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The Relevance of Foucault's Theory of Power to an Understanding of Military Indoctrination, a Culture of Violence and Human Rights Discourse in Myanmar

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ABSTRACT

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This article examines the intricate dynamics of military indoctrination in Myanmar and its entrenchment of a culture of violence, with particular attention to its implications for human rights discourse. Through a systematic review of secondary literature, the study employs Michel Foucault's theory of power, focusing on the concepts of *repressive* and *normalizing* power. The analysis highlights how the state wields its powers through the military apparatus, employing indoctrination to transform soldiers and perpetuate violence, simultaneously facilitating the normalization of authoritarian rule within broader society. By linking military repression to societal compliance, the study critically interrogates how these power structures shape, limit, and redirect discourses on human rights. Grounded in secondary data, the research warrants further empirical inquiry into the lived experiences and social consequences of military indoctrination processes in Myanmar.

1. Introduction and research problem

Myanmar's military, commonly referred to as the Tatmadaw, has been extensively analyzed through political science, military strategy, and security studies. However, much of this research has opted to integrate a human rights perspective and the internal mechanisms that sustain the military's authoritarian grip. Tatmadaw's ability to endure and perpetuate violence is not solely a result of its political influence or military strength but is also deeply rooted in its internal indoctrination processes and ideological conditioning. While democratic movements in Myanmar emphasize human rights principles to expose violations, the Tatmadaw remains largely insulated from such norms, maintaining a distinct ideological framework that normalizes violence, silences dissent, and justifies impunity.

Despite a rich body of scholarship examining Myanmar's military (Fink, 2001; Myoe, 2009; Nakanishi, 2013; Selth, 2002; Steinberg, 2021), much of the research has focused on the Tatmadaw's political influence, ideological foundations, and security role in the broader national context. These studies have shed light on the military's infiltration into civilian governance, its nationalist propaganda, and its strategic maneuvering in international relations. However, what remains underexplored is the opaque internal structure of the Tatmadaw—specifically, the indoctrination mechanisms that condition soldiers to engage in violence and suppress human rights discourse. Tatmadaw's training institutions reinforce psychological conditioning that legitimizes repression, loyalty, and violence as necessary tools of control.

This opacity has led to a gap in understanding how military indoctrination and ideological training contribute to the persistence of violent structures within Myanmar. The 2021 military coup further highlights the urgency of this inquiry, as soldiers and officers continue to engage in systematic human rights abuses without significant internal dissent. This paper explores a critical question: How does the Tatmadaw's ideological training indoctrinate soldiers, sustain systemic violence, and reinforce a culture of impunity within Myanmar's military institution and broader society?

2. Critical analysis of Myanmar's military indoctrination and power dynamics

While existing research has extensively examined Tatmadaw's political, structural, and strategic functions, insufficient attention has been given to how the institution wields power through internal indoctrination and ideological training. This study argues that these ideological mechanisms are key to understanding how the Tatmadaw maintains long-term control over both its soldiers and Myanmar's broader political landscape. By examining training materials, military publications and testimonies of defected soldiers, this research seeks to expose how indoctrination produces a military culture that resists human rights accountability and continues to sustain violent authoritarian rule.

Applying Michel Foucault's theories of repressive and normalizing power, this study contends that Tatmadaw's indoctrination system functions in two ways:

1. **Repressive Power** – The Tatmadaw enforces a rigid command structure in which ideological training, propaganda, and hierarchical discipline ensure absolute obedience. Dissent is met with severe punishment, reinforcing a culture where soldiers internalize violence as both a duty and a necessity. This repressive structure not only ensures loyalty but also eliminates alternative moral or ethical considerations that could challenge military authority.

2. **Normalizing Power** – The Tatmadaw's training institutions instill an ideological framework that shapes the worldview of individual soldiers, normalizing the perception that violence against civilians, suppression of dissent, and absolute loyalty to the military institution are justified actions. This process constructs a belief system where human rights violations are not seen as crimes but as necessary measures to maintain order and national unity. The broader societal impact is the normalization of power abuse, as fear becomes an instrument of control, reinforcing a culture of silence and submission.

Understanding these mechanisms is critical to analyzing how military indoctrination sustains authoritarian control and suppresses human rights discourse. By examining the ideological conditioning within Tatmadaw, this study explores how power is reinforced through disciplinary structures and internal narratives. A deeper theoretical engagement with these processes can contribute to broader discussions on military governance, coercive power, and shed light on the challenges of institutional reform in post-authoritarian transitions.

3. Research method

Through a qualitative approach, this study conducts a critical discourse analysis of secondary sources, including military publications, retired generals' biographies, and human rights reports. By examining how these texts construct narratives of power and violence, the paper uncovers patterns of military indoctrination that sustain authoritarian governance. Drawing on Foucault's theory of power, particularly his concepts of repressive power and normalizing power, the study analyzes how the Tatmadaw exercises control through military training, ideological conditioning, and suppression of human rights discourse.

The research utilizes a content analysis of military publications, biographies of retired generals, speeches of former military leaders, training manuals, defectors' testimonies through media outlets, human rights reports, and scholarly works on Myanmar's military institution. Additionally, discourse analysis is applied to military statements, propaganda materials, and state narratives to uncover how power is wielded and justified within the Tatmadaw.

The selection of these sources follows a purposive sampling approach, prioritizing materials that reveal insights into how Tatmadaw conducts its ideological training and justifies its continued repression.

