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MILITIAS IN MYANMAR

JOHN BUCHANAN

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ONE: INTRODUCTION

This brief provides a historical narrative on militias in Myanmar and discusses the challenges they present to resolving the country's ongoing conflict. Most militias are allied with Myanmar's armed forces, known as the *Tatmadaw*, while others support ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) that have been in conflict with the *Tatmadaw* for decades. In 2011, a quasi-democratic government led by President Thein Sein came to power and initiated a peace process aimed at resolving these conflicts. The peace process has produced bilateral and multilateral ceasefire agreements, and recently entered a stage of political dialogue involving a broad range of actors. Yet despite their role in Myanmar's ongoing conflicts, the issue of militias remains marginalized in analyses of conflict and the peace process.

Militias pose several challenges for peacebuilding efforts in Myanmar. First, only limited information is available about militias, meaning that several of their basic features, such as how they operate, their numbers, and the roles they play in conflicts, are not well understood. Second, militias are numerous and play active roles in armed conflict, but engagement with them and discussion of their roles has been limited in the peace process. Third, the *Tatmadaw's* incorporation of ceasefire groups into its militia system has made militias a political issue. The recent transformation of ceasefire groups into militias decreased the military strength of some EAOs, though several of them did not accept the proposal to transform into militias, and have instead pushed for political dialogue with the military.

Given the challenges presented by the multitude of militias operating outside of Myanmar's formal peace process, a more systematic look at militias and their role in the transition from conflict to peace is in order. To do so, the first section of this brief begins with a short overview of militias and the challenges that militias present for peacebuilding efforts and for the peace process more broadly. The second section provides historical background on the roles played by militias in Myanmar's armed conflicts and political contests. Section three presents a typology of militias, as an analytical tool for understanding the complexity of the current array of militias operating in Myanmar. The fourth section examines the roles played by militias in the different conflicts, economies, communities, and political environments in which they operate. The final section considers issues regarding militias in Myanmar's current period of reform.

TWO: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF MILITIAS (1930 TO PRESENT)

The predominance of militias in contemporary Myanmar reflects processes and events that date as far back as the British colonial period. Over the last 85 years, militias have played far-reaching and diverse roles in Myanmar's civil wars and political struggles.

2.1: The Pre-independence Period

At the end of the British colonial period, several ethnic Burman political leaders formed paramilitary organizations known as *tat*. While members of *tat* engaged in military drills, colonial officials did not allow them to carry guns. In the 1930s, local leaders in present-day Shan State also formed militia units, when the *sawbwa* of Hsenwi (or Hseni Township), a traditional leader, authorized local leaders to establish militias, also referred to as Home Guards, in areas near Burma's border with China.

After World War II, the tradition of *tat* continued, as their expansion reflected the political and security concerns of British officials and local leaders. The deteriorating security situation in ethnic Karen areas in particular provided an impetus for the creation of militias. In the period between 1945 and 1948, the British government authorized the formation of small militias in these areas, known as "peace guerillas." Nationalist leader Aung San formed the People's Volunteer Organization (PVO), which became his political tool to enhance his leverage in negotiations with the British government over Burma's independence. During this time, *tat* groups associated with politicians from the Socialist party and with *dacoits* (armed bandits) also emerged.

2.2: The Early Independence Period (1948 to 1962)

Following Burma's independence on January 4, 1948, militias proliferated. Their emergence reflected a combination of domestic political rivalries and a worsening security situation. The power struggles that surfaced among rival political factions led to the continued formation of *tat* by politicians. Popularly known as "pocket armies," they were used as personal security forces by politicians, and they engaged in violence and intimidation. At the same time, emerging security challenges, ranging from insurgencies to mutinies by *Tatmadaw* units and incursions by Chinese troops, led state officials at the local and national level to establish militias to counter these threats.

In 1949, the end of the Chinese civil war introduced a new threat to newly independent Burma. Chinese troops from Chiang Kai-shek's defeated KMT army began crossing into Shan State to escape the advance of the Chinese communists in Yunnan province. The rapid and successive emergence of armed threats portended the collapse of the newly independent government of Prime Minister U Nu. The security threats facing the newly independent Myanmar rapidly outpaced the *Tatmadaw's* capacity to contain them. Faced with the prospect of military over-extension and possible defeat, security leaders formed militias as part of their strategy to address the growing threats. The organization of these militias was varied and variable, with frequent changes to their internal structures.

In 1948, Prime Minister U Nu authorized the creation of the Union Police Special Reserve – later known as the *Sitwundan* (literally “military burden carrier”). Some local politicians formed their supporters into *Sitwundan* battalions, with the aim of defending against attacks by communists. Security officials of the U Nu government also sanctioned the raising of paramilitary units called “levies” across Burma. In Shan State, local rulers formed units of able-bodied men with limited training to counter the threat presented by insurgents and KMT forces. By 1953, local officials began organizing local militias known as Volunteer Defense Forces in ethnic Shan and Kachin villages in northern Shan State.

