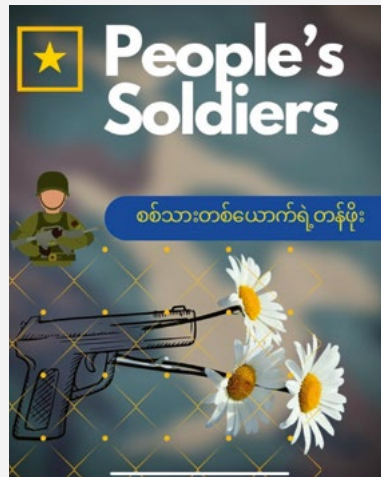
Over time Nyi Thuta's 'People's Soldier Group' has developed into a more established grassroots advocacy organisation for defectors, which since August has been providing practical support in the form of advice, contacts, donations from the public and safe places to survive with their families.¹⁴⁴ Defector Captain Htet Myat told us in an interview that he was now in charge of the People Soldier Groups 'Relocation Team', which is helping to support soldiers who leave the army. While he informs soldiers who are considering defection that it will not be easy and that it must be their own decision, he also clarifies that the People's Soldier group will make sure they receive health care and that they will not starve. In addition, he explained:

'After their decisions [to join the CDM] we draw routes and carry out ID issues for them. We guide them where and how to come [...]. We also travel as far as we can and pick them up. Some of them are out of money or lost their money during their travel. In such cases, I immediately contact my acquaintances and try to transfer money. We have to make their journey as short as possible. The longer the journey, the more dangerous it is.'¹⁴⁵



People's Soldiers' Facebook group logo.

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/peoplesoldiers2021/photos/a.107037358237034/150766073864162/>



The poster is from the People's Soldiers' Facebook page.

Translation: 'The value of a soldier'.

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/people-soldiers2021/photos/136734478600655/>

Defector Kaung Htet Aung, who used to serve in a weapon's manufacturing military unit in the Southern Regional Command explained that help from the People's Soldier group had been vital. In fact, he had defected once before, but because he had no safe escape route he was caught and detained for one and a half months by his commander. After leaving detention he continued to work for the military, while planning to defect again. He explained what made him defect the second time:

One day in my free time, when I was using my phone, I saw the news about People's Soldiers dialogue from Mizzima News. I learned that the People's Soldiers team is providing help and support to CDM soldiers and those who want to join CDM. Therefore, I contacted the People's Soldiers team. I also used to watch the weekly People's Soldiers dialogue and learned that the people are warmly welcoming the CDM soldiers, generously supporting them and encouraging us to join CDM [...]. I am now in a liberated area.¹⁴⁶

On 17 March, Lin Htet Aung launched a Facebook group under the name @SupportCDMPoliceAndSoldier, which was listed as a non-profit organisation.¹⁴⁷ There were several postings encouraging soldiers and police to defect and join the CDM, promises of help, as well as a Telegram group and contact phone numbers for those police and soldiers who wished to defect but who feared going public. The banner heading read (in Burmese): 'Warmly welcome into the people's arms those who don't cooperate with the military dictators. If there is any difficulty in making CDM, from the police and military, you can contact the following Telegram address'. Some of the postings on this page encouraged the wider public to welcome defected soldiers, and to not seek revenge or hate those who left the army. A series of interviews with civilians on how they viewed the army and of 'a good soldier' were also shared, both encouraging soldiers to defect and civilians to meet them with open arms.

As data was being collected for this report in May, the @SupportCDMPoliceAndSoldier Facebook group was still up and running, but it then suddenly disappeared. This is likely for security reasons, as the junta is known to track down people opposed to the coup via Facebook and other social media platforms. In early August, a new Facebook group called 'People's Embrace' appeared, which is also overseen by Lin Htet Aung and other active defectors.¹⁴⁸ By mid-October 2021 this page had 108,000 followers. The page declared that 'People's Embrace' collaborates with the NUG's Ministry of National Defence to support defectors. According to its own Facebook posting, the 'People's Embrace' group had by August 2021 assisted 790 soldiers

Invitation to the first Watermelon Buffet focused on Lin Htet Aung, posted on the People's Embrace public Facebook page.

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/PeoplesEmbrace>.

The following message was posted above the poster in Burmese, encouraging people to join the first session of the Watermelon Buffet:

- Have you ever thought 'I want to ask this' when watching interviews with soldiers or police who join the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)?
- Why are some joining the CDM while others are still killing the people?
- What made you join the CDM?
- How much will CDM soldiers and police contribute to this revolution?
- Have your say at the 'Watermelon Buffet' Zoom Session arranged by People's Embrace.
- Only five USD per month (4 sessions) with all profits from ticket sales going to support CDM soldiers and police.
- With the support of local people, 'People's Embrace' has donated nearly 30 million kyats to CDM soldiers and police. We are now launching a fundraising project to provide more effective support so that the people can help without being burdened.
- Watermelon Buffet Part 1 will commence on Friday 27 August at 7 pm Myanmar Standard Time. Ko Lin Htet Aung will answer questions this week, with other CDM soldiers and police taking the chair in the coming weeks.
- Contact 'People's Embrace' Facebook page or peoplesembrace@gmail.com for tickets and more information. Limited to 500 participants.
- Due to security reasons, buy tickets through PayPal only.

Source: public Facebook page of the People's Embrace: <https://www.facebook.com/107790364828632/posts/161666472774354/>

who joined the CDM with support like financial assistance, food, accommodation, and advice on how to get linkages to the 'liberated areas' [safety zones].¹⁴⁹ People's Embrace has also started to help with CDM registration codes for defectors through the NUG, and Lin Htet Aung stated in a live Facebook video in late August that so far they had provided 150 such codes to CDM soldiers. Lin Htet Aung explained the challenges and that members of the group provide support largely out of their own pockets and are still looking for external financial support. He also highlighted the People's Soldier group as an alternative option for support. Judging by the various comments to the Facebook postings, many defectors are desperately seeking help and protection.¹⁵⁰ In a video interview in August, Lin Htet Aung further stated that, in conjunction with the NUG's Ministry of Defence, People's Embrace were preparing 'to provide pre-CDM codes to the soldiers who are still in the army but secretly helping the people and the NUG'.¹⁵¹ This is likely to try to encourage those soldiers who find it hard to defect to side with the people.

In late August, People's Embrace also started to host weekly online debate groups where defectors are interviewed and where they discuss how and why some soldiers have joined the CDM. One aspect of the discussion has been that CDM soldiers and police should contribute to the people's revolution against the military regime. These debates are held as Zoom sessions called 'Watermelon Buffets', which is simultaneously a fund-raising project to support CDM soldiers and police. Participants pay five USD per month via PayPal.¹⁵² The name Watermelon Buffet



People's Embrace group inviting soldiers and police to get CDM registration codes.

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/PeoplesEmbrace/photos/170469751894026>

likely comes from the notion that soldiers who remain within the army, but who are supporting the people, are known as watermelons.¹⁵³ They are green (army colour) on the outside, and red (pro-democracy opposition to the military) on the inside.

Since September, the People's Embrace has started to post daily statistics of soldiers and police who have contacted them via their Telegram group. The figures ranged from between 18 and 35 people per day in September, and according to the People's Embrace, these have included both CDM and non-CDM soldiers and police.¹⁵⁴ The intention, is to spread the word about how great the incentive is to join the 'people's side', and thus can be viewed as a clear mobilisation strategy.

It is evident that online efforts to mobilise and support defectors have continued, despite the security risks involved, and according to the People's Soldier group, this had resulted in an increase in defections to between 5-10 per day by August.¹⁵⁵ In

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Guest Speaker

Live Streaming

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Poster by People's Soldiers inviting guests to a dialogue meeting with Dr. Sasa, NUG's Minister of International Cooperation, 17 October 2021.

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/peoplesoldiers2021/photos/192862876321148>

addition, the development of organisations like People's Soldiers and People's Embrace – membered by defectors and supported by civilian volunteers – help to create not only a forum for debate and motivation to defect, but also enables the strengthening of support networks and exit options for those who wish to defect. This defection strategy has increasingly received support from the National Unity Government (NUG), which since 16 April has declared itself the legitimate government of Myanmar and the main organised representation of the opposition to military rule.¹⁵⁶

ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT FROM THE POLITICAL OPPOSITION

Defectors like Nyi Thuta and Lin Htet Aung, and others who have assisted their CDM soldier groups, have gradually connected with members of the NUG and lobbied them to welcome and support defecting soldiers and police. The People's Embrace group, led by Lin Htet Aung, has also established a close relationship, as noted earlier with the NUG's Ministry of Defence providing CDM cards to the defectors, and seems to be closely aligned in general with the NUG. The People's Soldier group works more independently but has been in regular dialogue with the NUG. For instance, on 19 September the People's Soldier group hosted the NUG Minister for Human Rights, Aung Myo Min, who joined a debate about the human rights violations against soldiers' wives and families within the army.¹⁵⁷ In October, NUG's minister of Electricity and Energy, Soe Thura Tun, who is the son of a military officer but himself a long-term democracy activist, participated in a People's Soldier dialogue, where he was asked to share his view of civil-military relations in Myanmar.¹⁵⁸ Later in the month, on 17 October, NUG's Minister of International Cooperation, Dr. Sasa, spoke in the People's Soldier dialogue about the joint revolution against the military dictatorship, where he also welcomed soldiers to join the people's side and spoke about a new federal army.¹⁵⁹ These forms of engagement with the political opposition to the military have also been supported by new policy initiatives by the NUG.

On 23 August, NUG issued a statement that outlines a policy for 'People's Armed Forces and Police Forces', which explicitly invites soldiers and the police to stand with the people and oppose 'the illegal military terrorists'.¹⁶⁰ Nyi Thuta shared the statement with soldiers in his Telegram group and it was also shared on the People's Embrace Facebook page. The statement promises protections and support for defectors now and in a possible future federal democracy. Areas of support include: continuity of pensions and positions; assistance programmes for food,

shelter and family security; assurance that defectors will not be attacked by the PDFs (People's Defence Forces); promise of a role in a (future) Federal Union Army and police force. The announcement is signed by the Interim President of the NUG, and promises are made to form a committee to ensure the implementation of the policy. In other words, the policy signals a strategy within the NUG to advance their cause by encouraging splits within the army and by enlarging the opposition with members from the armed forces. It also contains significant elements that address the anxieties associated with defection risks and future survival for soldiers, as discussed further in Chapter 4. In a speech on 6 October, the NUG's interim President, Duwa Lashi La, reinforced these points and repeated promises to provide food, shelter and health care for the families of military personnel and police who joined the CDM. He expressed recognition of the experiences and skills of soldiers who had honestly served the country under the military and urged them to contact the CDM soldier groups in order to join the people.¹⁶¹

Comparative scholarship on military defection has shown that such initiatives by opposition movements like the NUG can play a strong role in motivating soldiers to defect. This is especially the case if the opposition can create trust among military personnel by fulfilling their promises in the long run, once a regime falls. Promises should therefore not only include protection and security during the crisis, but also guarantees for integration into the institutions set up by the opposition and for amnesty for human rights violations. To motivate defections, it is significant that military personnel trust the wider reform project of the opposition or its alternative vision of social order. Creating such trust is easier when social ties can be established between the opposition and military personnel.¹⁶² In this light, the NUG's 23 August policy statement combined with the interactions of NUG members with soldiers in various CDM soldier debates could be seen to contribute to trust building that can motivate defections.

Nonetheless, scholars on soldier defections raise the concern that such trust-building between military personnel and the opposition can be challenged if the opposition switches from non-violent to violent resistance.¹⁶³ The discussion will now focus on how such a shift in the context of Myanmar, which happened gradually since May and which culminated in the NUG's declaration of the 'People's Defensive War' against the military junta on 7 September 2021, may affect defections.¹⁶⁴

ARMED RESISTANCE AND POPULAR HATRED

Since May, resistance towards the military has become increasingly violent. This has taken the form of armed defence and attacks on soldiers, police, and civilians affiliated with the junta, such as informers (talan) and local administrators.¹⁶⁵ While peaceful protests and strikes have continued, large cities like Yangon and Mandalay have experienced almost daily bombings and attacks on junta targets since May. Self-defence groups and resistance fighters armed with air guns, homemade firearms and bombs have also been active in various rural areas, including in Bamar dominated regions like Sagaing and Magway, and in ethnic minority dominated border-states such as Kayah, Chin, Kachin, and Karen. Some of these activities are led by the civilian People's Defence Forces (PDFs), which were recognised by the National Unity Government (NUG) on 9 May 2021. According to Matthew Arnold (2021), there were an estimated 183 PDFs/DFs by September 2021, just prior to the NUG's declaration of a people's defensive war. In addition, there are numerous more autonomous local militias or Defence Forces (DF's) both in urban and rural areas.¹⁶⁶ Ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) like the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) are also believed to have aided some of the civilian militias and PDFs, while also engaging independently in battles against the Tatmadaw. Since August, several PDFs have become more institutionalised and sophisticated in terms of weapons, uniforms, training and the building of alliances among PDFs, local militias and some EAOs. However, despite various efforts by the NUG to align the various forces, by October (at the time of writing) there was still no unified structure that brings together the different resistance forces across the country under a single strategic command.¹⁶⁷

The degree of military casualties at the hands of resistance fighters is hard to verify, however the NUG claimed that in July 2021 alone, 740 Myanmar junta troops were killed by resistance fighters during 355 shootouts.¹⁶⁸ Between 7 September and 6 October, the NUG reported a record number of 1,562 killed soldiers.¹⁶⁹ In short, since May, people have increasingly been at war with the junta's forces, and the mass popular resistance can no longer be regarded as only non-violent and peaceful. This shift was further solidified in the NUG's 7 September 14-point declaration of a People's Defensive War against the military junta, which encourages all citizens in Myanmar to help in the revolt against military rule. It urges the PDFs to target the military junta and its assets, in accordance with a military code of conduct, while also protecting people and their property from army attacks. Point seven calls on the EAOs to attack the military in any way they can and to take full control of their areas. Of relevance to this report, the declaration's point 12 makes a particular call to soldiers and police to join the PDF forces. This supports the NUG's policy

statement of 23 August.¹⁷⁰ While the defensive war declaration by the NUG did not immediately turn into a full-blown civil war, it did accelerate the attacks by PDF forces around the country as well as reinforced the army's efforts to specifically target their strongholds with attacks on civilians and daily raids on private homes to detect and arrest PDF members and their supporters.

In what ways these new dynamics of violent resistance affect defections is still uncertain, but we tentatively suggest that they could be both a driver and an obstacle to defections, depending on how individual soldiers interpret and experience the armed resistance and its relative strength.

The comparative scholarship on military defections in general clarifies that the moral burdens associated with an army's violence against protesters are greater when protesters are unarmed and peaceful than when they use violent tactics.¹⁷¹ The shift to violent resistance could therefore decrease those defections in Myanmar that have been driven by the unacceptability of violence against peaceful resistance. In the context of Myanmar, where a substantial number of soldiers have participated in combatting armed rebellions over a long period, the turn to violent resistance could aid the army leadership in confirming their portrayal of the opposition to the coup as 'terrorists' and 'enemies' that challenge the stability of the nation. This could compel some soldiers to support, rather than draw away, from violent actions against the resistance fighters, or at least reduce their motivation to defect.

However, as noted by Anisin, in some cases violent resistance can motivate defections or insubordination. This is particularly evident in cases where soldiers conceive the armed resistance as strong and likely to succeed in defeating the army.¹⁷² In addition, Albrecht highlights that soldiers' personal risks of being attacked by resistance fighters and their fear of escalating violence can motivate defection or insubordination, which may outweigh the fear of being punished by the army for defecting.¹⁷³ According to Anisin, any decision to defect is less influenced by whether the resistance is violent or not, and more related to what extent soldiers conceive the resistance to threaten the military's capacity to repress it. He simultaneously highlights the significance of escape routes and protection for soldiers, and to what extent the resistance movement can convey viable and trustworthy alternative orders.¹⁷⁴ Then there is the extent to which military personnel believe that the (armed) revolution will realistically challenge and overcome the army.