A critical discourse analysis is used to uncover how military discourse constructs power relationships, reinforces loyalty, and legitimizes state violence. By systematically analyzing these sources, the study demonstrates how military indoctrination functions as a mechanism for reinforcing authoritarian governance and perpetuating impunity. The findings contribute to understanding the role of power in sustaining violence and silencing dissent within Myanmar's military-dominated society. The application of Foucault's theory of power provides a conceptual lens to examine how military doctrine operates at both the structural level (institutional mechanisms of control) and the individual level (psychological conditioning of soldiers and officers). This dual-layered analysis sheds light on how power is normalized within the Tatmadaw and how it extends to the broader political and social landscape.

As this study is based on secondary sources, it does not incorporate primary interviews or ethnographic fieldwork with military personnel. However, ongoing research efforts will incorporate primary data collection, including interviews with defecting soldiers and policy analysts, to further validate and expand these findings. Additionally, future studies should explore comparative cases of military indoctrination in other authoritarian regimes, providing a broader contextual understanding of how military power operates in repressive states.

4. The application of Foucault's theory of power in the context of Myanmar

In the examination of Myanmar through the lens of Foucault's theory, two key concepts are utilized: repressive power and normalizing power. These concepts elucidate how power is cultivated, exercised, and normalized within society. Myanmar's military has a notorious history of brutal attacks on civilians spanning seven decades of civil war, followed by protracted armed conflicts. The atrocities perpetrated by the military amount to crimes against humanity, war crimes, and even genocide¹. Foucault's theory of power provides insights into the mechanisms through which such violence is perpetrated and justified. For instance, his analysis of the suppression or manipulation of sexuality, the formulation of justice systems to serve the interests of dominant classes (such as feudal lords or the bourgeoisie), and the utilization of control methods like the panopticon prison system all contribute to understanding the dynamics of Myanmar's military institution and its indoctrination methods. Moreover, Foucault's theory sheds light on how the enduring legacy of military indoctrination and rule in Myanmar impacts society.

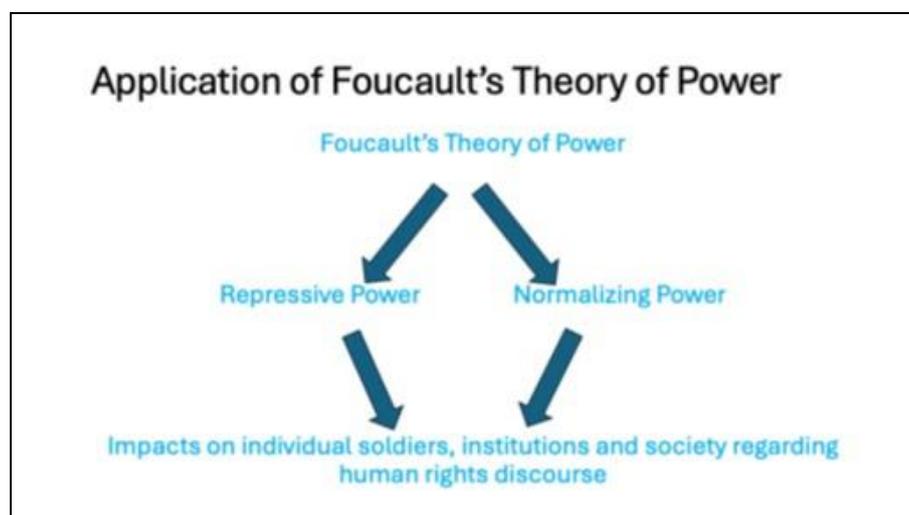


Figure 1: Foucault's theory of power and relevant concepts

¹ International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar (2009). The Economic Interest of the Myanmar Military. United Nations Human Rights Council. Para 2.

5. Conceptual framework and application of Foucault's theory in understanding Myanmar's military

This study employs a framework of key concepts to analyze the relevance of Foucault's theory of power in understanding the dynamics of Myanmar's military. The framework encompasses three interrelated phenomena: military indoctrination, the cultivation of a culture of violence, and tolerance of power imbalance and its consequent impacts on human rights discourse in Myanmar. By drawing on existing scholarship, the conceptual framework critically examines the processes of military indoctrination, the embedding of a culture of violence and power dynamics.