By 1956, the *Tatmadaw* had established the Directorate of National Guard Forces, a forerunner of later coordinating directorates, to coordinate militias. One of its responsibilities was training volunteers recruited from university students. In 1956, the government also introduced the *Pyusawhti* program, which was a town and village defense scheme intended to assist the *Tatmadaw* in counterinsurgency activities.

By the late 1950s, the threats presented by the multiplicity of insurgents began to subside. In 1958, the U Nu government's Arms for Democracy initiative, offering amnesty for rebels, led to a significant decline in the number of insurgents. In 1958, the *Tatmadaw*, led by General Ne Win, took control of the government, initiating a period of military rule from 1958 to 1960 that became known as the “caretaker government.” During this period, the Ne Win government disbanded many of the militia units.

2.3: The Ne Win Period (1962 to 1988)

In 1962, General Ne Win led a coup d'état against the

electd government and established a political system featuring single party rule, initially by the military-led Revolutionary Council (RC), and subsequently by the new Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), which was dominated by serving or former *Tatmadaw* officers.

By the early 1960s, a second wave of insurgencies emerged. The outbreak of armed revolt among ethnic Shans in 1959 and ethnic Kachins in 1961, and the Communist Party of Burma's (CPB's) push into eastern Shan State from China in 1968, posed new, serious challenges to the military government. During this period, the *Tatmadaw's* use of militias became widespread and formalized as part of its doctrine of people's war, and *Tatmadaw* commanders employed different militia arrangements on the basis of the local situation and requirements for security.

In the early 1960s, *Tatmadaw* commanders in Shan State began establishing militias to combat the growing threat of ethno-nationalist insurgencies. Three types of government militias had emerged by the late 1960s; people's militias (or *pyithusit*), anti-insurgent groups (or *Ta Ka Sa Pha*) and *Ka Kwe Ye* militias.

The term “people's militias,” or *pyithusit*, refers to militias that were created by the *Tatmadaw* in the early 1960s under the Ne Win regime and were the forerunners of the *Tatmadaw* community-based militias. Coordinated by the *Tatmadaw*, they were created as part of the regime's national defense strategy. One of their primary duties was to assist with village defense and serve as guides and informers.

The anti-insurgent groups were the predecessors of the *Tatmadaw* non-integrated militias. They received little training, and the *Tatmadaw* had less control over them. Various sources indicate that these groups were often formed by soldiers from ethnic armed groups and operated in southern Shan State and Karen State.

The *Ka Kwe Ye*, which means “defense” in Burmese, involved the *Tatmadaw* recognizing armed groups as *Tatmadaw*-allied militia forces and tacitly approving their illicit business activities. During this period, local leaders built up small armed units on their own for purposes of self-defense. For many groups, the status as a *Ka Kwe Ye* militia offered economic opportunities and the benefits of official recognition by the state.

In 1974, the government promulgated Burma's second constitution, and this change also involved considerable revisions of the militia system. *Tatmadaw* leaders created

the Directorate of People's Militias and Public Relations on January 23, 1973. At the same time, *Tatmadaw* leaders also tried to rein in the *Ka Kwe Ye* militias in Shan State. After months of negotiations, *Tatmadaw* commanders set a deadline of April 1973 for the twenty-three *Ka Kwe Ye* militias to surrender their weapons and disband or join the *Tatmadaw*. The responses by the *Ka Kwe Ye* militias were mixed. The most powerful groups refused to obey the order, whereas many of the smaller groups complied.¹ Several of these militia leaders, including Lo Hsing Han and Mahasan, allied with the Shan State Army (SSA).

Analysts have advanced different explanations for the *Tatmadaw*'s decision to restructure their militia arrangements and disband the *Ka Kwe Ye* militias. One is that it reflected concerns among *Tatmadaw* leaders that their association with militia groups engaged in both the opium trade and Burma's emerging black market in consumer goods was a source of popular discontent. Another explanation is that the decision reflected changes in Burma's relations with the United States as the US began to incorporate a counter-narcotics initiative in its foreign policy.² Another explanation is that the use of *Ka Kwe Ye* militia units proved inimical to the *Tatmadaw*'s counter-insurgency goals. During this period, some *Ka Kwe Ye* units maintained ties to the insurgents.

After 1973, the *Tatmadaw* reconstituted some of the local defense forces, which had earlier surrendered their weapons, into people's militias. During this period, the *Tatmadaw* continued to establish new militias on an *ad hoc* basis. The militia system featured two main arrangements – the people's militia forces and the anti-insurgent forces – both of which were guided by local security concerns.