The emergence of armed resistance forces like the PDF, which are recognised by the parallel NUG government, could, we suggest, be viewed by (some) soldiers as exit options that can motivate defections. This is further supported by the NUG's 23 August policy statement's promise of positions to defectors in new institutions. In addition, some PDFs like the Moby PDF (MPDF), have made deliberate invitations to soldiers who wish to defect. On their Facebook group page on August 23, the MPDF issued a statement asserting that it is cooperating with the People's Soldiers group to secure the livelihoods of defectors and that 'it will take full responsibility for the security of defectors'.¹⁷⁵ It further states:

This is the best time to break free [defect] from the military regime's oppressions and discriminations. Precious life, blood, and sweat of the soldiers should not be sacrificed for the benefit of Min Aung Hlaing and a group of generals. You need to stand on the people's side. You all are invited to overthrow the military dictatorship together with the people.¹⁷⁶

The Chin Defence Force (CDF) has also encouraged soldiers to side with the people. On 10 August the CDF even announced that it would provide a five million kyat (USD 2,725) cash reward to soldiers and police who defect with vehicles or small arms and ammunition which could aid the resistance movements. They also promised transportation to safe places. The CDF has already provided safe houses to some defectors, while other defectors have joined them in their fight against junta troops in Chin State. According to a CDF spokesperson, 20 soldiers had joined their side by mid-August, and three of these, including a Captain, joined directly after the CDF had attacked a police station in Mindat in July.¹⁷⁷ On 16 September, the CDF further announced that it would provide a ten million kyat cash reward to soldiers defecting with heavy artillery, according to a tweet that day by Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB). On 1 October the CDF announced that three soldiers had joined them with arms and received their reward.¹⁷⁸

Judging by these insights and interviews with the defectors who have joined the PDF or who have declared that they are willing to join, the existence of the PDFs as an exit option certainly seems to be a driver for defection, at least partially. One warrant officer who defected on 4 March said: 'I will serve any kind of role in the PDF or federal army to end the military rule'.¹⁷⁹ Major Hein Thaw Oo and Major Myo

Hlaing have directly supported the fight by training PDF youth.¹⁸⁰ Defector Special 007 also stated in a debate meeting that he planned to join the PDF, adding: 'I really admire and appreciate them [PDF]. I believe this revolution will succeed, but so far there are still many needs'.¹⁸¹

In addition, Defector Captain Htet Myat told us that by October there were numerous connections between the People's Soldier group and the PDFs:

' We often meet with some township level PDF leaders. And then, we especially provide military advice. PDFs are very passionate. But they have no combat experience. That is why we are providing advice on military strategies and tactics. We are providing leadership training as well because it is very important. And in some places, we are also providing financial support. We also provide training in how to use small arms appropriately. In addition, some of our junior brothers in our group are giving military training. If we get information from the army, we inform them in advance so that they can avoid confronting the army.¹⁸² ,

Other defectors have expressed more uncertainty of the PDFs as a viable exit option, and some have said they are directly opposed to participating in fighting the army. Various overlapping concerns are at play. Reflective of this uncertainty in the wake of the increasingly violent resistance, a deserter, Phoe Than Chaung, raised concerns in a Telegram Group debate on 15 August hosted by defector Nyi Thuta:

' I do not want to say that I am a CDM. I just deserted from the military, and I am hiding now [...]. I heard that a CDM soldier who was at officer level when he defected said that we should find a new military [e.g. PDF] and fight back the military. But I wonder if that is possible and if the revolution [fight of the resistance] will be victorious. My second point is under which leadership we [defectors] must continue? Should it be the NUG and the CRPH? If so, we need to consider what this group has been doing. We cannot deny the terrorism committed by the military, but we must think about if the NUG's way is going in the right direction. On the one side, over 800 or 1,000 people have been killed by the military. And on the other side, the PDFs have killed the people they called Talan [military informers or collaborators]. Those people who have done social punishments to the soldiers and their families and their products, I do

not like. What I understand is that in democracy all the diversity is accepted and can come together, but now I see that if you do not agree with another person, you are enemies.¹⁸³ ,

A man in the Telegram group debate responded to this deserter, stating that ‘it is the military that has turned the people into terrorists [made them violent]’. Another, who stated that he is a PDF member, responded: ‘I am working under the NUG and the NUG never ordered us [PDF] to commit any terrorism, but just to prevent problematic things to happen to people [e.g. to defend the people against the army’s violence]’. To these comments, Phoe Than Chaung responded, reflecting on his uncertainty regarding opposition to the military:

‘ I just want to know clearly the policy that we have to follow. Now the policy is not clear, because the NUG is also going towards terrorism [violence]. No...they already committed violence. Here in this meeting, there are also many soldiers who still did not defect, and who are here to know a clear policy [of the opposition]. But today I learnt that even for CDM soldiers [who already defected] the future is also uncertain. ,

In short, despite leaving the army due to its use of force against civilians, Phoe Than Chaung, questions the violent direction taken by the opposition’s approach to defeat the military. This can be contrasted with others whose defections seem meaningful to them because they can engage in the armed resistance against the military dictatorship (i.e. the revolution) by joining the PDF. A core issue here for defectors like Phoe Than Chaung seems not only to be the moral disregard for violent resistance but also the extent to which military personnel believe that the people’s war will be victorious.

A debate between Nyi Thuta and another defector, Captain Zin Yaw, on the NUG’s declaration of the people’s defensive war at a People’s Soldier dialogue meeting on 18 September, revealed some of these concerns. While neither of them expressed disapproval of the declaration, they were concerned about the timing and to what extent the PDFs were sufficiently prepared to wage war against the military. Nyi Thuta stated:

‘ To start a war, we need to prepare the strategic plan then start a fight to win. As Sun Tzu [a Chinese General and philosopher of war] said: “If a battle cannot be won, do not fight it”. I think this is a concept that really needs to be practiced in war. Instead of fighting with invincible spirit,

you should know first the enemy's forces and make sure of your own forces, then you should start the battle if you are sure that you will gain something by winning.¹⁸⁴ ,

He further argued that, while he supports the fight, there is a need to develop strategies and to have leadership. Otherwise, there would be too many losses. He suggested that the NUG form a National Defence and Security Council, which includes leaders of EAOs and others with military experience, who have both military capacity, skill, and ability to develop a strategy and secure that the PDFs are trained in handling weapons. Before such developments are in place, Nyi Thuta suggested, the PDFs should avoid large armed confrontations with the Tatmadaw, which still remains militarily stronger. In the meantime, he said, the armed resistance should develop other strategies of 'tiring the enemy'. He gave one example of a good strategy, namely when the Chin-based PDF forces invited soldiers to join them before they started a battle: 'This is a very good behaviour, which shows that war is not just murder but defence', he adds.¹⁸⁵ He further suggested that by having many oppositional forces around the country, the troops would gradually become stretched and tire out, and this could lead to more defections. In the past, he explained, troops used to have a break between military operations of a year or six months, but in the current situation they have perhaps only one week off. As a result, he said, 'they will do many mistakes. They [the army troops] will dissolve by themselves'.¹⁸⁶ He finally noted that while the early CDM soldiers defected due to their own conviction to stand with the people, others may only be pushed to do so if or when the fighting escalates and drags on. Captain Htet Myat similarly raised concerns about the timing of NUG's declaration, agreeing with Nyi Thuta that many PDFs are not yet ready to fight the Tatmadaw. He also expressed concern that the NUG's declaration of a defensive war could make it practically more difficult for soldiers to defect and for young protesters to operate, as it has already led to the army imposing even more restrictions and to increase its military operations on the ground.¹⁸⁷

What these views suggest is that the armed resistance could motivate soldiers to defect on different grounds: while some would defect based on a trust and a belief in the armed resistance, others would only defect if they sense that the army is realistically being defeated.

Another concern with the shift to armed resistance is that it has reinforced a widened gap between 'the people' and 'soldiers', which could affect defections. As also evident in Phoe Than Chaung's narrative, there is a real and deep concern that after having fought the people, soldiers would find it difficult to defect because they worry that

they will not be trusted and welcomed by the people. This worry also includes concerns over personal risks. For instance, at the People's Soldier Telegram Group meeting on 15 August, some soldiers who were contemplating defection noted that they feared that if they left, they would either be hunted down by the military informers (talan) or be killed by PDF forces. Some also said that they have received several comments on Facebook by civilians that they are talan (military informers) and not real defectors who are on the people's side. Images circulating on social media of soldiers sheltered behind sandbags in Yangon out of fear of the PDF or other militia attacks and reports of soldiers in rural PDF strongholds being killed, have also added to concerns of personal risk for those contemplating defection.¹⁸⁸

Fears associated with defecting could be somewhat tempered by the NUG's welcoming of defectors to side with the people after its 23 August policy statement and by the various efforts of the CDM soldier groups to convince in-service soldiers that they will indeed be received positively by the people. Yet there is simultaneously a real sense that ordinary people's hatred towards, and distrust of, soldiers has increased since the violent crackdowns and clashes, as Lin Htet Aung explains:

‘ In February and March, the people warmly invited the military [to join the CDM]. And we, the CDM soldiers warmly welcomed those who wanted to defect the army. But for those families who have been destroyed and their family members have been killed by the military, they cannot show any love for the military people. The same with the people who see the atrocities by the military with their own eyes, they cannot show any love to the military. They have transgressed the word of hate and reached a point of resentment. But even though some are unable to welcome defecting soldiers because of the military's inhumane atrocities, others try to be inviting as much as they can. I have experienced that people gave half a plate of rice [to a defected soldier] even though they have just one plate of rice.’¹⁸⁹ ,

The resentment people feel towards soldiers has also been evident in non-violent forms of social punishment. Many people boycott businesses owned by soldiers and their families and they refuse to sell products to them. Soldiers are also mocked on social media, called cowards and worse, and when they meet people on the street they are met with signs of hatred and disgust.¹⁹⁰

As noted earlier, popular ostracization of soldiers has motivated some to defect. Yet it can also result in making defecting harder to imagine and imbued with uncertainties of where to go, how to be trusted and how to find secure escape routes. This becomes even harder, when combined with personal fears of attacks by resistance fighters. There is also a risk that the armed resistance and the widening gap between soldiers and the people encourages some soldiers to continue participating in the violence, viewing the people as the real enemy.

These various uncertainties can conversely also result in internal forms of insubordination among in-service military personnel. According to defector Htet Myat, there are currently several so-called watermelon soldiers who remain within the army but who support the people's resistance.¹⁹¹ Some of them have even aided the armed resistance, e.g., by providing information and facilitating attacks on army properties.¹⁹² These kinds of internal resistance by non-defectors have also been encouraged by Captain Nyi Thuta during his Telegram group meetings. Addressing the non-defectors at an online meeting on 15 August he said:

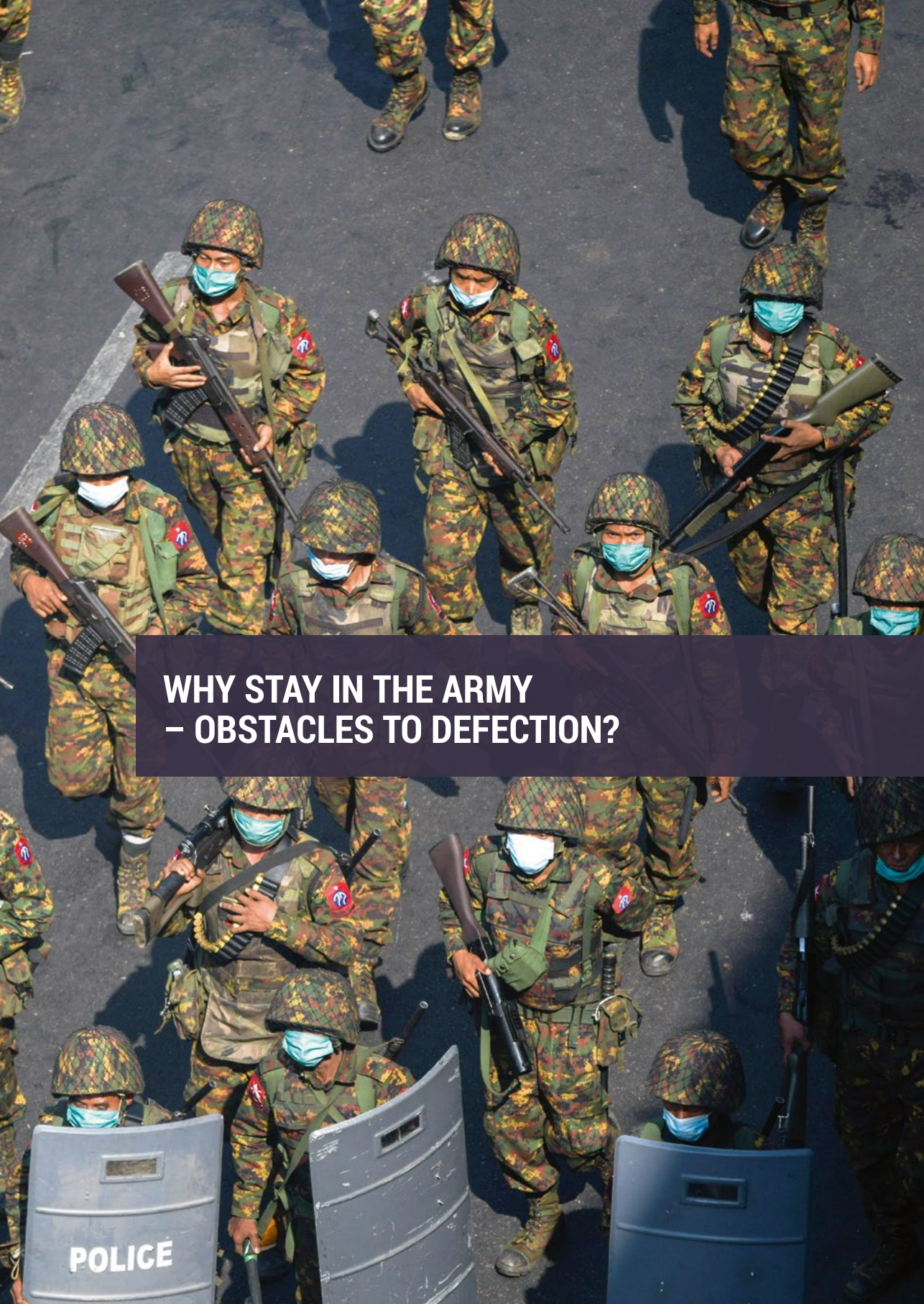
‘ If you want to do CDM but you cannot leave from the military due to your family security, there are many other different ways that you can help the people. For example, you can give some information to the people, and you can support the PDFs. In that way you can do the opposition inside the military. ’

Defector Captain Htet Myat, explained to us that he had aided the resistance while still in the army and was contemplating joining the CDM: ‘I helped the people in many ways. I opened fire in the air before the officer shot at them. I also texted messages to my civilian friends and told them where to stay and where not to stay. If what I was doing was seen by others [in the military] it would be very dangerous for me. Therefore, I left the army’.¹⁹³

As noted here by Htet Myat, aiding the resistance from within the army is evidently highly risky for individual soldiers and must be weighed against the risks of defecting. He simultaneously told us that there are advantages to having pro-democracy soldiers within the army who are in contact with CDM soldier groups, because they provide the CDM soldiers with information on planned operations and routes.¹⁹⁴

As discerned in this chapter, the insecurity associated with defections undeniably affects the establishment of not only how many have defected, but also what the varied drivers are for defecting. What can be established from the few voices that have been heard is that the reasons given for defecting are multiple and overlapping. Yet drivers for defection seem to primarily revolve around a mixture of a) immediate moral concerns for the violence against peaceful civilian protesters after the coup, both at a personal level and in terms of concerns for the army's legitimacy, and b) deeply embedded dissatisfaction with the Tatmadaw's internal structures of corruption and oppression that negatively affects lower ranks. Ideological and political drivers are conversely much more difficult to establish, even though these are not absent from the voices of defectors. Yet it is mainly these drivers that are articulated when opposing a return to military dictatorship and as 'standing on the people's side' more generally, rather than in terms of political affiliation. Finally, the role of the CDM as an exit option can be considered to have a potential multiplying effect for electing to leave the army. This is strongly facilitated by the role of social media and the moves made by both active defectors and the opposition to the coup, such as the NUG and associated groups like the PDF. However, as also noted, the increasingly violent resistance and popular resentment of soldiers can demotivate defections and it cannot be assumed that the internal structures of the army, including the mistreatment of soldiers, work as drivers for defections. They may also present obstacles to leaving the army. The following chapter delves deeper into some of these defection obstacles.