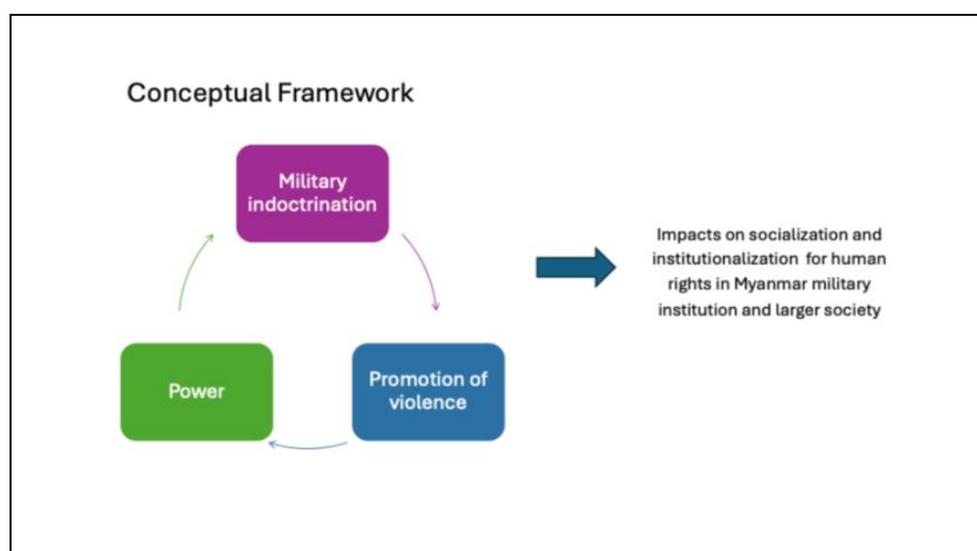


Figure 2: Elements of the conceptual framework

6. Literature review

The literature review examines two key areas relevant to the study: (1) the current political context in Myanmar, particularly the role of the military in governance and its implications for human rights and democratic transitions, and (2) broader perspectives on military culture, including ideological indoctrination, command structures, and institutional norms beyond Myanmar.

6.1 Present context of the Myanmar military and scholarly endeavors to date

Myanmar is dealing with the protracted challenge of the world's longest-running civil war, characterized by multifaceted conflicts deeply entrenched within systems that permeate the political, social, and economic fabric of the nation (Steinberg, 2021). In the peripheral regions inhabited by ethnic and religious minorities, where injustices, imbalances of power, and state-sponsored violence prevail, violence has regrettably become normalized. However, in addition to the underlying conflicts and pervasive violence, Myanmar finds itself engulfed in a grave political-economic crisis precipitated by the 2021 coup orchestrated by the country's military, abruptly halting the nascent democratization witnessed from 2011 to 2020.

In the aftermath of the coup, Myanmar has descended into a state of turmoil, with already fragile governance structures exhibiting symptoms akin to those of a failing state (Sun, 2023). The once formidable and dreaded military now finds itself on the brink of collapse (Ratcliffe & Soe, 2024), as various armed resistance factions gain ground in battles across ethnic regions, wresting control of territories where conventional state functions have become ineffectual or have been disrupted by these groups, resulting in the imposition of alternative governance structures including taxation and provision of public services such as education and healthcare (Martin, 2024).

In urban centers, insurgent-guerrilla military tactics, mainly by People's Defense Forces numbering several hundred operating across Myanmar, characterized by hit-and-run strategies, have been deployed by armed resistance groups formed out of the anti-coup movement, exploiting the Myanmar military's vulnerabilities (Kurlentzick, 2024). The concerted military offensives launched by these groups in both rural and urban areas strain human resources, impede logistical mobilization, and undermine the effectiveness of Myanmar's military strategies.

Meanwhile, the coup-installed State Administrative Council confronts a barrage of challenges, including simultaneous warfare on multiple fronts, an escalating economic crisis marked by uncontrollable inflation, dwindling foreign investments, and the withdrawal of international development cooperation by global and regional organizations. Consequently, Myanmar finds itself increasingly isolated, grappling with active armed conflicts and urgent humanitarian needs amidst a backdrop of political upheaval and economic instability.

6.2 Brief analysis of military indoctrination literature beyond Myanmar

The section provides a concise literature review. To categorize relevant literature effectively, the literature review process adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach drawing upon the existing scholarship pertaining to the Myanmar military, its indoctrination and military doctrine principles.

Military doctrine, as defined by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), encompasses "fundamental principles by which the military forces guide their actions in support of objectives. It is authoritative but requires judgment in application."² Geluk (2023) emphasizes that the doctrine guides military commanders on the 'how' of military operations rather than the 'what and why'. Military analysts such as Hoiback trace the development and application of military doctrine dating back as far as the Macedonian and Roman empires. Hoiback (2012) posits that military doctrine contains three key elements: theory, culture and authority. Theory is described as "the best possible thought that can be defended by reason", whereas culture requires that "two preconditions have to be met. First of all, culture must have causal power in one way or another. It must be able to induce people to act and cause things to happen. If not, cultural elements are mere decoration. Secondly, culture has to be manipulative in one way or another." Finally, Hoiback argues that authority is essential in an activity like war where reason hardly points into one direction and as war is a collective team effort; thus, authoritative command is a requirement, and such authority enables commanders/the fighting units/the military to endorse which theories to trust (Hoiback, 2012: 37-41).