2.4: The Ceasefire Period (1989 to 2009)

A nationwide protest movement against the Ne Win-led BSPP government in 1988, and the collapse of the CPB in 1989, had far-reaching consequences for the *Tatmadaw*'s use of militias. One was that the *Tatmadaw* began engaging EAOs through ceasefire agreements, in some cases leading to their transformation into pro-government militias. At the same time, the *Tatmadaw* also restructured its use of militias as part of a broader military reform.

In 1988, the eruption of popular protests against the government of Ne Win's BSPP led the *Tatmadaw* to engage in a coup against itself that involved the installation of General Saw Maung, a trusted Ne Win supporter, and in 1992 General Than Shwe, as leader of a newly established governing body known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). At the same time, the *Tatmadaw* also took measures to shore up its authority that included a reconfiguration of its militia system. The extent of the changes at that time is not clear, but reports indicate that in some non-Burman areas, such as Kachin State, the *Tatmadaw* disbanded militias. In other non-Burman areas, however, such as Mon State, the *Tatmadaw* introduced militia training courses for civilians.

Another significant development in the *Tatmadaw*'s management of militias involved its conferral of militia status on EAOs formerly engaged in armed resistance against the government. This began in 1989 with a mutiny within the ranks of the CPB that led to the rapid collapse of Burma's largest armed insurgency. The CPB split into four groups, and its demise provided SLORC leaders with the opportunity to adopt a new approach to managing EAOs. Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt, head of the Military Intelligence Services (MIS) of the *Tatmadaw*, took the lead in coordinating the negotiation of ceasefire agreements with EAOs. Ceasefire agreements with the four post-CPB groups concluded in 1989 and thwarted the attempts of EAOs to form an alliance with them against the *Tatmadaw*.

During the period from 1989 to 2009, forty armed organizations entered into ceasefire agreements with the military government. The success of the ceasefires is attributed to a combination of military pressure from the *Tatmadaw* and incentives for a cessation of conflict, along with the promise of economic assistance and political dialogue. The agreements were military truces that suspended open hostilities but offered little in the way of lasting political solutions. The military government maintained that it was a transitional government drafting a new constitution through the National Convention (NC), which first convened in 1993 and eventually produced the 2008 Constitution. While representatives of some ceasefire groups attended the NC, others expressed disappointment that the NC did not involve substantive political dialogue and that

¹ Of the twenty-three *Ka Kwe Ye* groups, nine refused to comply.

² In the early 1970s, with the Nixon administration's declaration of a "war on drugs," the US State Department began pursuing cooperation on counter-narcotics as part of its foreign policy. In the case of Burma, the US government created counter-narcotics assistance incentives for the *Tatmadaw* to take a tougher stance on the narcotics trade.

the 2008 Constitution did not address their political concerns.

The ceasefire approach pursued by the *Tatmadaw* produced two tiers of ceasefire groups. The first tier included EAOs, which the *Tatmadaw* referred to as “major armed groups.” The second tier included splinter groups – breakaway factions of EAOs – which the *Tatmadaw* labeled “minor armed groups.” Ceasefire terms tended to be more favorable for the first tier than for the second. First-tier groups received economic assistance from the military government, and in some cases their territory was demarcated and designated a special region. In contrast, terms for some of the second-tier groups led to reduction in their arms and territory. Some of the ceasefire groups became pro-government militias.

This ceasefire system operated from 1989 to 2008. Beginning in 2009, the *Tatmadaw* changed its approach to managing EAOs, which altered the ceasefire system. The changes involved the proposal by the *Tatmadaw* that EAOs become pro-government militias, and, later, the initiation of a peace process that involved a new round of ceasefires. The changes in the government signaled the beginning of a new phase of ethnic politics.

2.5: The Transformation and the Peace Process (2009 to Present)

Since 2009, as the political system changed from direct military rule to a more open, quasi-democratic government, the militia system also experienced changes. In 2009 and 2010, this involved the *Tatmadaw*'s initiative to transform ceasefire organizations into militias and increase training of civilians for militia service.

On April 27, 2009, the *Tatmadaw* announced its intention to transform ceasefire organizations into pro-government militias. The militia proposal involved two different arrangements. The first was the Border Guard Force (BGF) scheme, which included the following procedures: First, *Tatmadaw* soldiers would integrate into the unit and make up three percent of its force composition. Second, each group would form into battalion-size units of 326 men. The allotment of units for the larger armed groups was greater than the allotment for the smaller ones.