**WHY STAY IN THE ARMY
– OBSTACLES TO DEFECTION?**

They are prevented from doing so by fear. They are also hampered by deeply rooted beliefs. They also worry for their families. They are afraid that their families might be punished for their actions. Some are given wealth, possessions, and positions to stay. (Defector Major, interviewed by RFA in April).¹⁹⁵

As reflected upon by this defector who was asked why soldiers remain in the army, there are multiple obstacles to army defections in the current Myanmar context. In this chapter we suggest that defection obstacles should be understood as a combination of both immediate and structural obstacles that affect military personnel's desires and abilities to defect in different ways. On the one hand are those soldiers who already wish to leave the army, but who face immediate concerns and challenges that impede them from defecting, such as fear of punishment and even death, not only for the soldier who defects, but also for his family members. Such immediate obstacles are further associated with the tightening of military restrictions on movement, surveillance of soldiers and their isolation from external social networks and information after the coup. On the other hand are those military personnel who remain loyal to the army and who have no desire to defect or engage in acts of insubordination, which can predominantly be linked to deeper structural obstacles to defection, but also to pragmatic factors such as economic interests or fear of losing positions and benefits. As suggested in this chapter, structural obstacles are embedded in the Tatmadaw's deeply entrenched insular culture, internal system of hierarchical control, and patron-client relations, which are sustained by a mixture of fear, economic benefits, and ideological programming. This internal system has far-reaching historical roots within the Tatmadaw and works to bind soldiers so tightly to the army that it not only makes it difficult for soldiers to leave, but also impedes many soldiers from considering defection.

Reflecting the heterogeneity within the Tatmadaw, it is important to note that immediate and structural obstacles overlap and affect military personnel in different ways, depending for instance on rank, personal background, education, and experience.¹⁹⁶ In addition, there are strong indications that some military personnel are currently caught in an uncertain position, undecided about whether they wish to stay loyal and remain in the Tatmadaw or not. This uncertainty is likely embedded in a range of diverging concerns and incentives to stay, which could also shift according to how the situation develops. As argued by Albrecht, while soldiers' moral concerns for their complicity in the violence against civilians may be present, these are often weighed against soldiers' perceptions of personal risks, economic incentives and concerns for survival.¹⁹⁷ Anisin, similarly argues that economic

interests and financial resources can 'buy loyalty' and thus be an obstacle to defection. In the context of Myanmar, where the Tatmadaw for decades has had a strong dominance over the economy, this obstacle seems particularly relevant to highlight as something that could outweigh moral concerns.¹⁹⁸ Simultaneously, as discussed in the last part of this chapter, the Tatmadaw's pervasive ideological programming, which over decades has legitimised violence against civilians, may impede (at least some) soldiers from having moral concerns in the first place. This may also help to explain why those lower ranks who do not in reality reap any significant economic benefits or status from being in the Tatmadaw, are nonetheless continuing to follow the orders of the army.

Drawing on interviews and historical analysis of the Tatmadaw, the following sections will address the various immediate and structural obstacles to defection.

FEAR OF PUNISHMENT AND FAMILY SECURITY

One strong immediate obstacle to defection in Myanmar that defectors mention is a fear of severe levels of punishment, including the death penalty. They are taught early in training that anyone seen to disobey orders or defy authority will be dealt with harshly, and in the past there have been several examples of imprisonment and even execution.¹⁹⁹ Captain Htet Myat further noted that punishments are believed to increase in severity as the rank of the soldier involved increases, or if they leave the army as a defector – joining the opposition to the military – rather than as a deserter.²⁰⁰ In addition, there is a notion that soldiers in general face higher risks of being persecuted and tracked down by the army in comparison to police officers and other state officials who join the CDM. Defector Phyo Pyae Sone relates this point to the tight control within the military organisation:

There is a lot of control in the military. A civilian government employee can stay at home without going to the office if he or she wants to join CDM. Maybe he or she might be charged for the Section 505 [of the Penal Code]²⁰¹ in the last situation. It does not affect his or her family. But for a soldier, there is a lot of control in the army. There are many articles to sue him.²⁰²

The effects that defections may have on defectors' families has been echoed by numerous defectors when asked why they believe those soldiers who oppose the coup are reluctant to defect. As mentioned, family members of defectors - even a

sister who lives abroad - have been threatened and contacted by higher-ranking officers, as a strategy to track down defectors. But there are also fears that the army will directly punish family members, as noted by Captain Aung Sin Phyo: 'There are also those who dare not take the risk of leaving as they fear it might bring their families into harm's way'.²⁰³ A sergeant who defected from Chin State also explained in a YouTube video: 'They would not dare to join the CDM. If they joined their families would be detained by the military, may even be beaten tortured or killed. It is their [Tatmadaw leaders] way of controlling us'.²⁰⁴ A retired soldier, who fled the army before the coup, but who is a bachelor and therefore did not have to worry about his own family, similarly said: 'Most of the soldiers are unhappy to work in the military. But some have their families, and they cannot flee due to their families' security'.²⁰⁵

There is a widespread notion that the tight exercise of control within the military extends to family members, and that the army is deliberately employing this form of control to prevent defections.²⁰⁶ For those soldiers who live with their families within army compounds, a safe defection depends on them bringing family members with them, which can be more difficult than individual defections. Conversely, those operating on the frontlines are separated from their families and therefore have no option to protect their family members if they defect.²⁰⁷ Believing that many soldiers would defect if their families would be safe, Captain Lin Htet Aung, noted:

Those living in military compounds have basically been kidnapped. They use soldiers' family members to control them so they can't act freely. If a soldier wants to run, he has to take his family with him [...] They know the regime is arresting, torturing and murdering innocent civilians [...] but they are too worried about the safety of their own families to risk doing anything about it. They know it isn't fair, but they have to look out for their families. They're aware of the injustice and I'm sure they feel uncomfortable about it. And yet they have to close their eyes.²⁰⁸

In one of his Telegram Group debates, Nyi Thuta explained the military's methods to control soldiers by registering family members:

Soldiers in the military are required to provide a list of siblings' families and addresses when obtaining personal information. You have to provide 58 points of personal information. In addition, the uncles and aunts' families and addresses have to be provided. All relatives are recorded. So, running away from the army is much harder than for

ordinary people [who join the CDM]. It is done to be able to trace when someone wants to run from the military. So, when they run away, it is not convenient for them to go to their relatives.²⁰⁹ ,

In addition to concerns for family security, defectors also face risks if they try to seek refuge with family members. To some there are also matters of survival at stake, as related by a defector and his wife, who fled the barracks together with their baby:

‘ Ever since the military coup, I consulted with my wife about joining the CDM. She wanted us to join CDM but did not dare to. As our son is too young, we were worried about him, if the military council found us [after defecting]. We worried how our child would survive. I negotiated with my wife many times. I said “Wife, I do not want to continue. I will one day be involved in ordering the cracking down on innocent people”. On February 9, when the army shot Mya Thwe Thwe Khaing, my wife could not feel anymore. My wife also said “YES” she would agree to do CDM.’²¹⁰ ,

The wife further added:

‘ We women are very scared to leave from the army. When we leave from the army, we leave all of our properties and savings. But if we think about them [properties and savings], our children’s future will be lost. So, I decided to join CDM.’²¹¹ ,

Echoing these sentiments, defector Captain Tun Myat Aung reflected that it was easier for him to defect because no family members depended on him: ‘I did not have much anxiety [when defecting] as I am single, and I do not have my own family. My brothers and sisters are also already married. So, I am alone and there is no one depending on me. So, I do not have to worry for my family.’²¹²

Another defector, Captain Htet Myat, conversely said to us that his wife was instrumental in encouraging him to join the CDM, but the decision to do so was based on a careful weighing of the risks involved: ‘We mainly consulted on the difficulties we will face after I joined the CDM. If I leave the army I may be caught anytime and can go to jail or die. Therefore, I asked my wife if she could accept if that happened. She said she would rather face such difficulties than committing injustice. So, I joined the CDM.’²¹³ His wife was based in Yangon at the time of defection, not in the military barracks, and she was regularly providing Htet Myat

with information about the violent crackdowns. Other wives, Htet Myat told us, have other views: 'Some soldiers and military officers want to join the CDM, but do not because their wives do not agree. Some women like to be called officer's wife and they do not want to abandon that status'.²¹⁴

ISOLATION FROM INFORMATION AND RESTRICTIONS ON MOVEMENT

There is a general impression that the army's top-brass and officers have heightened efforts to prevent soldiers from defecting after the coup by increasing the closure of information flows and restrictions on movement from army bases. Several defectors have reported that they lost access to the internet, to TV and radio channels not controlled by the army, and that their social media accounts were monitored more aggressively after the coup. While civilians' access to internet has also been restricted since the coup, defectors have highlighted that soldiers in army bases are much more closed off. This seems to have increased more and more since the coup, with some defectors saying that in the early days after 1 February it was



easier to use Facebook and to contact relatives and friends outside the army.²¹⁵ A defector from Shan state explained the situation as he experienced it immediately after the coup, before he defected:

‘ We did not know [before defecting] much about what was going on. We could not use the internet in our units. We were not allowed to go out anymore, so we could not use the internet in nearby areas. I was closely following current events until the lines were shut down. At first, I was still able to watch the news when the internet was only partly shut down during the night. When wireless internet was cut off, we could not follow the news anymore [...]. We last heard there were about a hundred [civilian] deaths, and we only now found out that it was more than 800. I called home and learned from friends who are participating in the protests.’²¹⁶

Defector Major Aung Sin Phyo further explained to RFA in a video interview in May how the army has deliberately tried to keep soldiers in the dark about events following the coup, as well as cutting them off from social networks outside army compounds. This has been combined with efforts to ensure that soldiers only get information which contains messages from the military leadership, as Aung Sin Phyo noted: ‘In the army camps the soldiers are only allowed to watch Myawaddy TV [military owned station]. All the soldiers and their families have been asked to listen to what U Hmwe Gyi [army propaganda person] says episode after episode. We were forced to watch the commander-in-chief’s speech every evening’.²¹⁷

A soldier’s wife whose husband remains in an army camp away from her and the rest of the family, explained that restrictions on soldiers’ movements and their ability to contact outsiders have worsened since the coup. She is no longer able to contact her husband, and he has been confined to the camp because higher-ranking officers fear defections: ‘They can’t go out [of the army camp] except for security purposes. They line up every day and night to give their names, since some are defecting’. She said that her husband wanted to leave the army, but he is being threatened: ‘He says they [superiors] threaten him, asking if he wants a promotion or one or two years in prison’. She also explained that some soldiers are still loyal to the army, and that this may be due to lack of access to information: ‘There’s no internet access and they believe that everything they see on Myawaddy [army-controlled TV channel] is real [so] they genuinely believe this coup was staged due to electoral fraud’.²¹⁸

As evident in these narratives, the closure and control of information flows is likely used by the military as a defection-prevention strategy to keep soldiers in the dark about what is happening in the country, thereby trying to secure loyalty, and also to scare and threaten those soldiers who are intent on or desire to leave the army. On the latter point, three defectors informed Deutsche Welle (DW) journalists of a Facebook monitoring team within the army that scrutinises likes and postings, and one defector stated they had to hand in Facebook login details at their army base. If they post political messages, e.g. supporting the NLD or criticising the military, they are told they may be arrested and denied promotions.²¹⁹ Simultaneously, the army teaches them not to believe social media news.

The closure of information flows co-exists with restrictions on movement, which together can be seen as two interrelated obstacles to defection. One defector told DW journalists that everyone and everything within the army bases is monitored, stating that 'they [the army] want to turn people into robots, who don't think for themselves'.²²⁰ Several defectors have also highlighted that defection is difficult because soldiers are required to stay at the army base and are only allowed to leave if they are granted permission from superiors. When the third wave of COVID-19 commenced in June 2021, the military leadership further restricted the movements of soldiers and their families, claiming that it was to prevent the spread of Covid-19. But in reality, it was applied to prevent defections, according to defectors in a People's Soldiers debate on 29 August.²²¹

It seems evident that strict control and isolation of soldiers, not least of lower ranks who reside within army bases, has increased since the coup and thus can be seen as an immediate obstacle to defections. Yet these practices of isolation and control are far from new. By contrast, they are embedded in a deeply entrenched insular culture and a system of hierarchical control that has characterised the internal workings of the Tatmadaw since long before the coup.²²² As noted by Selth, one of the core characteristics of the Tatmadaw is the extraordinary control that it exercises over the private lives of officers, lower ranked soldiers and family members who live on the bases: 'To a large extent they are cut off from the outside world, and strongly encouraged to make friends among other military personnel'.²²³ Defector Nyi Thuta further stated that 'when people join the military, the first thing they feel is [that they are part of the] military family. When they become part of that family, they gradually accept in their hearts the doctrine that the military is not part of the people'.²²⁴ As alluded to here, the isolation of military personnel is integral to the Tatmadaw, presenting a deeper structural obstacle to defection. Structural obstacles are

embedded in the Tatmadaw's internal system that not only isolates soldiers from civilians but also binds them to military organisations through a mixture of patron-client relations, economic ties, and ideological programming. These elements are addressed separately in the following sections.

INTERNAL SYSTEM OF HIERARCHICAL CONTROL AND VIOLENT PATRON-CLIENT RELATIONS

‘ You should ask why the soldiers keep working in this situation at the military? The answer is because they are being held in a modern-day slave system. It is like working in a mafia group and it is very difficult to get out from the military.’²²⁵ ,

The system that Nyi Thuta here labels as slave-like does not only refer to the isolation of Tatmadaw soldiers on army bases living lives detached from the wider population. It also hints at what Sai Latt's (2016) pre-coup study describes as a chronic system of internal hierarchical power relations that binds lower-ranks in the Tatmadaw to their superiors through inherently violent patron-client relations. In part, this system is sustained by a military discourse of 'one blood, one voice, and one order', which positions junior soldiers as subservient bodies to their seniors, instilling complete loyalty and unquestioned obedience.²²⁶ This has created not only an internal culture of following orders, but also one where junior soldiers are expected to consistently please their superiors, both economically and with gifts and services to secure protection and promotions. Senior officers, Sai Latt has shown in his study, simultaneously exploit their subordinates in terms of arbitrary taxation, unpaid forced labour, and financial manipulation (for instance with their salaries). These practices sustain junior, and especially, frontline soldiers in a situation of poverty, while being used by superiors to aid their own upward mobility, as they too must in turn please those above them. Sai Latt's study also submits evidence of physical abuse of junior soldiers as a means of enforcing control and obedience within the exploitative patron-client relations.²²⁷ This is confirmed by defector Captain Khant Ko, who explained that physical abuse commences during military training and is focused on instilling fear to ensure that junior soldiers do not question orders:

‘ From the very beginning of the training [at the DSTA – Defence Services Technological Academy], we were ruled by various fears. The first-year students were punished by the seniors. Almost throughout the first year

at the academy, our seniors came one by one or group by group to beat one night after another. Since then, fear has prevailed, and we have been scared when we see our seniors. During the whole time of first year student, we could only talk 6 words to our seniors – Thee, Ma Thee; Shi, Ma Shi; Hote, Ma Hote [Know, Don't Know; Have, Have not; Yes; No]. If we talked except form those six words, we got beaten. It's been 12 years since I was in my first year, but I still have nightmares about things from my first year. Therefore, a soldier's ability to change and improve his understanding [of what goes on in the army] is limited by his fear. The more he learns, the more dangerous it becomes for him. This is the way of the Tatmadaw. They know they are wrong, but no one dares to say by themselves that it is wrong. If their leaders say "this is right", they accept.²²⁸ ,

An anonymised defector who used to serve as a sergeant clerk highlighted the internal culture of following orders and further linked this to the prevention of soldiers from thinking freely and independently – here speaking specifically about lower-ranks:

Most of the grass-root soldiers think: "We are soldiers, and we have to take any order from our leaders". They were trained to be like that. Therefore, if there is an order, they will take it and proceed. Do first and think later [...]. They do not dare to refuse the orders and have no idea how to refuse them. They were systematically brainwashed to accept these things.²²⁹ ,

Asked by DVB why the lower ranks, who are now losing their lives for the Tatmadaw leaders in the fight against the resistance movements, do not resist, the sergeant clerk continued:

The lives of the grassroots are very low. They think they have no one to rely on but the Tatmadaw. Therefore, they do not dare to desert. They were administered with fear. They even do not dare to speak out and it is difficult to resist, but they should try, I think. Some have such kind of idea [to resist] but some understand that the people are from the other side. Their leaders brainwashed them. Therefore, there are many soldiers who consider the people as the enemy.²³⁰ ,

In these narratives we can trace the Tatmadaw's systematic inculcation of fear, training obedience to orders and suppression of lower ranks. As noted earlier, this internal system, and the dire conditions it creates for lower ranks, has been highlighted as a driver for defection by some of the current defectors, and indeed has also led to desertions prior to the coup, as noted by Sai Latt.²³¹ Simultaneously, the system presents clear obstacles to defection, both immediate and structural. Overall, it ties junior soldiers to their seniors and works to divide soldiers from civilians, which can make it difficult to break free from the army's patron-client relations. The system of control through fear makes it difficult to leave the army for those who are discontent with the coup and the army's system, thereby posing an immediate obstacle to defection. Yet the system also creates deeper structural obstacles to mobilising or incentivising soldiers to wish to defect and thus be disloyal to the Tatmadaw.