² <https://www.jwc.nato.int/articles/jwc-doctrine-development-process>

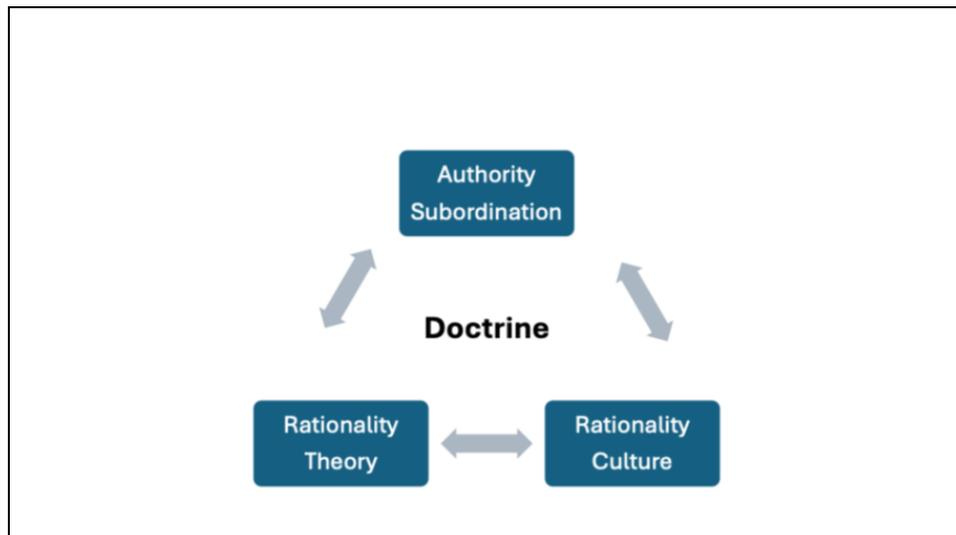


Figure 3: The doctrine of the Trinity

Source: Hoiback 2012; 38

From the insights of Geluk (2023) and Hoiback (2012), it becomes evident that military doctrine serves as one foundational aspect of the military institution to justify their roles, their costs, their actions during wartime, and their cultural influence on society.

Numerous scholars have extensively examined military indoctrination and its profound implications on individuals, institutions, and broader society. Scholars such as Bumbuc (2020) delineate the elements and aftereffects of indoctrination, underscoring the erosion of independent, rational thinking and reduced resistance or power to understand, internalize, and justify the direction, vision, and goals, in following whatever leaders command. The author argues that indoctrination also contains some elements of manipulation that intend to influence a person, a group, or a community to conform to the interests of the influencer through persuasion, distorting the truth, and coercing them to abandon freedom of thought and decision. Interestingly, the author concludes that military indoctrination has proven to be more conservative and effective in creating conformity, obedience, uniformity, or unconditional service to the country's interests, thereby changing values and behavioral norms (Bumbuc, 2020).

Similarly, Quiroga's exploration of military indoctrination and politicization under a Spanish authoritarian government underscores the role of formal education and propaganda in propagating military service as integral to Spanish interests, keeping the nation from disintegration and accepting the military as the nation-builder. However, Quiroga writes that despite the efforts by the Spanish authoritarian government, the success of indoctrination has been contested (Quiroga, 2007: 80).

Indoctrination through the combatant training of the military was to ensure that the soldiers act automatically without hesitation in combat situations, and the repetition of drilling and firing exercises transforms physical behavior. However, military analyst and writer Grossman examines American veterans as well as military data from other countries emphasizing the mental status and consciousness of the soldiers who fought in battles reveals the startling insight that only 15-20 percentage of a unit in battle fire, implying that about 80 percent of soldiers refrain from firing or opt to miss their targets just to avoid killing (Grossman,1996). The author interestingly points out that acts of violence are often posturing tactics to frighten or intimidate targets rather than causing actual harm.

These scholarly examinations by Grossman (1996) and Quiroga illuminate the dual nature of military indoctrination and institutional politicization. While indoctrination may achieve short-term objectives, it often fails to reconcile with the innate reluctance of human beings to inflict harm upon others.

7. Main discussions

This section presents two key discussions grounded in the conceptual framework, which examine three interconnected phenomena: military indoctrination, the cultivation of a culture of violence, and power dynamics within Myanmar's military. These discussions are analyzed through the lens of Foucault's theory of power, with a focus on the distinction between repressive power and normalizing power.

The first discussion explores military indoctrination as a mechanism of control that sustains hierarchical structure and military dominance in Myanmar. By drawing on existing scholarship, this section critically analyzes how ideological training, internal propaganda and institutionalized discipline function as tools for embedding obedience, reinforcing loyalty, and legitimizing military dominance. Within this context, Foucault's concept of normalizing power is applied to demonstrate how indoctrination operates not merely as an overtly coercive mechanism but also as a subtle process of shaping perceptions, values, and behaviors among military personnel.

The second discussion examines the culture of violence and power dynamics within the military, emphasizing how violence is institutionalized and perpetuated as a means of governance and control. This section investigates the intersection of repressive power, which manifests through direct coercion, surveillance, and punishment, and normalizing power, which conditions soldiers and society to accept violence as an inherent aspect of military rule. By applying Foucault's theoretical framework, the discussion illustrates how power operates through both explicit force and implicit normalization, shaping the military's engagement with broader political and human rights issues in Myanmar.

Through these discussions, this section provides a critical analysis of how power is exercised, legitimized, and sustained within Myanmar's military apparatus, contributing to broader debates on authoritarian governance, militarization, and resistance.

7.1.1 Military indoctrination

Military indoctrination in Myanmar is neither consistent nor straightforward. The primary basis of military indoctrination is based on the perceived threats of external factors, whereas another issue is the internal military insurgency (Cheesman, 2023). Preceding the 2021 coup, military indoctrination on the strategic direction emphasized the conventional protection by the military of sovereign land, sea and air space and the establishment of a sophisticated army capable of defeating insurgent groups, mainly the ethnic armed groups seeking greater autonomy in the form of federalism (Kipgen, 2018). While the military expanded recruitment of troops, Ne Win's regime initiated a new 'state ideology' that departed from the military's commitment to constitutionalism; this ideological departure led to the Burmese Way to Socialism of a one-party political structure with an ideology that promoted the state as the provider and the center of national life and yet effectively prohibited public debate about democracy and other forms of socialism (Nakanishi, 2013).