A second arrangement offered to ceasefire groups was to transform them into militias, referred to by the *Tatmadaw* as People's Militia Forces (PMFs). The procedures were less strict for becoming a PMF than a BGF. PMFs

assisted the *Tatmadaw* by collecting information about other armed groups, helping them navigate the difficult local terrain, and supporting them in combat operations. Like the BGF proposal, it involved the downsizing of forces. However, unlike the BGF, this militia arrangement did not require the integration of soldiers from the *Tatmadaw*. The proposal led several ceasefire groups that had not earlier become militias to join the *Tatmadaw*'s militia program.

When President Thein Sein took power in 2011, his government initiated a peace process to resolve the conflict between the *Tatmadaw* and EAOs. One step made by the new government was to decouple the issue of militia transformation from participation in the peace process. Nevertheless, some non-Burman areas have become more militarized as a result of the *Tatmadaw*'s formation of new militias.

The Thein Sein government succeeded in negotiating new bilateral ceasefire agreements with fourteen armed organizations. On October 15, 2015, after three years of negotiations among at least 17 active armed groups and the *Tatmadaw*, a multilateral agreement, known as the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), was signed. Significantly, the NCA calls for political dialogue between the military and the EAOs.

The NCA is a multilateral ceasefire agreement signed by eight armed organizations, including the country's oldest ethnic armed opposition group, the Karen National Union (KNU). But seven other EAOs that had concluded bilateral ceasefires with the government did not sign the NCA. And another four ethnic organizations, which have no ceasefire agreements with the government and are involved in ongoing conflicts with the *Tatmadaw*, did not join in the process. These groups include both the recently established Arakan Army (AA) and Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), and the much older Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and Kachin Independence Army (KIA). The KIA accepted a ceasefire agreement in 1994, which broke down in 2011, and despite participating in the early stages of drafting the NCA, the KIA did not become a signatory.

In the lead-up to the 2010 election, the steps taken by the SPDC to transform ceasefire organizations into militias, and its expansion of civilian training for militia service, had several far-reaching effects. One was that the formation of militias led to the further militarization of some areas. Another is that the transformation of units from the Shan State Progress Party/Shan State Army

(SSPP/SSA) and MNDA into pro-government militias weakened them militarily. Some of the BGFs and the newly formed militias served as proxy forces for the *Tatmadaw* to exercise influence in areas not under their direct control, enhancing their ability to apply indirect pressure on EAOs. From a political perspective, conferring militia status on EAOs represents an expansion of the militia system's function to include the integration of EAOs into the *Tatmadaw*. However, several EAOs have been unwilling to participate. The issue of militias and the prospect of transforming EAOs into militias remain politically contentious because of uncertainty and a lack of consensus about the role of militias in Myanmar's future.

THREE: A TYPOLOGY OF MILITIAS

The primary feature assessed in this typology is the status of militias. "Status" refers to whether they are allied with the *Tatmadaw* or with EAOs, and the ways pro-government militias are integrated into the *Tatmadaw's* command structure. The militias are broken down and classified into four types. This typological framework is useful because any aggregate estimate of the number of militia groups without proper contextualization can easily conflate militias with as few as five civilian members, recruited by the *Tatmadaw* and with only minimal training, with others comprising hundreds of well-armed, veteran soldiers belonging to an EAO that joined the peace process after armed conflict with the government.

3.1: Type I: *Tatmadaw* - Integrated Militias

Tatmadaw-integrated militias, officially known as the Border Guard Forces (BGFs), operate under the command of the *Tatmadaw* and are integrated into its formal command structure. *Tatmadaw*-integrated militias are responsible for assisting the *Tatmadaw* in maintaining security and are part of its national defense plans. Their activities range from providing information on the activities of EAOs in their areas, to serving as guides to navigate the local terrain, and participating in combat operations against EAOs.

At present, there are twenty-three battalions of BGFs. The primary characteristics of *Tatmadaw*-integrated militias are as follows: the units are integrated into the formal command structure of the *Tatmadaw*; the *Tatmadaw* issues standard uniforms and provides direct financial and material support; the units have soldiers from the *Tatmadaw* serving in their ranks; and each unit

receives arms and supplies from the *Tatmadaw*. BGFs are located in townships that are near, but not necessarily adjacent to, international borders. BGF units operate in Kachin, Shan, and Kayin states. The areas of BGF operations generally correspond roughly to their areas of influence prior to becoming a BGF. Details on their freedom of movement are unclear, but BGFs appear to be more restricted than some *Tatmadaw* battalions and, for instance, could not be deployed to a different state.

One of the most significant aspects of BGFs is the inclusion of *Tatmadaw* soldiers in the ranks of what were previously militias and EAOs engaged in ceasefire agreements with the government. The guidelines for the formation of BGF units call for the integration of thirty soldiers from the *Tatmadaw*, of which three must be officers.

Financial support for *Tatmadaw*-integrated militias comes from the *Tatmadaw* and their own income-generating activities. The government provides members of the BGFs with the many of the same benefits as a *Tatmadaw* member: salary, rations, military uniforms, and healthcare. Moreover, members of BGFs and their families reportedly receive other benefits, such as discounted travel on buses, railways, and air flights.