As noted in the narratives quoted above, several defectors relate this structural obstacle to mental destruction or prevention of independent thinking, which some refer to as brainwashing.²³¹ Such 'brainwashing' blinds lower ranks to their own oppression within the army's violent patron-client relations and makes them believe that their survival depends on the army. According to some defectors, this is not only facilitated by the forms of training they receive within the army, but also by the low levels of education and poverty of many recruits.

They do not need smart people in the military. They [army leaders] are afraid that if someone is very smart, they will point out their mistakes and misconduct. Therefore, they oppress such kinds of people. For example, when such people ask for leave, they are rejected. Hence, there are no people who dare to say their difficulties in a meeting. Therefore, military management in the military campus is a system of oppression. (Captain Khant Ko, Defector participating in DVB live interview, 4 September 2021)²³³

Sai Latt's pre-coup study provides some important contextual background to this point about low education, linking it partly to the army's system of recruitment that developed after the 1990 coup when the new army leadership set out to enlarge the size of the army.²³⁴ Since then, it was difficult to mobilise enough new recruits, and combined with high levels of yearly desertions (e.g. 9,467 desertions between May and August 2006), a system developed where most recruits were from among the poorest of the poor, orphans, children, criminals, and people with no or very low

education.²³⁵ Promotions within the army were simultaneously attached to the ability of seniors like battalion commanders to find new recruits, and if commanders failed to live up to recruitment numbers they were also scolded or punished. This nurtured a system of random recruitment with a focus on quantity rather than quality, where officers would pay for new soldiers to join the army and even force juniors to recruit.²³⁶ Defector Captain Lin Htet Aung has confirmed the continuity of these practices to this day, which he himself claims that he was involved in before he defected. The result, he explained, is that soldiers joined to improve their livelihoods and that many were not well educated and trained.²³⁷ This has made lower-ranks more prone to being bullied by seniors and to what the defectors today describe as brainwashing.

An anonymised defector sergeant clerk explained that when low educated recruits first joined the army 'they were polite, but later they were brainwashed, and some became rude'. He further added:

‘ The main reason is the level of education [of grass-roots soldiers]. Therefore, the lower echelons are taking whatever orders – if the order is to go, they go, if the order is to kill, they kill. They do not think, if they do it, what effect it will have on them or the country. The number of educated people is very low in the grassroots of the military. They also have less thinking ability. In fact, it is not their fault. Their original mindsets are not like that, they were brainwashed and separated from the people.’²³⁸

A retired bachelor soldier who fled the army before the coup after having served since 2012, was of the opinion that the recruitment of soldiers from the poorer echelons of society makes them believe that their survival depends on staying in the army:

‘ Some do not know how to flee [the army]. Some are also afraid what will happen to their livelihood if they flee. Almost all lower rank soldier joined the military because of their poverty in every area. Some are orphans and their relatives could not support them, or they joined because the parents could not control them [...]. Therefore, the soldiers of lower ranks who cannot afford to go anywhere else [than the army] are bullied by the upper-level people. Also, even though they are not happy in the military, they think the military is still their benefactor.’²³⁹

This quote underlines Sai Latt's point on how the poverty of lower ranks is not only reproduced within the army, but also binds them into hierarchical and abusive patron-client relations that can be hard to break free from and hence can be an important obstacle to defection. Importantly, this system has also tended to reinforce a separation between soldiers and civilians, or 'the people', as noted in the other defector narratives quoted above. This relates not only to the relative isolation of soldiers within army bases, but also to how frontline soldiers have tried to overcome their own poverty by exploiting civilian villagers within their territories of operation. Sai Latt provides several examples where soldiers, with the support of their superiors, have looted villagers for food and violently forced them to provide free labour for army units. In that sense, lower ranks have participated in reproducing their own subjection in their treatment of, and relationship to, civilians.²⁴⁰ While such practices may work to create discontent among lower ranking soldiers towards their organisation and superiors, they also underline deeper rifts between them and the people, which in the current situation may also present significant obstacles to defection. Simultaneously, the deeper history of exploitative and violent relations within the army can aid us in trying to understand why many soldiers since the coup have participated not only in violent crackdowns on protesters but also in various forms of looting and raiding of civilians.

Andrew Selth highlights how the internal relations of the Tatmadaw rest on a deeper isolation of military personnel from the wider population by tying them to the Tatmadaw's own institutions and economy. While this isolation may be associated with exploitation of lower ranks, it has simultaneously, positioned the officer corps and their close relatives as a separate and privileged caste within Myanmar society.²⁴¹ This system is further sustained by economic ties and a system of promotions that affect military personnel in various ways across different levels of rank, as we address next.

Economic ties and the internal incentive structure

Marco Bunte and Yoshihiro Nakanishi have argued that the stability and cohesion of the Tatmadaw has relied on an internal incentive structure that keeps the officer corps tied to the army, through promotions, special benefits, and the granting of lucrative official positions, including after retirement.²⁴² Ultimately this system has been interlinked with the Tatmadaw's capacity to gain dominance in politics, and over a long historical period, also within the economy.

During the Ne Win socialist regime prior to 1988, the internal cohesion of the Tatmadaw was, according to Nakanishi, the result of the development of a system of distribution of official positions to military officers in the party and in the civilian administration, both before and after retirement.²⁴³ This was combined with the use of fixed and restrictive promotion paths within the military that were accompanied by frequent spatial transfers and officer reshuffles.²⁴⁴ Those who lost out on military promotions were transferred to the party or the administration to avoid dissatisfaction and secure cohesion.²⁴⁵ Together these mechanisms allowed for pervasive control of the officer corps, securing officers' loyalty to the organisation and tempering internal dissatisfaction and possibilities for dissent, while concurrently facilitating the penetration of military officers into the state administration.²⁴⁶ After Ne Win stepped down – following the 1988 uprising and the military coup that succeeded the 1990 elections – this internal incentive structure of promotions and positions for the officer corps persisted and continued to be salient even after the introduction of elected civilian governments.²⁴⁷

A core difference from the Ne Win period is that the internal incentive structure was expanded to include significant economic benefits for military officers after the new military junta in the 1990s liberalised the economy and opened up for foreign investment.²⁴⁸ While the transition to a market economy served to remit the economic crisis facing Myanmar, it was also employed to finance a significant expansion (from 200,000 armed forces in 1988 to 400,000 by 1999) and modernisation of the army itself.²⁴⁹ Simultaneously, the army secured itself a near monopoly on the economy, which also allowed it to provide active and retired officers with economic business opportunities and lucrative retirement schemes.²⁵⁰ As such, entering the army since then became a stepping-stone for personal wealth, beyond military service and for family members of army officers. This system was partly facilitated by the formation of large military conglomerates, notably including the Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL – previously UMEHL) and the Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC), which initially took over many of the state-owned enterprises and later expanded to take advantage of the marketisation of the economy.²⁵¹ Established in 1990, the MEHL continues to operate as a military-managed business engaged in various commercial enterprises and industries, serving principally as a 'welfare programme' for active and retired military personnel.²⁵² The MEC covers various insurance companies, factories, banks, and other businesses, including joint ventures with foreign companies. Its private shares are owned by active military personnel and their family members. High- and low-

ranking officers alike pay into a MEC-related insurance scheme, which is withdrawn from their salaries and which ties them economically to the military in the present and for their future retirement.

While the military lost its dominant role in policy formulation and its businesses began to face higher competition after the NLD took over the civilian government in 2016, military companies have remained powerful and deeply entrenched in the Myanmar economy. The conglomerates have also benefitted from increased privatisation and foreign investments, which has resulted in continued military control of the vast majority of major businesses in the country (including rice trading, mining, petroleum, banking, transport, steel, beverages, real estate and so forth).²⁵³ Overall, therefore the MEHL and MEC continue to provide lucrative career channels for retired army personnel and for active officers to extract significant business rents. In addition, profits from MEHL and MEC businesses, in e.g. the jade trade, are shared with families of former senior generals, and officers have also been known to extract informal payments from private companies in exchange for preferential treatment.²⁵⁴

This high-scale military monopolisation of the formal economy in Myanmar since the 1990s has in addition co-existed with large-scale military seizures of farmland for commercial purposes and with the involvement of military officers in the informal or illicit economy of for instance logging, gems, and drug-trafficking, especially in the ethnic border states. The latter activities were in particular facilitated by the ceasefires that were brokered with numerous EAOs from 1989 onwards, which also enabled many regional commanders and officers to enrich themselves through various forms of rent-seeking opportunities.²⁵⁵ This coincided with the expansion of the army through a system of self-funding for each battalion, which also created opportunities for officers to earn personal profits through different channels, including approving business licenses, grabbing land and engaging in illegal trade.²⁵⁶ Also, these activities continued more or less undisturbed during both the USDP and NLD governmental periods, despite the NLD beginning to speak about reforming the economy prior to the coup.²⁵⁷ As such, they remain relevant for present discussions regarding defections.

The army's strong hold over the economy, tying serving and retired military officers to private businesses, has succeeded in strongly binding military personnel to the army and can be viewed as a key method of securing loyalty to, and internal integration of, the Tatmadaw in ways that prevent both purges at the top and defections lower down

in the army's officer hierarchy.²⁵⁸ It is evident that wealth creation and economic ties are likely much more significant as obstacles to defections the higher up we look in the Tatmadaw's hierarchy. Reflecting on why officers above the rank of major have not joined the CDM, defector Lin Htet Aung reflected:

‘ Above the Major level, they have not joined yet. It will be very difficult to get out from their position. According to the system of the army, low rank level to Major level soldiers have faced many difficulties. However, when you were promoted in above level, the orders come with the benefits. When they are promoted the rank of colonel regional commander, you much love the military because they have more rights, privileges, and benefit. You have fallen in love with the stars on your shoulders. Even when you know about the injustice things or wrong things, you never dare to reveal the truth.’²⁵⁹ ,

We noted earlier in this report, that some military personnel at major and captain level said that they partly defected because they could not accept the economic greed, corruption and profiting at the top of the Tatmadaw. Yet it is likely that even within this group, as well as among lower ranks, economic ties and the potential loss of benefits could present important obstacles to defections. As noted by Andrew Selth, the fear of losing benefits may not solely be tied to lucrative businesses, but also to the range of services and basic necessities that many military personnel have access to, such as medical care, electricity, petrol, food and so forth. Given the collapse of the economy since the coup, such benefits may likely be even more valued, making the fear of losing them even greater. This situation could encourage continued loyalty or at least attachment to the Tatmadaw, and thus undermine motivations to defect.²⁶⁰

Several defectors have highlighted that some military officers are reluctant to defect because they do not want to miss out on their retirement scheme, which they have paid into for years, expecting to get rewarded with both revenue and position in the future.²⁶¹ Such payments are imposed through forced salary deductions, thus also binding lower ranks to the army economically. A female defector explained the difficulties of getting out of this system:

‘ They did not explain why we had to pay [to the MEC] from our salaries. It has been deducted from our salary since we were in training. They said we can withdraw but there are many steps and a lot of paperwork. Poor

families are more vulnerable to such deductions. MEC saving is the same. They said we will get interest and it is good for after pension. They also keep our saving books as well.²⁶² ,

Defector Major Hein Thaw Oo further explained in an interview in April that several other military officers and soldiers from his outfit wanted to join the CDM but they did not defect because they have been offered wealth, possessions, and positions to stay.²⁶³ Others like defector Kaung Win Thant have highlighted how soldiers are tied economically to the Tatmadaw, both because they believe they depend economically on the army and because the military deliberately demotivates defections by withholding assets or shares that officers have in military companies:

Some soldiers believe that we will never be hungry and always get our salaries as long as the Tatmadaw exists. I do not believe that. In reality, there are many inconsistencies. Besides, it is not sure that they really can rule the country. I consulted with one of my seniors and said I cannot do that [stay in the army]. He said, “[...] it is very difficult to stand outside once you leave, whether for political reasons or not to stay in the military. After leaving the army, will you be able to live in poverty and work as a labourer? In the military, you do not have to worry about income and food”. He was right, but if I was greedy for these opportunities and stayed in the military and oppressed the people, I would be selfish. I do not want to be selfish. Whatever I face in the future, I have decided to join in the CDM with the sole intention of standing with the people. As I deserted on 27 April, I did not get my salary. In mid-April, I applied for a bank saving but I did not get it. This is part of a system to control the military personnel who are in service. They surely know that if a soldier has a lot of money, he could leave the army. Hence, they do not [let military personnel] withdraw the money from the share of Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited [MEHL] and life insurance and the money are put back in the bank account.²⁶⁴ ,

Defector Kaung Win Thant makes a distinction between economically selfish and non-selfish military personnel when trying to understand how the internal economy of the Tatmadaw both incentivises soldiers to remain within the army while it drives others to defect on moral and political, rather than economic grounds. In short, it by

and large makes pragmatic economic sense to remain within the army, at least for those at officer-rank level. Reflecting on the same topic, but also highlighting the prospect of promotions, Nyi Thuta stated to the DVB:

For those who do not love [the people], they only want to be promoted. I cannot be one of those officers. Knowing such a situation, officers who work for promotion and self-interest should consider whether they are qualified as leaders of an army. These officers know that everything they are doing now is in the interests of the commander-in-chief and the generals. But they are lying to themselves in fear of endangering themselves and their promotion. It's very sad.²⁶⁵

In addition, to the incentives for promotions and economic benefits, it is also likely that an internal culture where exploitation and corruption have been accepted at least by some within the army, can prevent defections or at least prevent army officers and lower-ranks from questioning the culture. This became clear in a People's Soldiers debate on Zoom on 4 September, where an in-service soldier was questioned about the enrichment of Tatmadaw's leaders:

Interviewer (a defector): The military leaders have become very rich. Although their salaries in the constitution are low, they own big assets like the MyTel Company. Do you think this is because their families are so good at business or is it because of luck?

In-service soldier: I am an in-service military personnel. I do not have a plan to join the CDM. I do not love the military leaders and I do not have to protect them. However, the situation like in this question will not only be in the army but also outside. In a company, a manager gets paid as a manager and has his authority, and a managing director gets paid as a managing director and has his authority. Depending on the position he holds, he is given authority. Everyone knows this situation. In the same way, when you become a senior, you get bribes because of your position. For example: When I went to a front line as deputy battalion commander, one day my senior, the battalion commander, had to go back home due to a family funeral. Thus, I was assigned as an acting battalion commander. Things changed when I took that position such as the village administrator sent a meal to me. This is a very small case. As a result, the higher the position, the greater the authority. A signature from

a high-ranking official can be a lot of authority to act. Of course, the salary for a military leader is 30-50 lakh and they are not able to buy those kinds of stuff. But they will get bribes. This is normal in this environment.²⁶⁶

This sense of 'normalisation' of corruption and economic transactions inside the Tatmadaw could in part be influenced by the self-financing of army units that was introduced in the 1990s. According to Sai Latt's study, this self-financed system has allowed officers to personally enrich themselves, for instance by engaging in business activities, taking bribes, and exploiting lower-ranks, economically and through forced labour. At the same time, the officers were expected to use the profits of such activities to finance their army units and operations. If they failed to do so, Sai Latt argues, they would be punished by their own superiors or lose promotions.²⁶⁷ This reflects a system where future promotions, benefits and protections are tied to the generation of wealth.²⁶⁸ For lower ranks, as discussed earlier, this system tends to keep them in a situation of poverty, which could motivate defection or desertion, but it simultaneously creates expectations that the sacrifices they make can eventually turn into benefits and promotions.