As noted by Selth (2002), the primary military indoctrination is to garner support for Tatmadaw by mobilizing or coercing the populace to perceive threats against the military as threats against the nation itself. In this sense, the perceived enemy of the Tatmadaw is the enemy of the people. This indoctrination has been effective among the Burman majority for decades, as they were the main recruits of Tatmadaw until the 2021 military coup that revealed a humiliating defeat and rejection of the military by the people.

Beyond scholarly research, institutions such as the Myanmar Ministry of Information, the Myanmar Ministry of Education, and the Historical Research Department continue to produce Burmese-language publications that depict ethnic armed groups fighting for autonomy and self-determination, as well as the resurgent Burmese Communist Party, as "terrorists" or "violent groups." These narratives serve to reinforce the Tatmadaw's self-image as the "guardian of the nation-state," a theme prominently echoed in General Saw Maung's 1989 speech (Clarke, 2016). His rhetoric is particularly significant as it aligns with the official discourse found in military biographies and speeches, which consistently seek to legitimize Tatmadaw's authority.

Moreover, writings by some generals, alongside official Tatmadaw publications³ emphasize a long-standing process of ideological indoctrination. These texts perpetuate the notion that the Tatmadaw is the sole protector of the state, a belief that, as Selth (2002) argues, equates loyalty to the military with loyalty to the nation itself. This doctrine ultimately positions the Tatmadaw as indistinguishable from the state, enabling it to justify its grip on power under the pretense of national guardianship, regardless of the consequences.

In the aftermath of the 2021 coup, the military has faced not only a crisis of military defeat but also the need to stabilize its foundational doctrine and ideologies, as the defection of its members and the desertions of infantry units on the ground indicate distrust and disapproval of military rule (Shwe 2023). Selth (2002) warns that loyalty and allegiance to the military are questionable despite the efforts by the military leadership to indoctrinate the people to be submissive to the Tatmadaw at all costs.

The once formidable reputation of the military as an invincible force has been notably diminished, particularly in the wake of successful military offensives by the Northern Brotherhood Alliance, comprising the Myanmar National Democracy Army (MNDA-Kokang), Arakan Army and Ta'ang National Liberation Army, against Tatmadaw infantry battalions stationed in Northern Shan State (Michaels, 2024). This victory underscores the combatant deficiencies of the Tatmadaw and its lack of readiness to confront coordinated attacks from combined resistance forces. The military has suffered significant setbacks in battle, thereby diminishing the perception of military invincibility, resulting in decreased morale among ground troops. In contrast, the morale of various People's Defense Forces and Ethnic Armed Organizations is bolstered (Quinley, 2024).

³ Such as ၂၀၁၁ တွင် ရဲဘော်မောင်သစ်ရေးသားထားသော ဂြိုဟ်တိုင်း ဝေသင်းကျန်းမှု သမိုင်း ၁ ရှု့၌ ၂ လွတ်လပ်ရေးမရေမကာလများ၊ ဂြိုဟ် ကားရေး ဘုရား၊ ပုံရိပ်ပေးရေးနှင့် စာအုပ်ထုတ်ဝေလုပ်ငန်း [History 1 and 2 of internal violent terrorists before independence compiled and written by Maung Thet, Ministry of Information Publishing Department].

In contrast to previous armed conflicts, the 2021 military coup and subsequent violent crackdown on peaceful protesters have revealed a new aspect of the situation: a significant increase in defections from the military since late February 2021. Media reports (Tan, 2024) have documented numerous instances of soldiers surrendering or deserting during armed encounters or clashes with resistance groups, a phenomenon previously unheard of, given the deeply ingrained loyalty traditionally associated with Tatmadaw. Kyed and Lynn (2021) report that motivations for defection among soldiers vary widely. Some defectors are driven by a moral conviction that participating in violence against peaceful protesters contradicts the principles they pledged to uphold. For them, their commitment was to protect the nation, not to engage in violence against civilians. Others believe that the military's prolonged reliance on violent tactics no longer serves the best interests of the institution (Kyed & Lynn, 2021).

Although the military institution has not yet collapsed, the growing number of defections and desertions raises critical questions about the diminishing effectiveness of its indoctrination processes and efforts.

7.1.2 A cultivation of a culture of violence

The extent to which violence is cultivated and individual behavior is shaped during military training remains largely obscured. However, the conduct of ground troops in counterinsurgency operations demonstrates the degree of violence they are encouraged to exercise against perceived enemies, particularly civilians (Hassan, n.d.). This violent conduct is not only a battlefield tactic but is deeply embedded within the broader military culture that has been systematically nurtured over decades.

Since the 1960s, the Myanmar military has institutionalized the 'Four Cuts' strategy, which aims to sever insurgent groups from access to food, funding, intelligence, and recruits. This strategy has frequently translated into collective punishment against civilians, justified under broader military objectives of counterinsurgency and deterrence (Abrahamian, 2017). The normalization of such tactics illustrates the ingrained military culture that views violence as an essential and legitimate means of maintaining control.

Beyond strategic doctrine, the brutal culture fostered within military training is a crucial factor in shaping soldiers' behavior in combat. Training instills an ethos of violent retribution, framing excessive force, including collective punishment, as a necessary display of military dominance and cohesion. Hierarchical obedience and strict discipline reinforce this culture, ensuring that soldiers not only follow orders unquestioningly but also internalize violence as an expected mode of operation.