The economic activities of BGFs are diverse. Members of BGF units tax the population and commerce, and operate businesses, including industrial agriculture projects, real estate, mining, logging, and others. In some cases, reports indicate that members of BGFs are also involved in narcotics trafficking.

3.2: Type II: *Tatmadaw* Non-integrated Militias

Tatmadaw non-integrated militias are diverse in size, strength, command structure, history, and sources of revenue. Despite these differences, these militias are all under the command of the *Tatmadaw*, but are not fully integrated into the *Tatmadaw* like the BGFs. Some were initially EAOs that fought against the *Tatmadaw*. These groups signed ceasefire agreements with the *Tatmadaw* during the SLORC/SPDC period, and then became militias. Other *Tatmadaw* non-integrated militias were originally organized by local leaders for self-defense, and joined one or more of the various militia arrangements created by the *Tatmadaw* over the last few decades. A few militia units can trace their origins back to the 1950s. Most other *Tatmadaw* non-integrated militias that are not ceasefire groups were established later.

In addition to having no *Tatmadaw* soldiers in their

ranks, *Tatmadaw* non-integrated militias have no uniform system of rank, and no prescribed number of soldiers like the BGFs. They are not required to attend training programs conducted by the *Tatmadaw*, or obligated to operate full time. Finally, they do not receive salaries from the *Tatmadaw*. These features distinguish them from the *Tatmadaw*-integrated militias (type I).

Like BGFs, *Tatmadaw* non-integrated militias have taken part in transformation ceremonies in which *Tatmadaw* officials recognize them as government militias. These militias perform security roles for the *Tatmadaw* that include assisting in protecting their communities from internal threats such as EAOs. In addition, the extent and type of assistance varies, and reflects the security situation on the ground. Some of these units have supported *Tatmadaw* operations and have come into conflict with EAOs such as the TNLA, KIA, and SSPP/SSA.

The influence of *Tatmadaw* non-integrated militias varies considerably. Most comprise fewer than one hundred men, some fewer than ten, while others may have several hundred or more. The number of men in a unit can be greater than the number of weapons issued by the *Tatmadaw*.

The membership of *Tatmadaw* non-integrated militias consists largely of non-Burmans from nearby communities, and they appear to operate within the confines of their regions of origin, which are non-Burman areas. The designated zones of operation for these militias correspond roughly to the areas covered by their ceasefire agreements, and some militias are not allowed to patrol outside their active area or to use heavy weapons. However, it is also known that members of this type of militia support combat operations by the *Tatmadaw* in areas beyond their normal areas of operation. Their support often involves serving as guides for *Tatmadaw* troops, particularly in difficult-to-navigate, mountainous regions.

Like other features of *Tatmadaw* non-integrated militias, how they support themselves varies. Many rely on some form of taxation to raise revenue. A few also operate businesses and receive business concessions from the government. Militia leaders are permitted to operate their own businesses to generate revenue, and several have connections with business people. Their business activities include the transport sector, real estate development and agribusiness, resource concessions for timber, mining, farmland, and jade, and also alleged involvement in illicit activities such as narcotics.

3.3: Type III: *Tatmadaw*-Supported Community Militias

Tatmadaw-supported community militias are made up of civilians recruited from a community, trained, and armed by the *Tatmadaw*. Local *Tatmadaw* units supervise and coordinate their activities. The use of community militias under the direct control of local *Tatmadaw* units is a practice that began in the late 1960s. When necessary, the *Tatmadaw* may mobilize this type of militia to fight against foreign and local threats.

The role played by the *Tatmadaw* in organizing these militias is one of the features that distinguish them from the *Tatmadaw*-integrated and non-integrated militias (types I and II). In some cases, village headmen select members of a community to attend a *Tatmadaw* militia training course. By contrast, the militias of types I and II were already formed when they came under *Tatmadaw* command. Another difference is that these groups tend to be smaller than the other types.

Tatmadaw-supported community militias operate in both villages and towns. In municipal areas, they may serve where there is limited or nonexistent police or *Tatmadaw* presence. In other instances they work with local civilian officials such as the police and local administrators. Their duties vary, depending on the local security conditions, and may include serving as sentries, watching for suspicious activities by strangers and filing reports with local security officials. In some villages, where the presence of either the *Tatmadaw* or the Myanmar Police Force is negligible or nonexistent, these militia forces may have greater security responsibilities.