Our interview with an NGO worker, Ma Thida (pseudonym) who is married to a now retired soldier, but who has remained connected to the army ever since, revealed some of these in-built tendencies in the Tatmadaw.²⁶⁹

I resent people who think that majors in the army are rich. The soldiers on the front line live the hardest and poorest lives. If a household has a military officer, that house is like a war-torn house [very poor household] because the officer must take the family's properties to resolve his livelihood problems. I have used my own salary to send to my husband [when he was on the frontline], because he could not cater for his livelihood while in the army. And those soldiers who have their families with them [on the frontline] must secure their livelihood by doing gardening or raising livestock or some kind of farming business. Where my husband was posted they had to grow opium trees as this was the only means of livelihood. Some soldiers' daughters become sex workers for the family to survive, and the soldiers cannot afford to send them to get education. Some soldiers are not reflective on their poor state. They have low education and just think the poor life is normal. My husband told me when he was on the front line that his regiment commander made him go to the pawn shops to get money to cover the regiment

commanders' needs, like when his wife was going to get hospitalised. When higher ranks visited the frontline regiment, the soldiers and the commander had to gather money to treat the visitors with food and drinks, otherwise it could affect their promotion. The leaders did not listen to their problems – they just had to follow orders. ,

When we asked Ma Thida about defections since the coup, she was sceptical that many soldiers would in fact leave the army. Most would stay, she said. Her main reason for thinking this, is that soldiers are so tied up to the army and to each other that it is hard to disconnect from the army, even after retirement. She said:

‘ The soldiers develop very close relationships to each other on the frontlines. Many of them only know each other from the army and not people from outside, especially if they, like my husband have been in the army for many years. My husband’s friends, even after he retired, are all in the military and he keeps those connections. They also have shared Facebook groups with each other between the different groups and training batches. So even if they know the military leaders are not good in the country, they do not want to leave the military. They have very strong relationships with each other and understanding for each other. They resolve their poor problems together. ²⁷⁰ ,

At the end of the interview, Ma Thida told us that her husband retired at the rank of major after 15 years of service. He resigned because he was not physically fit for a promotion and the other options he was offered within the army did not include the possibility for promotion. After retirement he was offered a job in the military conglomerate MEC by his superior where he worked for some time. After he left MEC he struggled, but he continued to rely on relationships with his peers from within the Tatmadaw. Since the coup he has, however, become successful, while Ma Thida herself has lost hope for her future career. Her husband has become a broker selling steel and iron (from the buildings that were burnt down since the coup) to military-linked construction businesses. He got that job opportunity through connections with people he still knows from the army group that he trained together with at DSA. He is now making a lot of money, Ma Thida said.

This minor example is illustrative of the ways in which military personnel, despite having served under dire conditions and not having succeeded in acquiring promotions that bring high economic benefits, are tied to the army personally, and in terms of prospects for economic opportunities and success at least sometime in

their life. Therefore, while economic incentives and ties at the top of the army hierarchy are central to the prevention of army rifts and purges, these can also serve as structural obstacles to defections among lower ranks. At the same time, Ma Thida highlighted that many soldiers and their families, even among those who are educated, are also very unlikely to defect 'because of the strong psychological warfare or propaganda in the military. They strongly believe that the army is protecting the religion and race of Myanmar'.²⁷¹

MILITARY IDEOLOGY – BUDDHIST NATIONALISM AND INTERNAL ENEMIES

The Tatmadaw's tight grip on its forces through patron-client relationships, isolation from civilians, and stringent obedience to orders has for decades been combined within a particular nationalist military ideology. This ideology portrays the Tatmadaw as the guardian of the state and as the only institution that can secure national unity, against the threat of destabilising external and internal forces.²⁷² While fostered to legitimise military rule within the wider population and beyond the Tatmadaw's own institutions and personnel, this ideology is also consistently propagated to soldiers from the time of training and throughout service to produce a strong esprit de corps.²⁷³

As related by Ye Myo Hein, 'the Tatmadaw launches constant indoctrination and propaganda campaigns, telling soldiers that they are the guardians of the nation and national unity'. Propaganda campaigns convey slogans like 'only if the Tatmadaw is strong, will the nation be strong,' and 'the Tatmadaw is [the] mother and father of the people'.²⁷⁴ These campaigns position the Tatmadaw above the civilian population and imbue soldiers with the belief that the country will fall apart without the Tatmadaw. In addition, military-owned TV stations frequently broadcast high-budget war movies which convey to soldiers the might and kingly capacity of the Tatmadaw. While the impact of this propaganda on broader society has been limited, Ye Myo Hein argues, it exerts significant influence on the closed social circle of military officers and on soldiers who are isolated in army bases.²⁷⁵

We suggest that this ideological campaigning and the way it is instilled into military personnel also constitutes a significant structural obstacle to defection. This is embedded in a long history.

Early in its history, the legitimacy of military rule was principally tied to the historical representation of the Tatmadaw as the army of national liberation that preceded and secured an independent state.²⁷⁶ This laid the foundation for the Tatmadaw to retroactively claim the role of guardian of the Burmese state and defender of the nation when Ne Win staged a military coup in 1962.²⁷⁷ Yet from this point on, the nationalist ideology that served to legitimate the Tatmadaw's seizure of political power, also became inextricably tied to the construction of both external and internal enemies who are portrayed as destabilising the union.²⁷⁸ At the time of the 1962 coup, the key external enemy was Chinese communist forces, while the key internal enemies were, and have for decades remained, the ethnic armed organisations (EAOs), which in the early days were highly separatist.²⁷⁹ Until its defeat in 1989, the Communist party of Burma (BCP) also constituted a significant threat to the Tatmadaw, and was seen as a core internal enemy, comprising also defectors from the army itself.²⁸⁰ As Selth notes this early history likely still creates feelings of loyalty and patriotism among the Tatmadaw's officer corps, who 'have grown up learning about the bitter political divisions, economic hardships, criminal activities and rural insurgencies that plagued Myanmar's early years', and based on this, they have come to believe that it 'was only through the country's fledgling armed force that the Union survived'.²⁸¹

After the 1988 democratic uprising, which included the participation of a large number of majority Bamar people, the Tatmadaw's notion of internal enemies expanded to include all civilians who opposed military rule.²⁸² Included here was the pro-democracy movement under Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the NLD. As Callahan notes, despite being the daughter of the founder of the army, Aung San, Aung San Suu Kyi became the Tatmadaw's new opposition icon in the 1990s, which previously had been the communist guerrillas and the ethnic insurgent leaders.²⁸³ At that time, the Tatmadaw also consolidated its ideology in what is referred to as its 'Three National Causes', which includes: 'Non-disintegration of the Union; non-disintegration of national solidarity'; and 'the perpetuation of national sovereignty'.²⁸⁴ The ideological notions that underpin these causes are, according to Gravers, that civilians and non-Bamar groups are destabilising 'the nation and the union state, assisted – in the Tatmadaw's often paranoid imagination – by 'foreign colonialists'.²⁸⁵ According to the Tatmadaw's reasoning, this means that 'the military must identify and destroy the enemies who destabilise the union' to protect and secure the integration of the Myanmar nation-state.²⁸⁶

Over the past decade, the Tatmadaw's nationalist ideology has also increasingly relied on a religious discourse whereby the Tatmadaw has presented itself as the protector of Buddhism against an external and internal threat of an expansionary Islam.²⁸⁷ This anti-Muslim discourse has been supported by nationalist monks aligned with army generals, who preach that the Tatmadaw and the Buddhist monkhood must unite to combat Islam.²⁸⁸ While this discourse has portrayed Muslims as internal enemies across Myanmar, it has been most evidently employed in defending the pervasive military atrocities against the Muslim Rohingya. In the Tatmadaw's internal propaganda to its soldiers, this anti-Muslim discourse co-exists with a portrayal of Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD as agents of a rapacious West, which could conquer Myanmar at any moment, and which are promoting foreign ideas of democracy that will destabilise the country.²⁸⁹ At the same time Aung San Suu Kyi has been labelled as protecting and aiding the Muslim threat.

A son of an army officer, Rio (pseudonym) vividly recounts in an Oxford Tea Circle article how these ideas, based on a mixture of Buddhist Nationalism and an anti-Aung San Suu Kyi rhetoric, shape a particular understanding of domestic politics and religion within the Tatmadaw:

Most soldiers [...] find it difficult to see ASSK as a genuine, democratically-elected leader of people; instead, they see her as someone with foreign allegiances, who married a foreigner and who is working for the Muslims and Rohingya. This is despite Daw Suu's decision to protect the institutions of the military at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in December 2019. Like other conservative Burmese Buddhist people, most soldiers have strong anti-Muslim sentiments, which has led them to condone the serious human right violations carried out against Rohingyas in Northern Rakhine State between 2016 and 2017. Such sentiment was originated and amplified by the propaganda of former military regimes, the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), and their related associations. These organizations regularly use religion for the sake of political advantage. Moreover, many soldiers have consumed hate speech and fake news on social media, especially on Facebook.²⁹⁰

A soldier we interviewed, who fled the army before the coup, similarly explained: 'When in the military we were told that Daw Suu is pro-Muslim and that her husband is kalar [derogative term used for Muslims and to some extent Hindus in Myanmar]. [We were told that] she favours the Muslims and not the Buddhists and that she is degrading Buddhism in our country'.²⁹¹

A defector in a People's Embrace debate confirmed these forms of military propaganda, which begins during training:

Most of the time, we were told during the training that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is not in line with the military. She is always opposed to the military. We were brainwashed like that. After I had finished school, I observed by myself and then I found out that this was just propaganda. However, those who do not have their own ideas believe that the country will fall apart and that Buddhism will be destroyed if Daw Aung San Suu Kyi leads. As for me, I admire Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. She abandoned her family and tried to develop the country. I became more sympathetic to her when I deserted, because now I live far away from my [military] family.²⁹²

When asked how to change these ideas among soldiers, this same defector highlighted that within the army, some deeply believe that the Tatmadaw is protecting Buddhism, while others have been brainwashed:

There are two types of groups [in the army]. One group which was brainwashed and which came to understand the truth. And another group, which strongly believes that the Tatmadaw is protecting the country and religion [Buddhism] and they support everything the dictators do. It is not easy to change in a short period of time what they have believed in for a lifetime.²⁹³

Other defectors have similarly highlighted that while in service they were made to see the Tatmadaw as the guardian of a threatened Buddhist nation and that the enemies are Muslims as well as Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, who are hellbent on destroying the Buddhist country.²⁹⁴ One of the interviewed defectors said that he had believed this propaganda until after the coup and that he had previously defended the army's position on the Rohingya as enemies bent on destroying Myanmar. He only altered his views after the coup when he saw the violent crackdowns on peaceful protesters.²⁹⁵

In an RFA interview, a CDM soldier, Captain Naing Lin, also explained this form of military propaganda since the coup:

Every month, the military leaders distribute a message through Telegram to every regiment stating that “the NLD-led terrorist groups of the spring revolution, the PDF and the NUG are destroying the nation’s economy, peace, and stability so that the military cannot rule [...]. Because of those terrorist groups, the nation is unstable in every sector. However, the Tatmadaw is working with the people for the better future of the country’s peace and stability”.²⁹⁶

Such messages come from the military leaders and are passed on by regiment commanders to the lower ranks, Naing Lin explained. He also said that since the NLD came into power, the Tatmadaw leaders visited the military bases monthly and said that ‘while we (Tatmadaw) were doing the good things for the nation, the ruling NLD is trying to make the Tatmadaw collapse in many ways. So, we (Tatmadaw) have to take care of not collapsing. We must unite. We must uphold our three important causes to prevent the disintegration of the nation’.²⁹⁷

While those who have defected since the coup may now be questioning the Tatmadaw’s nationalist ideology and its construction of internal enemies, after they witnessed the violent crackdowns on civilians, others likely remain loyal to the army due to these very ideas and continuous forms of propaganda. In the current situation since the coup, the Tatmadaw’s long history of portraying pro-democracy protesters and the NLD as enemies, is also significant. As related by defector Captain Tun Myat Aung, soldiers are taught during training that those who protest in the name of democracy are criminals. He recounted that in his first year of training at the DSA, he was shown a film that portrayed democracy activists in 1988 as frenzied animals slicing off soldiers’ heads.²⁹⁸ He added that based on these forms of training, soldiers in the current situation ‘see protesters as criminals because if someone disobeys or protests the military, they are criminal’.²⁹⁹ He further told the New York Times that the protesters are conveyed by the Tatmadaw as part of a foreign aggression: ‘Now soldiers are killing people with the mind-set that they are protecting their nation from foreign intervention’. The feared invasion is not through military means, but through indirect foreign influence. For instance, George Soros, the American philanthropist and democracy advocate, stands accused in Tatmadaw circles of trying to subvert the country with large cash donations for activists and politicians.

A military spokesman also implied during a news conference that people protesting the coup were funded from abroad.³⁰⁰ These current ways of legitimising the violence against civilians is a clear replication of decades of ideological campaigning, which links internal opposition to military rule with foreign take over. As noted by Selth, a significant element of this ideology is the idea that the 'armed forces have a special role to play in Myanmar's national affairs and [that] its leaders have a unique insight into the country's needs' that should not be interfered in by outsiders. In this logic, 'the armed forces are free to do whatever it takes to achieve the self-appointed task of restoring "law and order", as they perceive it, and safeguarding the Republic from all its enemies, armed and unarmed, domestic and foreign'.³⁰¹

Another significant element of this military discourse is the way that civilian politicians are criminalised and seen as a threat to not only the Tatmadaw but to national politics. On this point, a defector explained the following when asked in a People's Soldier group debate about what ideology the military junta uses and how it tries to control soldiers from within:

They were brainwashed [being told]: "As the Patriotic Tatmadaw we have to protect National Politics. If the military is weakened, it will be oppressed by the civilian government. From the private domains to the National Defence College we were brainwashed like this".³⁰²

For soldiers who have come to believe the various facets of the military's ideology, the violent crackdowns on civilians would unlikely motivate defection but rather compel them to continue to fight for what are perceived to be existential threats not only to the power of the Tatmadaw, but to the Myanmar nation and Buddhist religion. For others, it is perhaps more a question of following orders and believing that they are merely taking a defensive position, as Htet Myat explained to us: 'The military is spreading an ideology in the army that even if soldiers kill the people, they are not guilty because they are on security duty [...]. In the army you do not have to decide whether it is right of wrong. You have to do what you are ordered to do. For example, if you ask why a soldier killed the people, they will say that they shot them for their security because they attempted to attack them'.³⁰³

Our conversation with Ma Thida, the wife of a retired officer, revealed another dimension to this way of thinking about military violence. She believed that the coup had become an opportunity for soldiers to regain a sense of empowerment.