7.1.3 Tolerance of power imbalance

The internal military culture also plays a crucial role in normalizing power imbalances, both within the ranks and in the broader civilian-military relationship. Junior soldiers are often subjected to harsh disciplinary measures by superiors, creating an environment where authoritarian control is accepted as the norm. This internalized hierarchy translates into how soldiers engage with civilians, particularly in conflict zones, where the use of force is rationalized as an assertion of power rather than an exception (Quinley, 2022).

The abuse of power within military ranks is widely recognized, yet the precise mechanisms through which high-ranking officers exert dominance over lower-ranking soldiers remain insufficiently documented. However, accounts from defectors since the 2021 military coup have illuminated the extreme conditions faced within the institution, including systemic poverty, severe restrictions, bullying, forced labor, and an overwhelming sense of powerlessness that inhibits soldiers from envisioning a life beyond the military (Rocchio, 2024).

Myanmar's military culture extends beyond strategic doctrines within its institutional structures, supporter networks, and battlefield conduct; it represents an ingrained system that systematically institutionalizes violence, reinforces hierarchical power imbalances, and legitimizes coercion as a fundamental mechanism of governance. This deeply embedded culture ensures that violent conduct is not an aberration but rather a sustained and intrinsic feature of the military's operational ethos.

7.1.4 Impacts on human rights discourse

The institutionalized culture of military indoctrination, the normalization of violence, and the systemic reinforcement of power imbalances within Myanmar's armed forces have profound implications for the country's engagement with human rights discourse. The military leadership has historically viewed human rights norms and principles as ideologically threatening, perceiving them as antithetical to military rule and national security. This fear stems from the potential challenge that human rights discourse poses to the military's monopoly on power, as it promotes individual freedoms, accountability, and limitations on state violence—concepts fundamentally at odds with the military's authoritarian governance model.

Although the military leadership selectively seeks foreign training and academic exchanges to enhance technical expertise and institutional capacity, Myanmar's military has remained resistant to the broader ideological frameworks accompanying such programs. As Selth (2002) notes, the military leadership considers human rights discourse "alien, incompatible with military rule, and a contamination of state ideology". This ideological resistance has manifested itself in successive regimes distorting human rights principles, constructing alternative narratives, and engaging in systematic denial of rights violations.

A key strategy employed by the military has been the manipulation of human rights language to serve state interests. Public denials of human rights abuses—particularly those condemned by the United Nations and international bodies—are framed as "unfounded, politically motivated, and an infringement on Myanmar's sovereignty" (Ware, 2010, p. 8). The state has also strategically invoked the Right to Development and selectively ratified human rights treaties, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1991 and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1997. However, these ratifications were not driven by a commitment to human rights but rather by the regime's interest in gaining international legitimacy while maintaining domestic control. As Horsey (2016) argues, Myanmar's engagement with international human rights mechanisms—such as its acceptance of an International Labour Organization (ILO) mission in 2000—was primarily strategic, aimed at bolstering its international standing rather than implementing substantive human rights reforms.

The selective appropriation and distortion of human rights discourse underscore the military's broader strategy of maintaining authoritarian control while mitigating external pressure. By engaging in symbolic compliance with international human rights frameworks, the regime has sought to navigate diplomatic relations without fundamentally altering its governance model.

This calculated engagement demonstrates the military's ability to co-opt human rights rhetoric while simultaneously rejecting its core principles, reinforcing the structural power imbalances that underpin Myanmar's political and social order.

The atrocities committed against the Rohingya, where Myanmar is accused of committing genocide with the case being litigated at International Court of Justice (International Court of Justice [ICJ], 2019) and the 2021 military coup and the subsequent widespread violence against civilians have indicated that the military can no longer turn deaf ears to the world (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data [ACLED], 2025).

7.2 Discussion of Foucault's theory of power and Myanmar's military

This section re-examines the relevance of Foucault's theory of power in the context of Myanmar's military indoctrination, culture of violence, and systemic power imbalances. It highlights how Foucault conceptualizes power as inherently coercive and repressive, often deployed by the state as a mechanism of control. By applying this framework, the discussion explores how the military's exercise of power not only sustains authoritarian rule but also shapes societal norms, reinforces behavioral conformity, and institutionalizes obedience within both military structures and the broader population.

7.2.1 Repressive power according to Foucault and its relevance in Myanmar's military

Foucault underscores the multifaceted nature of 'repressive power,' highlighting its divergent manifestations within normative power structures. In conventional frameworks, repressive power is exemplified by judicial decrees that proscribe certain behaviors or confiscate elements of life or property, as well as by the imposition of restrictions on individuals or groups regarding permissible actions. Entities such as states and sovereigns wield repressive power, with the military capable of causing fatalities, the police and judicial systems authorized to mete out punishments, and state apparatuses exercising control over populations through educational and technological means. However, Foucault (1980) introduces a nuanced interpretation of repressive power, characterizing it as possessing a 'productive aspect.' He contends that repressive power serves to reinforce both the boundaries of what is prohibited and the mandates it imposes upon individuals or groups. Foucault explains, "The State is superstructural in relation to a whole series of power networks that invest the body, sexuality, the family, kinship, knowledge, technology and so forth. (Foucault, 1980). He continues, noting

that its prohibitions can only take hold and secure its footing where it is rooted in a whole series of multiple and indefinite power relations that supply the necessary basis for the great negative forms of power (ibid). From this elucidation, repressive power is not merely prohibitive but is sustained and reinforced through a dense web of micro-level power relations embedded throughout society. This interpretation reveals that repressive power simultaneously constrains and constitutes social realities, making it both restrictive and generative.