The strength of an individual *Tatmadaw*-supported community militia unit reflects at least two factors. One is the size of their community: some areas may have militias with only five active-duty members; others may be larger, depending on population size. A second factor is whether or not there are security threats in the area. As a senior officer of an ethnic armed group in Kayah State explains, “The militias are civilians. In times of need, they put on uniforms, and the military gives them guns.” Local *Tatmadaw* units issue weapons to these militias. In areas where EAOs are not active, however, they may be unarmed.

Like other armed groups in Myanmar, various forms of taxation support these militias, whether formally or informally.

3.4: Type IV: Ethnic Armed Organization Militias

EAO militias support ethnic armed organizations. Their roles may include protecting their communities from the *Tatmadaw*, government militias, or other EAOs, but these militias also may have reservists who can be mobilized to support the EAO's military operations. Their membership includes civilians and retired soldiers.

The large number of EAOs operating in Myanmar over the last sixty-five years makes characterizing this type of militia complicated. Not only are there several armed groups, but they also appear to have developed different militia arrangements based on local needs and their varying capacities. Among EAOs, the ones with greater resources and larger areas of control are the ones that have militias. A lack of resources constrains many smaller EAOs from equipping militia members with the weapons needed to exercise coercive force.

The Karen National Defense Organization (KNDO) is Myanmar's oldest EAO militia, dating back to 1947. At present, it operates in conjunction with the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), which is the armed wing of the KNU. It is one of at least two armed groups that function as militia in KNU-controlled areas, and it operates under the command of the KNU's Department of Defense. The Karen Human Rights Group describes the KNDO as a "militia force of local volunteers trained and equipped by the Karen National Liberation Army and incorporated into its battalion and command structure; its members wear uniforms and typically commit to two-year terms of service."³ The KNDO has a headquarters and seven battalions – one in each of the KNLA's seven brigade areas – each of which has an estimated strength of 130 to 150 trained troops.

3.5: Number of Militias?

Available estimates of militia strengths and numbers are unofficial and vary significantly. In 2010, Major General Maung Maung Ohn, then head of the Directorate of People's Militias and Territorial Forces, reportedly estimated the total strength of the militias at over 80,000 individuals. The report also noted that only 30,000 of them are armed. A report by the *Shan Herald Agency for News*, which cites a government document indicating the presence of 396 militias in northern Shan State

alone, lends credence to the scale of the previous estimate. It also reports that the militias in this area have a "core strength numbering 8,365 and reserve strength of up to 16,320."⁴ One of the highest estimates puts the number of militia members at over 180,000 serving in 5,023 militia groups.⁵ One media account reports that after 2008, *Tatmadaw* leaders planned to establish militia groups in each of the country's 13,725 village tracts.⁶

When weighing these unofficial estimates, it is useful to take into account that they do not precisely define "militia." In many areas, militias are not only small, but may be inactive. It is unclear whether these estimates take into account the fact that civilians who have received *Tatmadaw* militia training may also be inactive. Nevertheless, reports indicate that Defense Services continues to make use of militia units, and that they play a role in the *Tatmadaw's* national defense plans.

FOUR: KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING MILITIAS

4.1: How do Militias Sustain Themselves?

A significant feature of the *Tatmadaw's* arrangement with militias is that the militias wholly or partly finance themselves. This setup allows the *Tatmadaw* to employ militias on a widespread basis with minimal administrative or financial commitments. The present arrangement continues the involvement of militias in revenue generating activities that include not only taxation and legal businesses, but also illicit activities. While BGF units receive direct support from the *Tatmadaw*, some of their leaders also engage in these income-generating activities.

Taxation is one of the most ready means for militias to generate revenue. Some collect transit fees from people passing through their checkpoints. For militias in border areas, cross-border trade presents a lucrative source of income. In other instances, militias may tax households and businesses. Militias operating in areas where the *Tatmadaw* has regularly conducted military operations against EAOs are more likely to be involved in business ventures than those in areas with limited *Tatmadaw* activity. However, in some cases, such as the BGF units of the *Tatmadaw*-integrated militias, the *Tatmadaw*

³ Karen Human Rights Group, "Papun Interview: Saw T---, December 2011," July 16, 2012.

⁴ Shan Herald Agency for News, *Shan Drug Watch* (Chiang Mai: 2010), 15.

⁵ Shan Herald Agency for News, *Shan Drug Watch* (Chiang Mai: 2010), 15.

⁶ "Junta to Issue More Weapons for Militia Units," *Shan Herald Agency for News*, December 15, 2010.¹

provides direct assistance, such as salaries and material support. Similarly, EAO militias like the KNDO receive support from their parent organizations.

Drug trafficking is another way some militia leaders have enriched themselves. The areas of opium cultivation in Myanmar have also experienced some of the most intense conflict, and have some of the highest levels of militia activity. Indeed, in the opium-producing areas of Shan and Kachin states, where pro-government militias operate, several community organizations and EAOs have launched counter-narcotics activities.