Ma Thida's husband had frequently told her that many in the army felt they had been undermined and disempowered during the NLD's past five years in government and during various developments within the country. Also, those that retired from the Tatmadaw, including her husband, felt left behind and unrecognised, while they saw others, e.g. in NGO and other sectors thrive. She told us that the entire military got a lot of critique and blame on social media. They were looked down upon by civilians, CSOs, the NLD government and people with education, due to the negative history of the Tatmadaw. Soldiers were frequently ostracised and belittled, she said. For example, on social media people called the soldiers Sitt Kway ('war dog'). They were also called rapists. It was like hate speech, she told us. 'So the military people felt they lost their power', she said. When asked what she thought when defectors on social media said that many soldiers would like to defect if they could, she replied: 'In my view this is fake news. Most of the soldiers are happy in their work and they do not want to defect the army. Many soldiers felt the resentment during these past five years, and now they are happy for getting back the power'.³⁰⁴

She also used this interpretation to explain why some soldiers have been violent against civilians without being ordered to do so, giving examples from Kayah and Karen states after the coup. One defecting warrant officer, Pyae Sone Aung similarly said to DVB on 7 May: 'Some soldiers committed violence on the people more than the orders they had been given. They want to show they got back the power'.³⁰⁵

These insights are illustrative of how strongly the construction of civilians as enemies by the Tatmadaw is entrenched among (some) soldiers. While this construction is ideologically embedded in the Tatmadaw's claim to defend and protect the Buddhist nation from internal and external threats, it has also, in combination with the insular culture of the army, worked to create a division between soldiers and the people that may impede defections and moral concerns over violence against civilians.

As asserted in this chapter, the obstacles to defection from the Tatmadaw are pervasive and reinforced by the military leaderships' concerted efforts to systematically prevent defections and secure loyalty, not only after, but also long before the coup. In fact, as noted, strategies of preventing defections have for decades been integrated into the Tatmadaw's training modalities and ideological campaigns, its promotion and reward system, and its internal hierarchical relations and command structure. Since the 1990s' economic liberalisation, the military leadership has also nurtured loyalty through economic incentives and gains. To

understand current defection obstacles, it has therefore been important to delve into the deeper history and internal system of the Tatmadaw. It has likewise been significant to the analysis to consider both immediate and structural defection obstacles, as this reveals internal differences within the army in terms of perspectives and incentives. Simultaneously, the analytical distinction allows for a deeper understanding of what conditions would be necessary for more defections to occur.

Indeed, when we listen to the narratives of recent defectors, there are immediate obstacles to defection, which impede those soldiers who wish to leave the army from doing so, such as personal and family security, risks of being caught and punished, restrictions on movement and information, and fear of losing livelihoods. These obstacles, while not entirely easy to overcome, can be countered by efforts from the military opposition in terms of guarantees of protection and livelihood support. These efforts are in line with what the CDM soldier groups and the NUG are already trying to do.

It is far more difficult to address the structural obstacles to defection, which are deeply embedded in a combination of the military's ideological programming and hierarchical patron-client relations, which have produced a particular mindset and culture at various levels of the military organisation. Significant here is not only the strict system of unquestionably following orders from above, but also the way that officers and lower ranks are tied into a hierarchical system of rewards, promotions and punishments, which is hard to break free from mentally and practically. It is evident that the army leadership and officers of higher ranks benefit economically from this system, but it also presents obstacles to defections lower down in the hierarchy. As noted in this chapter, even those lower ranking soldiers who live in poverty and are subject to frequent abuses by their superiors still tend to believe that their survival depends on the army. They are blinded from seeing their own oppression because they are caught within the system and are isolated from information and education outside of the Tatmadaw's realm. Another structural obstacle is the insular culture of the Tatmadaw, which is combined with an ideology that constructs and continuously reinforces a division between soldiers and shifting denominations of the people as enemies. While this division nurtures the belief that the army is the protector of the nation and Buddhism, the construction of people as enemies can simultaneously impede some soldiers from having moral concerns over the use of violence against civilians, which as noted in Chapter 3 is a key driver of defection for others.

It is impossible to verify what proposition of the army continues to obey orders and remain in service due to either the immediate or structural obstacles or some combination of both. What seems evident, however, is that for those who have yet to develop a desire to defect or to tacitly resist the army's orders from within, a change of mindset, beliefs, and habits is required, which goes beyond providing access to livelihood and protection outside of the Tatmadaw.





CONCLUSION: THE PROSPECT OF LARGE-SCALE DEFECTIONS



It seems evident that defections from the Myanmar military are continuously growing, and that the number of discontent in-service soldiers far outnumbers the existing defectors. Unprecedented in Myanmar's history, active defectors have organised themselves, and despite the security risks, have made strong efforts to support and mobilise other soldiers to join 'the people' and the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). These CDM soldier groups – People's Soldiers and People's Embrace – have also achieved recognition by the main political opposition to the military, the exiled National Unity Government (NUG). Growing support among other anti-coup actors and movements also lends these defectors moral and material support.

There is little doubt, as noticed by Andrew Selth, that the 'generals' greatest nightmare' is that 'the security forces themselves may break up' as this would 'gravely weaken the Tatmadaw's grip on power, not least because the junta lacks any popular mandate and depends almost entirely on the state's coercive apparatus to maintain its position'.³⁰⁶ In this light, the defections since the coup are likely perceived as a threat by the Tatmadaw. This is evident in how military officers have consistently tightened measures to control soldiers and to track down those who have left. Nevertheless, neither defections nor desertions have occurred in large enough numbers to compel the military leadership to change its overall course of action. Nor have they resulted in any signs of schisms within the army leadership, and only in one known instance has a high-ranking officer – a Brigadier-General - tried to defect, without success. In this context, it is important to acknowledge the Tatmadaw's historical legacy of using pervasive mechanisms to secure cohesion and loyalty within the armed forces.³⁰⁷ While frictions and tensions have indeed occurred within the Tatmadaw over time, such mechanisms have produced deep structural obstacles to defection in Myanmar, which, as we have argued in this report, are embedded in the Tatmadaw's long history of striving for pervasive political and economic power. Thus, as Ye Myo Hein has argued: 'Unless conditions change, a major split is still a distant prospect'.³⁰⁸

The question is what conditions would provoke a large enough scale of defections to make a significant impact on the military leadership's course of action, its operational ability and on its internal coherence, not least at the top and among regional commanders. Research seems to suggest that this will depend on how the political opposition and the armed resistance to the military coup develop over the coming months and how the military responds.

Since the research for this report commenced in May 2021, there has been a marked shift in the resistance to the coup, from solely peaceful protests and civil disobedience to an increasingly armed and violent resistance that challenges the Tatmadaw's ability to control the cities and rural areas of Myanmar. Simultaneously, we have seen significant developments in the strategies and campaigns to mobilise more soldiers to join the 'people's side' by active defector groups, which have been supported by the political opposition to the military since at least August. The ability of these campaigns and the opposition to create viable escape routes and trustworthy alternatives to the Tatmadaw's power, vision of order and ideology in the eyes of military personnel are likely to be significant in shaping larger-scale defections. Much less evident is the extent to which the armed resistance will motivate more defections, although the likelihood of this could increase if the armed resistance appears capable of defeating the army, which, as some defectors have argued, would require that resistance forces become more organised, professional and united, including with the ethnic armed organisations.³⁰⁹ Given the superior military strength of the Tatmadaw, for soldiers to believe that the armed resistance could be victorious would likely first require substantial levels of defection or at least of insubordination, including among higher ranks. Other motivating factors are therefore significant to consider.

While future outcomes are very uncertain, the analysis in this report suggests that any efforts to motivate more defections needs to acknowledge the diversity of not only drivers, but also obstacles to defection from Myanmar's military. This rests on an understanding of the Tatmadaw – and any military power for that matter – as a heterogenous organisation, that despite being a highly cohesive force with a set of core characteristics, does comprise a multi-layered set of sectors, rank levels, and individuals with different personal convictions and experiences. Given that this report has relied extensively on the voices of defectors who are mainly from the younger generation and who hold ranks from major and below, our analysis necessarily speaks mostly to prospects for larger-scale defections among this lower-ranking group of military personnel. Our analysis is therefore less prone to predict splits or schisms at the top of the Tatmadaw's hierarchy, although there is a possibility that a high number of defections at the bottom could contribute to a disintegration at the top.

Overall, support mechanisms and campaigns to encourage defections, as seen to some degree in Myanmar, need to be diversified to correspond with the heterogeneity of drivers and obstacles to defection. Based on our analysis in this report, these

drivers and obstacles can roughly be categorised as: moral, ideological, informational, personal/family security, and pragmatic – with pragmatic including concerns for, and often quite calculated risk assessments in relation to, survival and access to benefits, economic interests, positions/status, and beliefs in the victory or defeat of the resistance to the military. It is evident from this report that neither of these categories are mutually exclusive, but often overlap, both when considering why soldiers defect and when exploring what likely causes soldiers to remain in the Tatmadaw.

As evident in the wider scholarship on military desertions, morality has been a key driver of defection in Myanmar, with most defectors expressing deep moral concerns for the military violence against civilians as their primary reason to leave the army. Demoralisation here relates not only to the brutality of the violent acts themselves and fear of committing such acts or being complicit in them, but also to the notion that the military is 'killing its own people', who it is supposed to protect. Some defectors expressed this more clearly as a refusal to be part of a military organisation that is unjust and has lost its legitimacy among the people. The sheer size and broad-based composition of the popular opposition to the coup, spanning various ethno-religious groups and classes in Myanmar society, has, we suggest, aided this moral and to some extent ideological drive to not simply desert but to defect. As some defectors have expressed, this is a choice between serving either an unjust or just order. In this regard, moral concerns also go beyond civilian-military relations.

Several defectors have expressed their deep dissatisfaction with what they perceive as the personal self-interest, corruption, and greed of the military leadership, which particularly became apparent to them after the coup. Others have felt demoralised with how military superiors disregard, mistreat, and economically exploit lower ranks, thereby linking defection to a deeper critique of the internal military system that also existed prior to the coup. In this light, defecting becomes articulated not only as a matter of 'joining the people' or avoiding complicity in violence, but also an act of escaping a position of exploitation, in ways that interweave pragmatic, moral and ideological drivers. However, it is clear from our analysis that access to information and awareness have been key enabling drivers in such processes, particularly in forming part of the retrospective reflections that soldiers have made after defecting. Leaving the army was like 'going out of the dark and coming into the light', as some defectors have expressed. As suggested in this report, the internal military system that is articulated by some defectors as one of the reasons to defect, simultaneously constitutes a significant obstacle to defection of a more structural character.

In terms of drivers of defection, this report has suggested that ideological orientations are rarely expressed as a key reason for defection, at least not in terms of affiliations to a political party like the NLD. What is more prominent is a broader support for being on 'the people's side'. Some of the most active defectors do however articulate support for democracy, justice, and human rights, while others highlight that they oppose military rule in more modest ways, because they do not want to reverse the past five to ten years of development and of opening up to the outside world (notably in terms of access to the internet and information). A growing political awareness may indeed be emerging among those who are defecting, but as extensively discussed in this report, the ideological barriers to defection run deep.

These ideological dimensions are understood by the CDM soldier groups – like People's Soldiers and People's Embrace – as can be seen in their persistent efforts to enlighten in-service soldiers of the poor and unjust conditions within the army. While the emergence of these groups does not per se constitute a primary driver of defection, their mobilisation, awareness raising and support campaigns can be seen to aid ongoing and future defections in various respects. Identification with the CDM constitutes a potential exit option for soldiers (and police), e.g., as a place to be affiliated with, gain a new status and get moral support. The CDM soldier groups also try to provide security and pragmatic solutions for defectors that temper the anxieties associated with leaving the army. Finally, they attempt to facilitate wider support from the people to soldiers who wish to defect, which according to defectors like Nyi Thuta, has been a strong catalyst for defection, as many soldiers fear that they will not be welcomed by the people.³¹⁰ Importantly, these groups and their campaigns are enabled by social media and online platforms that were not available during previous periods of military rule, coups and massive popular uprisings. This variation on the past, which has now enabled an organised form of anti-junta soldier movement, could prove significant in envisioning a larger scale of defections. The extent to which the armed and violent elements of the resistance movement, such as the People's Defence Forces (PDFs), are considered a viable exit option, is however less certain. Although the PDFs have attracted some defectors and are getting some support from the CDM soldier groups (i.e., in terms of information and training), it is also evident that other soldiers are not prepared to fight 'their own' army. Some also doubt that the 'timing is right' for waging a war against the Tatmadaw.

What could prove significant in the long run, however, is the prospect of soldiers being integrated into a new military organisation – a point that is supported by comparative scholarship on military defection.³¹¹ In this regard, the political

opposition to the military junta, currently most prominently represented by the National Unity Government (NUG), has a key role to play in promoting trustworthy guarantees of future options and alternatives for military personnel. The policy statements of the NUG since August speak to this potential driver of defection by inviting soldiers to join the opposition and by stating their intention to integrate them into a future federal army. This also relates directly to the most immediate obstacles to defection, i.e. those linked to personal and family security, concerns for survival, loss of pensions and access to health care, that impede soldiers who wish to leave the army – for moral reasons – from doing so. These issues, linked to security, positions, and economic survival, relate to the more immediate and pragmatic defection obstacles and drivers. While there are obvious and real challenges to implementing such initiatives (by the NUG and others) in the current climate, they are nonetheless more tangible than addressing what we in this report have referred to as the structural obstacles to defection. These are the obstacles that impede deeper desires to defect and that secure continued loyalty to the army.

In a recent article on soldier defections in Myanmar, Ye Myo Hein makes the point that for many military personnel, a desire to defect would require a fundamental change of mindset. While he applauds the NUG and the CDM soldier groups' efforts, he argues: 'Countering the military's well established propaganda machine will require propaganda and psychological warfare campaigns that are more systematic and vigorous'.³¹² A sergeant defector echoed this point, stating that given the high risks and dangers of defecting, 'it is crucial for soldiers to have a fervent desire to oppose the military dictatorship in order to join the CDM because only if they have it, they will be ready to face any situation'.³¹³

In this report, structural obstacles to defection are embedded in what seasoned scholars on the Myanmar military have described as a pervasive insular culture, an internal hierarchical system of patron-client relations, and a powerful ideological machinery.³¹⁴ The Tatmadaw has decades of institutional experience not only in nurturing a strong esprit de corps and training its armed forces to stringently followed orders, but also in tying its military personnel to its internal system of rewards, promotions and punishments, and in inculcating deep ideological beliefs about its superior guardianship of the nation and Buddhism. The construction of the people as perpetual enemies that threaten the integration of the nation, is a pervasive part of this ideology, which is also used to justify the current forms of violence against anti-coup civilians and movements. The Tatmadaw system is partly sustained by continuous propaganda, the blocking of external information (or denunciation of it as 'fake news'), restrictions on movement, surveillance, and a

combination of benefits and threats. Simultaneously, the Tatmadaw's deeply embedded presence within the formal and informal economy allows it to keep the officer corps in check, while it breeds belief among lower ranks that their survival and future prosperity depends on being tied to the army. These characteristics constitute deep structural obstacles to defections. Higher ranking officers more obviously stand to lose status and economic benefits if they were to successfully defect, not discounting those that stay loyal because they deeply believe that the Tatmadaw's system is the only one that can keep the union together. Yet from what we have learnt from defectors' narratives and relatives of retired soldiers, it is just as probable that among lower ranks, there are those who have no desire to defect, despite living under poor conditions, because they are deeply tied to the army both mentally, socially, and physically.