This process of idealizing state ideology in Myanmar aligns with Foucault's argument regarding the production of knowledge by dominant classes, wherein knowledge itself becomes a form of power. The inception of Myanmar's military indoctrination can be traced back to the 1960s under the leadership of General Ne Win and his advisors, notably Chit Hlaing, a lecturer in psychological warfare at the military academy and the architect of anti-communist propaganda. Chit Hlaing's theoretical framework drew heavily from Buddhist teachings on human behavior and morality, emphasizing the justification of actions in the context of societal development and obstacles posed by certain groups. Ne Win subsequently translated this foundational ideology into the framework of the "Burmese Way to Socialism." Nakanishi (2013) and Selth (2002) further elucidate that this ideological synthesis comprised elements of Buddhism, Marxism, and nationalism, eventually crystallizing into the political doctrine of the ruling Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) following the military coup of 1962. Despite the dissolution of the BSPP in 1988, indoctrination persisted under subsequent regimes, namely the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The focus of ideological allegiance shifted from the party to the state and the Tatmadaw, wherein actions deemed favorable to the Tatmadaw were automatically perceived as beneficial to the government and the nation (Selth, 2002).

The exercise of power is consequently justified, whether repressive or progressive, depending on its perceived alignment with the state's interest. In the case of Myanmar, repressive power is wielded throughout the indoctrination process at the training of Tatmadaw members and with violence often rationalized in the name of the protection of the state and its interests (Naing, 2021). Despite the military's historical disdain for bourgeois society and its perceived concealed power structures, it has paradoxically engendered a socio-political landscape reminiscent of the elite-dominated societies it ostensibly seeks to supersede. The creation of the military institution implies the military leaders' ascent to positions of a ruling elite, thereby gaining the opportunity also to become an economic elite or create the cohorts of their choice of the economic elite (Myoe, 2014). Through its expansion and consolidation of power, the military institution has perpetuated a system wherein a privileged elite class exercises

dominance over the masses, thereby perpetuating socio-economic disparities within Myanmar's society. In this context, Foucault emphasizes that discipline plays a pivotal role in the formation of individuals, functioning as a specific technique of power that views individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise.

Contrary to a power that revels in its omnipotence, disciplinary power is characterized by its modesty and suspicion, operating as a calculated yet enduring economy. As aptly articulated by Foucault: "Discipline makes individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise. It is not a triumphant power, which, because of its own excess, can pride itself on its omnipotence; it is a modest, suspicious power, which functions as a calculated, but permanent economy" (Foucault, 1977).

7.2.2 Normalizing power according to Foucault and its relevance in Myanmar society

Foucault posits that power emanates from myriad sources and permeates everyday interactions, evident in various manifestations such as constant surveillance, adherence to cultural norms, persuasive communication, and the approval or disapproval of certain behaviors. In the modern context, power becomes diffuse and often imperceptible, influencing individuals' choices as they navigate these unseen forces. Power, omnipresent and elusive, molds all behaviors. The concept of 'normalizing power' encompasses self-censorship and the mutual policing of individuals' conduct in daily life, a mechanism Foucault deems more efficacious than overtly repressive power. Moreover, with the advancement of science, which objectifies individuals, power assumes a productive role, generating cultural norms and producing knowledge that is wielded to assert dominance over the masses. Foucault expresses his views, "This was where the concrete nature of power became visible, along with the prospect that these analyses of power would prove fruitful in accounting for all that had hitherto remained outside the field of political analysis. To put it very simply, psychiatric internment, the mental normalisation of individuals, and penal institutions have no doubt a fairly limited importance if one is only looking for their economic significance. On the other hand, they are undoubtedly essential to the general functioning of the wheels of power. So long as the posing of the question of power was kept subordinate to the economic instance and the system of interests which this served, there was a tendency to regard these problems as of small importance" (Foucault, 1980).

The influence of military power extends beyond conventional warfare, encompassing its pervasive impact on societal adherence to military rule. Myanmar academic Myoe writes that during the decades-long institutionalization of the military, for example, during Ne Win's tenure, the military underwent remarkable growth, escalating from 18 infantry battalions in 1948 to 32 battalions within a relatively short timeframe. By 1968, the Myanmar army had burgeoned to encompass 99 infantry battalions across five regional commands. This trajectory of rapid expansion continued, with figures indicating 168 infantry battalions with nine regional commands in 1988, 462 infantry battalions in 2000, and 504 infantry battalions by 2007, comprising an estimated total of 600,000 troops (Myoe, 2009). The author continues to illustrate that the rapid expansion of the military implies political and economic absorption and its larger influence on Myanmar's society. The military's reach is extensive and inescapable; it shapes the education curriculum, indoctrinating children and youth; infiltrates civil administration, offering guaranteed employment for millions; controls state, commercial transactions and economic production, and thereby necessitates conformity with military dictates within the private sector.

Concomitant with this expansion, another historian, Steinberg, writes that Myanmar's military institution wields considerable economic power, penetrating various sectors of the economy, including manufacturing, agriculture, and services encompassing banking, tourism, and healthcare. Moreover, the institution is actively engaged in import and export ventures, particularly dealing in high-value commodities such as automobiles and fuel. The 1990s saw the initiation by military leaders of a free-market economy, which coincided with the emergence of an 'economic elite,' colloquially referred to as 'cronies' in the Myanmar vernacular. This amalgamation of military and economic powers facilitated the consolidation of political authority in the hands of military leaders, paving the way for what has been termed a 'crony-capitalist economy' (Steinberg, 2018).