The far-reaching economic reforms implemented during President Thein Sein's regime have created new business opportunities for militias. The development of transportation infrastructure and the increase in cross-border trade have allowed militias operating along trade routes to raise revenue through taxation. Recent government-led economic reforms involving new land classification laws have also provided militias and others businesses with economic prospects in the agricultural sector.

The growth of militias in tandem with changes in the political and economic landscape has led to new patterns of militia business activities as well as the continuation of earlier practices. Their involvement in business allows for the replication of the militia system on a widespread basis. Lastly, the limited oversight that militias receive creates opportunities for predatory and illicit economic activities.

4.2: How do Communities Interact with Militias?

Militias are local organizations, and local conditions structure their interactions with their communities. As local conditions and the interests of local communities differ, patterns of interaction between militias and society may also differ dramatically from one militia to another. These differences fall along three principal axes: recruitment, taxation, and the provision of goods by militias.

Militia recruitment is one critical dimension of interaction between militias and society. The recruitment practices of militias range from voluntary enlistment to forced conscription. The attitudes among communities towards militias and their recruitment practices also vary. For instance, the Tarlawgyi community in Myitkyina Township of Kachin State lives in an area where renewed fighting has taken place over the last few years between the *Tatmadaw* and the KIA. They have endured forced

recruitment and taxation by armed groups, including the KIA. In February 2013, the *Tatmadaw* conducted a militia training course for 200 Tai Leng villagers in Tarlawgyi. The Tai Leng community's support for the formation of a local militia indicates that *Tatmadaw*-supported community militias may receive backing from a non-Burman community. In other instances, members of communities have expressed resentment towards militia service.

Another dimension of militia-society relations is taxation. One of the most widespread effects of the militarization of Myanmar is the spread of arbitrary taxation by armed groups. In many non-Burman areas, taxation by multiple armed groups such as the *Tatmadaw*, militias, and EAOs can severely impinge on people's livelihoods.

A third dimension of interaction involves militias' provision of goods for a community. Militias offer communities protection and security, but the provision of this public good requires material support – again, taxation – whether in kind, such as rice, or in cash. But when the people paying the taxes don't perceive the threat from which they need "protection," it breeds resentment towards the armed group collecting the tax. When a community finds itself paying taxes to multiple armed groups, the burden can create resentment towards all the groups involved. On the other hand, a few capable militia leaders have expanded their provision of public goods to include patronage of public works and community development.

4.3: What Role Do Militias Play in Politics?

Militias are directly and indirectly involved in politics. The ongoing reforms in Myanmar's political system signal an opening for many people, including militia leaders, to participate in formal politics. At the same time, the change and uncertainty of the informal rules of the game create opportunities for militia leaders to exercise informal political influence. And militias are themselves a political issue. While the Thein Sein government dropped the issue from negotiations, the 2008 Constitution maintains that all armed forces are under the control of the *Tatmadaw*.

As the political system opens up, parliamentary elections at the national and subnational level have become a formal means for people to exercise political influence. Several militia leaders have contested seats and been elected to Parliament.

The militia system itself, rather than individual militias, has become a political issue and plays an indirect role in politics. The *Tatmadaw's* insistence that EAOs transform into militias politicized the issue of militias. Many EAOs and ceasefire groups balked at the *Tatmadaw's* plan to integrate them into its command structure. In 2011, the new Thein Sein government changed tack and dropped its demands that ethnic armed organizations transform into militias. Nevertheless, the issue of militia transformation remains a concern for EAOs in the peace process. The KNU is one of the largest armed organizations to join the NCA. In conjunction with its signing of the agreement, the KNLA, the KNU's armed wing, released a statement on October 14, 2015, declaring, "We shall never accept the transformation of the KNLA into the Border Guard Force or Civil Police, but shall remain as the Karen National Liberation Army."

4.4: What Role Do Militias Play in Conflicts?

Militias play both direct and indirect roles in Myanmar's ongoing conflicts. One obvious role is that pro-government militias have battled EAOs, and EAO militias have fought against *Tatmadaw* troops. Militias also play indirect roles in conflict through their support for either the *Tatmadaw* or EAOs, and they have assisted *Tatmadaw* units in military operations against several ethnic armed groups by providing information and accompanying them on patrols.

The *Tatmadaw's* earlier proposal to transform EAOs into either BGFs or pro-government militia units has also played an indirect role in catalyzing conflict. Following the proposal, and escalating tensions between the *Tatmadaw* and several of the larger EAOs, conflict erupted in the Kokang area of northern Shan State in 2009 between the *Tatmadaw* and the MNDAA. In 2009, the MNDAA joined other armed groups in rejecting the military government's proposal. In August, a standoff between state security forces and MNDAA troops occurred when state officials launched an investigation into reported drug and weapons manufacturing in Kokang. A bloody conflict involving the *Tatmadaw*, police, and MNDAA troops broke out in which MNDAA troops were driven from their positions. Six years later, in February 2015, the MNDAA launched a surprise attack against the *Tatmadaw* in Kokang.