These structural obstacles could be challenged over time, as recent defections suggest, but they do pose a strong and pervasive impediment to large-scale defections and desertions, not least in the higher echelons of the Myanmar military, who at least for pragmatic reasons stand to lose more from defecting than the rank-and-file. In this light, we suggest that the strongest potential catalyst of large-scale defections would be the conditions created by 'those who are fighting for a return to democracy', as also noted by Ye Myo Hein.³¹⁵ Providing immediate security, livelihood, and basic necessities for defectors is very significant, but would likely only appeal to those who are already intent on leaving the army. Campaigning and appealing to soldiers' morality and sense of justice and opening their eyes to the dire conditions that many of the rank-and-file are subjected to in the army, as the CDM soldier groups have done, is also a very important tool. Finally, as many defectors have highlighted, soldiers are encouraged to defect if and when they feel that they are supported and welcomed by the civilian population, so an increase in popular support to CDM soldiers is crucial.³¹⁶ Yet to nurture widespread moral concerns for violence against civilians and create fervent desires to oppose the military among soldiers more broadly, would require a strong challenge to the military's ideology of guardianship that portrays anyone opposed to them as enemies who pose an existential threat to the nation and religion. Economic incentives, prospects of future positions in, for instance, a federal army, and amnesties in the advent of the junta's fall could also prove significant for those who are less driven by moral and ideological concerns.³¹⁷ These are not areas that the opposition to the military, like the NUG, can fully guarantee in the current situation. The NUG's promises of such future alternatives for military personnel would therefore depend on a significant and continuous process of trust building.³¹⁸

Ye Myo Hein further presents the argument that the pro-democracy opposition needs to clearly articulate a persuasive alternative ideology to that of the Tatmadaw, which not only focuses on a call for a federal democratic union, but also includes visions of another kind of army where soldiers are fully entitled to human dignity, professional rights, and adequate standard of living. At a People's Dialogue meeting on 17 October, the NUG's Minister of International Cooperation, Dr. Sasa spoke to this call, promising that a future federal army would build on human rights, be subject to civilian control and pay out salaries to soldiers that corresponded with international standards. He said: 'The present military institution must be reformed and replaced. We will establish a federal army under the people'.³¹⁹

Ye Myo Hein also makes a call for a stronger and more united leadership across the various pro-democratic and pro-federalist movements. A strong alliance, he argues, between the NUG, the resistance forces and the ethnic armed organisations under clear political and military leadership could 'prove magnetic for military personnel'.³²⁰ This point was echoed by a sergeant defector from Chin state, who urged 'all ethnicities, armed forces and civil society organisations to be united'.³²¹ These are ambitious visions, but as developments since the 1 February coup have shown, broad-based resistance to the military has proven incredibly resilient and those alliances that have already developed between military defectors and the anti-coup opposition are unprecedented in Myanmar history. Whether these developments will lead to large-scale defections that reverse the military leadership's course of action meanwhile, remains uncertain.

NOTES

- 1 Tatmadaw is usually translated as 'royal force', but daw no longer refers to monarchy. Since Independence, Tatmadaw has been used as a vernacular term for the trident of armed forces, including the army, navy and air force, and it is also commonly used in English-language publications, see Andrew Selth (2021), 'Myanmar's military mindset: An exploratory survey', Griffith Asia Institute Research Paper, Griffith University, Brisbane.
- 2 Anecdotal evidence also suggests that the military is finding it hard to recruit new soldiers. On 24 October Myanmar correspondent for Channel Asia, for instance tweeted that the Tatmadaw is trying to re-recruit retired soldiers and that apparently only 100 people have applied to the military schools since the coup, whereas the yearly figure prior to the coup used to be 12,000. <https://twitter.com/LeongWaiKitCNA/status/1452295524942585859> (assessed on 25 October 2021).
- 3 The Irrawaddy (2021), 'Atrocious Myanmar Military at Risk of Splitting: Army Defectors', 28 August. Available at: https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/atrocious-myanmar-military-at-risk-of-splitting-army-defectors.html/amp?__twitter_impression=true (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 4 Yoshihiro Nakanishi (2013), *Strong Soldiers, Failed Revolution: The State and Military in Burma, 1962-88* (Singapore and Kyoto: NUS Press and Kyoto University Press); Sai S. W. Latt (2016), *Depoliticization, securitization and Violent accumulation in the integration of the Greater Mekong Sub-region*. Unpublished Phd Thesis, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby.
- 5 We hereby follow the common definition of desertions as implying that soldiers simply leave the army – i.e. they 'go home' – while defectors deliberately join the other side of a war or a conflict.
- 6 Police officers have also deserted and defected since the coup, as we discuss in Helene Maria Kyed & anonymised researchers from the Nyan Corridor: 'Police under the military coup in Myanmar: Between Violence, Fear, and Desertion', Nyan Corridor and DIIS, April 2021. Available at: https://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/4303211/police_under_the_military_coup_myanmar_final_2.pdf
- 7 Alexei Anisin (2020), 'Unravelling the complex nature of security force defection', *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 32(2), pp. 135-55; S. E. Nepstad (2011), *Nonviolent Revolutions: Civil Resistance in the Late 20th Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- 8 Marcos Degaut (2019), 'Out of Barracks: The Role of the Military in Democratic Revolutions', *Armed Forces & Society*, 45(1), pp. 78-100.
- 9 Selth (2021), 'Myanmar's military mindset', p. 1.
- 10 The Irrawaddy (2021), 'Myanmar Military Detains North Western Commander for Planning to Defect: Ethnic Insurgent Sources', 7 October. Available at: https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-military-detains-north-western-commander-for-planning-to-defect-ethnic-insurgent-sources.html?__cf_chl_jschl_tk__=pmd_yhxnszVjcxUFjN-hDGV.ez4geYLGloIECz3lr9S8qAUE-1634288625-0-gqNtZGzNpCjcnBszQsR (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 11 Angshuman Choudhury (2021), 'Why the Myanmar military is facing its most serious challenge today', *Barbed Wires*, 3 October. Available at: <https://barbedwires.substack.com/p/why-the-myanmar-military-is-facing> (accessed 21 October 2021).

- 12 Twitter message by Defector Nyi Thuta, available at: <https://twitter.com/peoplesoldiers/status/1451365622793662468> (accessed on 22 October 2021).
- 13 We participated in 17 CDM soldier online dialogue and debate meetings, hosted by the People's Soldier group and the People's Embrace. Some of the People's Soldier group debates were co-hosted by the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB). We also followed postings made by the CDM soldier groups and some defectors on their Facebook pages, as well as various live Facebook and YouTube video statements by defectors. We conducted two interviews with defected soldiers (a Captain and a Lieutenant), with the wife of a retired army major, and a retired officer. All data sources are based on online forms of communication and were in Burmese. They were translated into English in order to use quotations in English for this report. We acknowledge that some nuances are lost in these translations, but we have attempted to represent the Burmese language as accurately as possible. In addition, we are aware of the gaps in online sources, especially related to the loss of depth of information and insights that can be gained from face-to-face interactions and participant observation.
- 14 In the report we have used the names that defectors themselves have provided or used on publicly assessable platforms (social media, media interviews, online debate meetings). We are unaware of whether these are their real names or pseudonyms used for security reasons.
- 15 As Andrew Selth has argued, the testimonies of deserters and defectors offer valuable sources of information about the internal workings of the Tatmadaw, often inaccessible due to their secretive nature. We simultaneously acknowledge his point that their comments are naturally influenced by their current situation and are likely affected by the expectations of those offering them refuge. Selth (2021), p. 5.
- 16 Selth (2021), 'Myanmar's military mindset', p. 14.
- 17 Selth (2021), 'Myanmar's military mindset', p. 14, 17 & 22.
- 18 Holger Albrecht (2019), 'Military Insubordination in Popular Mass Uprisings', *Political Science Quarterly*, 134(2), p. 305.
- 19 Albrecht (2019), 'Military Insubordination', pp. 303-28.
- 20 Anisin (2020), 'Unravelling the complex', p. 136.
- 21 Many articles and analyses have been written about the Tatmadaw since the 1 February coup, and in-depth and impressive scholarly work has also been produced in the past, among others by Andrew Selth, Mary Callahan, Yoshihiro Nakanishi, Marco Bunte and Maun Aung Myoe. However, as noted by Andrew Selth, there are still many gaps in available data and insider knowledge of the Tatmadaw, which leaves the field open to much intuition, interpretation and speculation: Andrew Selth (2002), *Burma's Armed Forces: Power Without Glory* (Norwalk: East Bridge); M. P. Callahan (2003), *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press); Maun Aung Myoe (2009), *Building the Tatmadaw: Myanmar's Armed Forces Since 1948* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies); Andrew Selth (2021), 'Myanmar's coup will test the loyalty of the security forces', *The Interpreter*, 19 February. Available at: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/myanmar-coup-will-test-loyalty-security-forces> (accessed 21 October 2021); Nakanishi (2013), *Strong Soldiers, Failed Revolution*; Marco Bunte (2017), 'The NLD-Military Coalition in Myanmar: Military Guardianship and Its Economic Foundations', in Paul Chambers and Napisa Waitookiat, eds., *Khaki Capitalism: The Political Economy of the Military in Southeast Asia* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press), pp. 93-129.

- 22 Selth (2021), 'Myanmar's coup'; see also Y. M. Hein (2021), 'Finding fault lines within the Tatmadaw', 16 September. Available at: <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/finding-fault-lines-within-the-tatmadaw/> (accessed 21 October 2021).
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- 27 Selth (2021), 'Myanmar's Military Mindset', pp. 13-14.
- 28 'Burmanisation' denotes efforts to assimilate ethnic groups under one national identity, defined on the basis of the culture of the majority Bamar/Burman group. See M. J. Walton (2013), 'The 'Wages of Burman-ness': Ethnicity and Burman Privilege in Contemporary Myanmar', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 43(1), pp. 1-27.
- 29 Bünthe, (2017), 'The NLD-Military Coalition in Myanmar'.
- 30 Mary Callahan (2009), 'Myanmar's Perpetual Junta: Solving the Riddle of the Tatmadaw's Long Reign', *New Left Review*, 60, pp. 27-63.
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- 32 This does not mean that the Tatmadaw has never experienced internal disputes and challenges in the past, as Andrew Selth notes. E.g., in a recent analysis he mentions tensions between regional field commanders and the defence headquarters, fierce competition for promotions, and rivalries between graduates of the different defence training schools and academies. Selth (2021), p. 15.
- 33 Nakanishi (2013), *Strong Soldiers, Failed Revolution*; Selth (2021), 'Myanmar's military mindset'.
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- 36 See Steinberg (2021), 'The Military in Burma/Myanmar'.

- 37 Nakanishi (2013), *Strong Soldiers, Failed Revolution*, p. 220, reports of yearly desertions of 2000-5000 men during the 1960s, due to insufficient equipment and frequent salary arrears during the counter-insurgency operations in the ethnic border areas. Also prior to 1988 when the Tatmadaw faced economic problems, there were many desertions and recruitment difficulties among lower ranks. But alliances and elite coalitions at the top kept the Tatmadaw together.
- 38 See for instance Selth (2021), 'Myanmar's military mindset'.
- 39 Hein (2021), 'Finding fault lines'.
- 40 Naomi Conrad and Julia Bayer (2021), 'In Myanmar, the army controls its soldiers' lives, minds and finances', *DW*, 18 May. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/in-myanmar-the-army-controls-its-soldiers-lives-minds-and-finances/a-57557479> (accessed 21 October 2021).
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- 81 Telegram Group debate on CDM soldiers arranged by defector Nyi Thuta on 23 August 2021. The debate is not available online.
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- 103 'A Glimpse of a Revolution' (Part 6), video interview with defectors in August 2021. This is the original link, but since it was first posted and we heard it and did a written translation in English on 27 August 2021, it was shortened, so the details of Tun Myat Aung's statement are missing. Link: <https://fb.watch/7E4vTcb4WR/> (last accessed 21 October 2021).
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- 137 Postings during May by 'Nyi Thuta' (now erased). Profile available at: <https://www.facebook.com/nyithuta07> (accessed 21 October 2021).
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- 139 The anonymised author of this paper participated in these Telegram Group debates, which were open to anyone who wished to join, upon acceptance by defector Nyi Thuta. The group webinars are explained in the Media Pitch shared by the People's Soldier group.
- 140 Media Pitch by the People's Soldier group, shared in a PDF file with the authors.
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- 147 Facebook page is now erased. In May/June 2021 available at: <https://www.facebook.com/SupportCDMPoliceAndSoldier>.
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- 151 Video posted on Facebook on 25 August 2021 by 'People's Embrace'. Available at: <https://fb.watch/7E4vTcb4WR/> (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 152 See Facebook post on 24 August by 'People's Embrace'. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/107790364828632/posts/161666472774354/> (accessed 21 October 2021).

- 153 Lin Htet Aung explains this in a video interview, posted Facebook on 25 August: 'The soldiers who are still in the army but secretly helping the people/NUG they are called watermelons in the army'. Available at: <https://fb.watch/7E4vTcb4WR/> (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 154 See Facebook page 'People's Embrace'. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/People-sEmbrace> (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 155 The Irrawaddy (2021), 'Atrocious Myanmar Military at Risk'.
- 156 The NUG comprises members of the ousted NLD MP's voted in during the 2020 elections, but who escaped arrest on 1 February, as well as ministers and deputy ministers representing ethnic minority groups and civil society. It is supposed to be advised by the NUCC (National Unity Consultative Council), which also has members from among ethnic armed organisations, strike committees, labour unions and various civil society organisations. See The Irrawaddy (2021), 'Who's Who in Myanmar's National Unity Government', 16 April. Available at: https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/whos-myanmars-national-unity-government.html?__cf_chl_jschl_tk__=pmd_zklezVWQaoh6se-Ex55.IG1ThH9UjPjFBg35ISB7oK2Q-1634284241-0-gqNtZGzNAjucnBszQl9 (accessed 21 October 2021); Ardeth Thawngmung (2021), 'Myanmar's National Unity forces must overcome divide and rule tactics', Nikkei Asia, 21 July. Available at: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Myanmar-s-National-Unity-forces-must-overcome-divide-and-rule-tactics> (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 157 People's Soldier debate posted on Facebook 19 September. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/peoplesoldiers2021/videos/556144978947101/> (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 158 People's Soldier dialogue meeting posted on Facebook on 10 October 2021. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/peoplesoldiers2021/videos/578817503451455/> (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 159 People's Soldier Dialogue Meeting, 17 October 2021: <https://www.facebook.com/peoplesoldiers2021/videos/422795695883838/>
- 160 The NUG's policy announcement can be found in Burmese on this People's Embrace page: <https://www.facebook.com/107790364828632/posts/161341269473541/> (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 161 The speech by the NUG interim President was shared here on the People's Soldier group on 7 October 2021. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/107033758237394/posts/188588993415203/> (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 162 Anisis (2020), 'Unravelling the complex', p. 138 & 142; Julien Morency-Laflamme (2018), 'A question of trust: Military defection during regime crises in Benin and Togo', *Democratization*, 25(3), pp. 465-67.
- 163 Morency-Laflamme (2018), 'A question of trust'.
- 164 The live broadcast of the NUG's declaration of a people's defensive war against the junta was posted Facebook on 7 September 2021. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=605821454129982&extid=CL-UNK-UNK-UNK-IO5_GK0T-GK1C&ref=sharing (accessed 21 October 2021).

- 182 Interview, 1 October 2021 by the authors of this report.
- 183 There is no link available for this Telegram group meeting.
- 184 People's Soldier Talk program with the DVB, posted on Facebook on 18 September 2021. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/DVBTVNews/videos/1184090698745012/> (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 185 People's Soldier Talk program with the DVB, posted on Facebook on 18 September 2021
- 186 People's Soldier Talk program with the DVB, posted on Facebook on 18 September 2021
- 187 Interview, 1 October by the authors of this report.
- 188 The Irrawaddy (2021), 'For Myanmar's Junta Forces, a New Sense of Vulnerability', 27 May. Available at: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/commentary/for-myanmars-junta-forces-a-new-sense-of-vulnerability.html> (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 189 See interview posted on YouTube on 15 August by 'Mratt Kyaw Thu'. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=03ZKH5rOBTs&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR277j2rHzWXwKpqK5Dna6GqnFuk-o_6RnsWNOuATfAVjJzem3wedpJg_c0 (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 190 Personal observation by anonymised author; The Irrawaddy (2021), 'For Myanmar's Junta Forces'.
- 191 Interview, 1 October, by the authors of this report.
- 192 See video posted on Facebook on 22 June by 'Myanmar Now'. Available at: <https://fb.watch/v/1rsKI7LX6/> (accessed 21 October 2021). Allegedly on 30 September 'watermelon' soldiers, green on the outside and red on the inside, were behind a bomb explosion at a Military Procurement Office in the capital city Naypyitaw, which is a highly secured military compound that cannot be accessed by civilians. See Choudhury (2021), 'Why the Myanmar military is facing its most serious challenge'.
- 193 Interview, 1 October, by the authors of this report.
- 194 Interview, 1 October, by the authors of this report. As Tun Myint and James C. Scott argue in an article in Mizzima on 23 September, there are many ways that in-service soldiers who are morally against the military atrocities can practice a quiet, undeclared, and safer resistance while remaining inside the military. These may include: deliberately aiming weapons to miss protestors; misreading the address or taking the wrong route for an arrest, arriving late for an operation, so the intended victims have a chance to flee, feigning illness, disabling weapons and vehicles, not taking part in military robberies and arson, purposely misunderstanding orders in ways that minimise repression, providing misleading intelligence to save lives, delaying taking calls from their superiors, delaying response times, and so on ad infinitum. These acts of resistance are aimed at avoiding as much violence as possible and impeding, in hundreds of small ways, military plunder and repression. Such small acts, seemingly trivial in themselves, can and have added up over time to become something of a vast but quiet social movement that weakens, by a thousand cuts, the viciousness of the repression. See Myint and Scott (2021), 'How to be a patriot'.
- 195 Radio Free Asia (2021), Interview: 'Military Leaders Are Afraid of Letting Their Power Go'.
- 196 Albrecht (2019), 'Military Insubordination'.
- 197 Albrecht (2019), 'Military Insubordination'.
- 198 Anisin (2020), 'Unravelling the complex'.
- 199 Selth (2021), 'Myanmar's Military Mindset', p. 24.
- 200 Interview, 1 October 2021, conducted by the authors of this report.