Foucault's extensive lectures offer insights into the functioning of power within societies. In his discussions with Maoists regarding the definition and administration of justice, Foucault critiques the conventional notion of the 'court of justice', arguing that its underlying ideology serves to benefit specific segments of society. He posits that the public spectacle of justice or punishment is utilized as a means of exerting control over the population. The significance of this debate lies in Foucault's elucidation of how the dominant class commandeers the discourse surrounding retributive justice and the punitive apparatus, effectively supplanting the antiquated Ancient Régime system. In *On Popular Justice: A Discussion with Maoists*, Foucault (1980) explained how power is maintained and formalized in the name of public order. "There thus

sprang up a 'judicial' order which had the appearance of the expression of public power: an arbitrator both neutral and with authority, of whom the task was both to 'justly' resolve disputes and to exercise 'authority' in the maintenance of public order. It was on these foundations, of social struggles, the levying of taxes and the concentration of armed force, that the judicial apparatus was erected".

According to Fink (2001), across Myanmar's political upheavals, notably 1988, 2007 and 2021, it becomes patently evident that the populace does not support military rule. Despite the military dominance, there exist individuals and civic groups who defy military rule, striving to navigate the military's influence in community work and to oppose its rigid and punitive justice system. Nevertheless, the military employs tactics of criminalizing activists or opponents and signaling violence, thereby coercing social conformity with military rule on a daily basis. "Under the military rule in Burma, it seems that doing what is right is often directly opposed to doing what is necessary to survive" (Fink, 2001). This analysis of the social-political landscape remains pertinent in contemporary Myanmar society following the recent coup.

7.2.3 Strengths and limitations of the theory of power in the Myanmar context

The significance of Foucault's theory lies in its multifaceted applicability, offering numerous avenues to understanding various aspects of societal power dynamics, whether examining historical constructs of sexuality, the formation of individuals or collective identities, mechanisms of control such as the panopticon, or the construction of justice. In the case of Myanmar's military, these theoretical frameworks are particularly pertinent. Despite the rapid changes in global politics since the inception of these theories between the 1960s and late 1980s, the Myanmar military remains entrenched in its authoritarian rule, making Foucault's theory especially relevant for deciphering the opaque workings of the military establishment.

However, the application of Foucault's theory of power encounters limitations; Firstly, the theory's broad scope, encompassing a wide range of social and political phenomena, renders it inherently abstract and challenging to apply directly to specific cases. Moreover, in the application of the theory to comprehend the intricacies of Myanmar's military indoctrination and its broader impacts on human rights discourses, there are no specific methodological roadmaps that have been applied, which puts the application of this theory in an experimental terrain. Despite the theory's comprehensive analytical tools to understand and analyze power dynamics within Myanmar's military institution, the paper grapples with inherent complexities in the application to a specific context.

8. Conclusion

Comprehending the intricate dynamics of military indoctrination, the culture of violence and its impacts on human rights discourse in Myanmar necessitates a multidisciplinary approach. While the existing literature adopts a predominantly political science perspective, the unique nature of the Tatmadaw requires a broader lens. This endeavor encounters two key limitations; first, understanding the components of indoctrination requires not only a social science lens but also a psychological lens, which the paper attempts to cover, and second the rapidly evolving political and social contexts in Myanmar, marked by escalating civil war, pose challenges for maintaining the relevance of particular theoretical frameworks over time.

The institution's pervasive dominance is deeply ingrained in Myanmar society, manifesting itself in a culture of violence that engenders a cycle of retaliation and vengeance, devoid of rationality and empathy across diverse communities. Notably, the defection of younger Tatmadaw soldiers also suggests a broader shift in attitudes. These soldiers, influenced perhaps by the brief period of democratization experienced in Myanmar, have gained a taste of political freedom and economic liberalization. This exposure has likely shaped their perceptions, leading them to question the military's actions and contemplate alternative paths forward for peace and respect for human rights.

Utilizing Foucault's theory of power to explore Myanmar's military indoctrination offers unique insights. This approach not only sheds light on soldiers as human beings or less dehumanizing perspectives but also fosters scholarly debates on societal conformity to repressive power, whether overtly or tacitly, thus sustaining military rule. By shedding light on these dynamics, this analysis not only enhances our understanding of the Myanmar military but also contributes to broader discussions on power dynamics and societal compliance within authoritarian regimes. This paper has shown that using the lens of Foucault's theory of power makes it possible to understand that the state apparatus persistently applies repressive power, and society normalizes power, regrettably repressive, by imposing self-censorship and normalizing a culture of violence and a system of injustice, which have larger impacts on the human rights discourse. In conclusion, while this study, based on secondary data, offers valuable insights into the complexities of military indoctrination and its implications for human rights and power dynamics in Myanmar, further research is warranted to uncover the practices of the military institution in fostering a culture of violence. The discussion will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges in addressing Myanmar's problems to attain peace, human rights and democracy.

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Biography

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ရဲဘော်မောင်သစ်ရေးသားထားသော ငြိမ့်သွင်း သောင်းကျန်းမှု သမိုင်း (၁) နှင့် (၂)
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