FIVE: CONSIDERATION FOR MILITIAS IN A PERIOD OF REFORM

Collectively, militias represent a sizeable force and play

influential roles, including their involvement in armed conflicts. Despite the participation of militias in violent conflict, they are largely absent from the peace process, and discussions of the prospects for a transition from conflict to peace neglect militia-related issues. This section considers militia-related issues relevant to current peacebuilding efforts in Myanmar.

Depoliticized political interests of pro-government militias: The political interests of pro-government militias have become depoliticized. The decision by leaders of armed groups formerly advocating political change to become pro-government militias is viewed by others as a sign that they have also surrendered their status as a political group, while the involvement of some militias in narcotics trafficking, extraction of natural resources, and predatory taxation supports a perception that they are profit-seeking actors. These views of militias overshadow and delegitimize their political interests. Nevertheless, they are armed organizations that participate in conflict, and their possession of coercive capacity makes consideration and discussion of their roles in a post-conflict Myanmar important.

Marginalization of militias and issues of militias: Militias and the issue of militias are marginalized from the current process of political dialogue in Myanmar. Militias themselves are not involved in discussions about key issues regarding their post-conflict role, nor has the issue of the future of militias received much attention. A view common to governments, armed opposition, and conflict mediators involved in peacebuilding efforts in other conflicts is that including militias such as newly formed armed groups, smaller armed groups, and disarmed groups in peace negotiations is unnecessary, and that their inclusion in political dialogue creates incentives for groups to take up arms and engage in violence. As one participant in Myanmar's peace process explains, "The predicament for the [Government of Myanmar] is that by allowing groups not on the list [of recognized groups] to be around the table may encourage proliferation of armed groups. Likewise, their exclusion may also be a source of continuing conflict."

Self-financing militias: Militias engage in self-financing, which allows their replication on a widespread basis with minimal costs for the military. However, in some cases their engagement in economic activities lacks oversight. In the absence of adequate supervision, some militias have engaged in illicit and predatory economic activities in their areas of operation.

Diversity: Militias also display a striking diversity. A few

operate with EAOs, but most militia units are aligned with the *Tatmadaw*. Even among the *Tatmadaw* militias, there are significant differences in their strength, their economic activities, and the circumstances in which they formed. The strength of a militia unit can vary from fewer than a dozen members to several hundred. The range of economic activities can also vary. Some may receive economic support from state officials, whereas others may be involved in illicit narcotics. Several militias were formerly EAOs, established with specific objectives such as self-determination, political reforms involving federalism and equitable control of resources, and security for their communities. Their transformation from EAOs into *Tatmadaw* militias has meant their marginalization from a direct role in political dialogues.

Restructuring of armed groups: Discussions about changes in the structure and size of armed groups in Myanmar have drawn on models for Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) and Security Sector Reform (SSR) developed from the experiences of peace processes in other conflict-affected countries. The earlier transformation of EAOs into pro-government militias is one model for integrating EAOs into the *Tatmadaw*. Other proposals involve converting EAOs into local police forces or including their units in a federal army. In 2014, several EAOs presented a federal

army proposal, sometimes referred to as the “Union Army,” at a meeting involving representatives of the government and EAOs. But *Tatmadaw* leaders did not accept the proposal, and a consensus on whether or not to change the structures of armed groups, and to what, has not emerged. In part, this is because EAOs maintain that holding a political dialogue involving the *Tatmadaw* is necessary before changing the structure of their forces. Any steps involving the features of DDR and SSR will benefit from taking into account the differences among various types of militias, and considering the context in which they operate, particularly their security and political concerns.

Degree and source of threats: The degree and source of threats encountered by militias differ from place to place and from militia to militia. The recent support for the formation of militias in Tarlawgyi, in Kachin State, indicates that security threats remain a concern for some communities. By contrast, the reported attempt by members of a militia in Mon State to hand over their weapons to the *Tatmadaw* and end their duties suggests that some militia members feel that they no longer need to be active. These incidents illustrate the different conditions in which militias operate, and these differences are important in understanding their role in post-conflict settlements.

SIX: KEY QUESTIONS AND FURTHER READING

Discussion Questions

- What are the key risks to the ongoing peace process of including or excluding of militias?
- How can militias be better governed, and by whom?
- To what extent has the depoliticization of militias continued to affect EAO legitimacy in the peace process?
- What role should militias play in the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) and Security Sector Reform (SSR) processes?
- To what extent should communities themselves be the decision-makers about the future role of militias in their territories?

Further Reading

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