- 201 Section 505 of the Penal Code regarding sedition, to criminalise 'any attempt to hinder, disturb, damage the motivation, discipline, health and conduct of military personnel and government employees and cause their hatred, disobedience, or disloyalty toward the military and the government'. Following the coup, the military junta added another article to this section that criminalises 'any attempt to cause fear, spread false news, or agitate directly or indirectly a criminal offence against a government employee,' and provides a punishment of three years' imprisonment. Numerous people participating in the protests and the CDM movement have been sued under this article. See Irrawaddy (2021), 'Myanmar Ruling Council Amends Treason, Sedition Laws to Protect Coup Makers', 16 February. Available at: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-ruling-council-amends-treason-sedition-laws-protect-coup-makers.html> (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 202 Video posted on Facebook on 7 May by 'DVB TV News', translated by second author. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/DVBTVNews/videos/3825883697525023> (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 203 Radio Free Asia (2021), 'Interview: 'It's Like We Are Serving Them, Not the Country''.
- 204 Live YouTube video, posted on Twitter on 20 October: https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=qbb3sbcg85o&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR03YwNJ0yBvdX-a0a58fHZK005WN_4jt5XKhDq-tJV-Cy_8pZNHvWvRacj8
- 205 Interview 6 June by the anonymised author of this paper.
- 206 Radio Free Asia (2021), 'Interview: 'Military Leaders Are Afraid of Letting Their Power Go''.
- 207 Myanmar Now (2021), 'Roughly 800 soldiers have fled'.
- 208 Myanmar Now (2021), 'Junta uses control over military families'.
- 209 August 23 Telegram group debate, organised by defector Nyi Thuta. Link no longer available.
- 210 August 23 Telegram group debate, organised by defector Nyi Thuta. Link no longer available.
- 211 August 23 Telegram group debate, organised by defector Nyi Thuta. Link no longer available.
- 212 Video posted on Facebook on 25 August 2021 by 'People's Embrace'. Available at: <https://fb.watch/7E4vTcb4WR/> (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 213 Interview, 1 October, by the authors of this report.
- 214 Interview, 1 October, by the authors of this report.
- 215 This is with Ven Detta - a nonviolent activist talks about the most sensitive project to date.
- 216 Radio Free Asia (2021), Interview: 'Every Soldier 'Knows What They Are Doing is Wrong''.
- 217 Video with interview by RFA posted on YouTube on 11 May. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fJ93dObdtNw> (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 218 Myanmar Now (2021), 'Junta uses control over military families'.
- 219 Conrad and Bayer (2021), 'In Myanmar, the army controls its soldiers'.
- 220 Conrad and Bayer (2021), 'In Myanmar, the army controls its soldiers'.
- 221 People's Soldier online debate, 29 August 2021. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/peoplesoldiers2021/videos/451300399257990/> (accessed on 19 October).

- 222 Latt (2016), Depoliticization, securitization and Violent accumulation; Callahan (2003), Making Enemies; Nakanishi (2013), Strong Soldiers, Failed Revolution.
- 223 Selth (2021), 'Myanmar's military mindset', p. 26.
- 224 People's Soldier dialogue meeting posted on Facebook on 9 October 2021 by 'People's Soldiers'. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/peoplesoldiers2021/videos/578817503451455/> (accessed 21 October).
- 225 Facebook post on 8 May by 'Nyi Thuta' (now erased). Previously available at: <https://www.facebook.com/nyithuta07> (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 226 Latt (2016), Depoliticization, securitization and Violent accumulation, p. 129 & 136; see also Callahan (2003), Making Enemies.
- 227 Latt (2016), Depoliticization, securitization and Violent accumulation, p. 136).
- 228 Watermelon Buffet debate, organised by People's Embrace, 29 August 2021. Link unavailable.
- 229 People's Soldiers' talk programme by Democratic Voice of Burma, posted on Facebook on 28 August 2021. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/DVBTVNews/videos/1053299268831826> (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 230 People's Soldiers' talk programme by Democratic Voice of Burma, posted on Facebook on 28 August 2021.
- 231 Latt (2016), Depoliticization, securitization and Violent accumulation, p. 132.
- 232 Andrew Selth supports this view by arguing that recruit training and indoctrination programs is partly centred on stamping out individualism within the Tatmadaw and securing loyalty to the organisation by preventing independent thought. See Selth (2021), 'Myanmar's military mindset', p. 19.
- 233 People's Soldiers' talk programme by Democratic Voice of Burma, posted on Facebook on 4 September. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/DVBTVNews/videos/648200276158942/> (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 234 As noted in Callahan (2003), Making Enemies, the army expanded from 186,000 to more than 370,000 after the 1990 coup.
- 235 Latt (2016), Depoliticization, securitization and Violent accumulation, p. 132.
- 236 Latt (2016), Depoliticization, securitization and Violent accumulation, p. 133–134.
- 237 People's Soldiers' talk programme by Democratic Voice of Burma, posted on Facebook on 28 August 2021. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/DVBTVNews/videos/1053299268831826> (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 238 People's Soldiers' talk program by Democratic Voice of Burma, posted on Facebook on 28 August 2021.
- 239 Interview 6 June by the anonymised author of this paper.
- 240 Latt (2016), Depoliticization, securitization and Violent accumulation, pp. 152–53.
- 241 Selth (2021), 'Myanmar's military mindset', p. 14.
- 242 Bünthe, (2017), 'The NLD-Military Coalition in Myanmar'; Nakanishi (2013), Strong Soldiers, Failed Revolution.
- 243 Nakanishi (2013), Strong Soldiers, Failed Revolution, p. 25.
- 244 Nakanishi (2013), Strong Soldiers, Failed Revolution, pp. 258–59.
- 245 Nakanishi (2013), Strong Soldiers, Failed Revolution, p. 267.
- 246 Nakanishi (2013), Strong Soldiers, Failed Revolution, p. 105 & 167.

- 247 Nakanishi (2013), *Strong Soldiers, Failed Revolution*, p. 303.
- 248 Bünthe (2017), 'The NLD-Military Coalition in Myanmar'; Nakanishi (2013), *Strong Soldiers, Failed Revolution*, p. 294.
- 249 Nakanishi (2013), *Strong Soldiers, Failed Revolution*, pp. 298-300.
- 250 Bünthe (2017), 'The NLD-Military Coalition in Myanmar'.
- 251 Bünthe (2017), 'The NLD-Military Coalition in Myanmar'. Both of these conglomerates have been subject to sanctions by the US and the EU following the military coup.
- 252 Nakanishi (2013), *Strong Soldiers, Failed Revolution*, p. 305; Bünthe (2017), 'The NLD-Military Coalition in Myanmar'.
- 253 Bünthe (2017), 'The NLD-Military Coalition in Myanmar', p. 117.
- 254 Nakanishi (2013), *Strong Soldiers, Failed Revolution*, p. 307; According to Matt Davis and Anne Worthington, 130 business entities can be linked to the Tatmadaw. See Davis and Worthington (2021), 'Uncovering the shadowy business empire bankrolling Myanmar's military generals', ABC News, 29 July. Available at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-07-29/the-shadowy-business-empire-propping-up-myanmar-military-junta/100328162> (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 255 Bünthe (2017), 'The NLD-Military Coalition in Myanmar'; Kevin Woods (2011), 'Ceasefire capitalism: military–private partnerships, resource concessions and military–state building in the Burma–China borderlands', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 38(4), pp. 747-770.
- 256 Latt (2016), *Depoliticization, securitization and Violent accumulation*, p. 135.
- 257 See Bünthe (2017), 'The NLD-Military Coalition in Myanmar'.
- 258 On this point see for instance Selth (2021), 'Myanmar's military mindset', p. 19.
- 259 See interview posted on YouTube on 15 August by 'Mratt Kyaw Thu'. Available at : https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=03ZKH5rOBTs&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR277j2rHzWXwKpqK5Dna6Gqnfuk-o_6RnsWNOuAtfAVJjzem3wedpjc_c0 (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 260 Selth (2021), 'Myanmar's military mindset', p. 20.
- 261 Conrad and Bayer (2021), 'In Myanmar, the army controls its soldiers'.
- 262 Watermelon Buffet debate for CDM soldiers, 12 September 2021. The debate was not re-posted online. There is only a link to the invitation to the debate: <https://www.facebook.com/107790364828632/posts/172750574999277/>
- 263 Radio Free Asia (2021), Interview: 'Military Leaders Are Afraid of Letting Their Power Go'.
- 264 People's Soldier dialogue meeting, 29 August 2021, posted: <https://www.facebook.com/peoplesoldiers2021/videos/451300399257990/> (accessed on 21 October)
- 265 Video posted on Facebook on 7 May by 'DVB TV News'. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/DVBTVNews/videos/3825883697525023> (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 266 People's Soldier dialogue meeting, 29 August, posted: <https://www.facebook.com/peoplesoldiers2021/videos/451300399257990/> (accessed on 21 October)
- 267 Latt (2016), *Depoliticization, securitization and Violent accumulation*, pp. 148–50.
- 268 Latt (2016), *Depoliticization, securitization and Violent accumulation*, pp. 148–50.
- 269 Ma Thida was interviewed on 27 May by the second author of this report. She has a PhD degree and used to be a successful employee in an NGO until the coup put an end to that.

- 270 Interview by authors of this report, 27 May 2021.
- 271 Interview, 27 May 2021, conducted by the authors of this report.
- 272 Callahan (2003), *Making Enemies*; Bünthe (2017), 'The NLD-Military Coalition in Myanmar'; Steinberg (2021), 'The Military in Burma/Myanmar', p. 2; Gravers (2021), 'Making Sense of Military Violence'; Selth (2021), 'Myanmar's military mindset', p. 18.
- 273 As noted by Andrew Selth, the children of in-service soldiers are also subjected to such ideological teachings, Selth (2021), 'Myanmar's military mindset', p. 25; see also Rodion Ebbighausen (2021), 'Myanmar's military: A state within a state', 12 February. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/myanmar-military-state/a-56545673> (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 274 Hein (2021), 'Finding fault lines'.
- 275 Hein (2021), 'Finding fault lines'.
- 276 Nakanishi (2013), *Strong Soldiers, Failed Revolution*, p. 242; Bünthe (2017), 'The NLD-Military Coalition in Myanmar'.
- 277 Callahan (2003), *Making Enemies*; Callahan (2009), 'Myanmar's Perpetual Junta'.
- 278 Steinberg (2021), 'The Military in Burma/Myanmar', p. 25.
- 279 Callahan (2003), *Making Enemies*.
- 280 Hein (2021), 'Finding fault lines'.
- 281 Selth (2021), 'Myanmar's military mindset', p. 18.
- 282 Nakanishi (2013), *Strong Soldiers, Failed Revolution*; Callahan (2003), *Making Enemies*
- 283 Callahan (2009), 'Myanmar's Perpetual Junta'.
- 284 Selth (2021), 'Myanmar's military mindset', p. 18.
- 285 Gravers (2021), 'Making Sense of Military Violence'.
- 286 Gravers (2021), 'Making Sense of Military Violence'.
- 287 Selth (2021), 'Myanmar's military mindset', p. 21.
- 288 Steinberg (2021), 'The Military in Burma/Myanmar', p. 23.
- 289 Beech (2021), 'Inside Myanmar's Army'.
- 290 Rio (pseudonym) (2021), 'Critical Juncture: Being a Soldier's Son in Burma's Ongoing Crisis', *Tea Circle Oxford*, 12 April. Available at: <https://teacircleoxford.com/2021/04/12/critical-juncture-being-a-soldiers-son-in-burmas-ongoing-crisis/> (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 291 Interview 6 June by anonymised author of this paper.
- 292 Watermelon Buffet debate, organized by People's Embrace on 4 September 2021. The full debate has not been shared online, but an extract from the interview is available at: <https://www.facebook.com/107790364828632/posts/172066628401005/> (assessed on 19 October 2021).
- 293 Watermelon Buffet debate organized by People's Embrace on 4 September 2021. The full debate has not been shared online, but an extract from the interview is available at: <https://www.facebook.com/107790364828632/posts/172066628401005/> (assessed on 19 October 2021).
- 294 Conrad and Bayer (2021), 'In Myanmar, the army controls its soldiers'.
- 295 Conrad and Bayer (2021), 'In Myanmar, the army controls its soldiers'.

- 296 Video posted on Facebook on 13 October 2021 by 'RFA Burmese'. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/rfaburmese/videos/574533760534230/> (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 297 Video posted on Facebook on 13 October 2021 by 'RFA Burmese'.
- 298 Beech (2021), 'Inside Myanmar's Army'.
- 299 Beech (2021), 'Inside Myanmar's Army'.
- 300 Beech (2021), 'Inside Myanmar's Army'.
- 301 Selth (2021), 'Myanmar's military mindset', p. 23.
- 302 People's Soldier online debate, 29 August 2021. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/peoplesoldiers2021/videos/451300399257990/> (accessed on 19 October).
- 303 Interview, 1 October, by the authors of this report.
- 304 Interview 27 May 2021, by the authors of this report.
- 305 Video posted on Facebook on 7 May by 'DVB TV News', translated by second author. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/DVBTVNews/videos/3825883697525023> (accessed 21 October 2021).
- 306 Selth (2021), 'Myanmar's military mindset', pp. 29-30.
- 307 Selth (2021), 'Myanmar's military mindset', pp. 29-30.
- 308 Hein (2021), 'Finding fault lines'.
- 309 See earlier references in this report to interviews with Nyi Thuta and Htet Myat, both captains and defectors.
- 310 People's Soldier Dialogue Meeting, 17 October 2021: <https://www.facebook.com/peoplesoldiers2021/videos/422795695883838/>
- 311 Anisin (2020), 'Unravelling the complex', pp. 138 & 142.
- 312 Hein (2021), 'Finding fault lines'.
- 313 Live YouTube video, posted on Twitter on 20 October: https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=qbb3sbcg85o&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR03YwNJ0yBvdX-a0a58fHZK005WN_4jt5XKhDq-tJV-Cy_8pZNHvWvRacj8
- 314 See for instance: Nakanishi (2013), *Strong Soldiers*; Callahan (2003), *Making Enemies*; Sai S. W. Latt (2016), *Depoliticization, securitization and Violent accumulation*; Selth (2021), 'Myanmar's military mindset'.
- 315 Hein (2021), 'Finding fault lines'.
- 316 People's Soldier Dialogue Meeting, 17 October 2021: <https://www.facebook.com/peoplesoldiers2021/videos/422795695883838/>
- 317 Julien Morency-Laflamme (2018), 'A question of trust', pp. 466-7.
- 318 Live YouTube video, posted on Twitter on 20 October: https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=qbb3sbcg85o&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR03YwNJ0yBvdX-a0a58fHZK005WN_4jt5XKhDq-tJV-Cy_8pZNHvWvRacj8
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- 320 Hein (2021), 'Finding fault lines'.
- 321 sLive YouTube video, posted on Twitter on 20 October: https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=qbb3sbcg85o&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR03YwNJ0yBvdX-a0a58fHZK005WN_4jt5XKhDq-tJV-Cy_8pZNHvWvRacj8

Photos

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Østbanegade 117 | DK-2100 Copenhagen | Denmark | www.diis.dk