

# **Soldier Defections in Myanmar**

## **Motivations and obstacles following the 2021 military coup**

DIIS-report, 2021:06. By: Helene Maria Kyed and Ah Lynn.

### ***Executive summary***

*“The main duty of the Tatmadaw [military] is to protect the country but in Myanmar, they kill the people and always try to rule the country. I do not want to be hated by the people. That is why I chose to stand on the people’s side. Killing the people is like killing my family members”* (military defector, 12 Sept. 2021).

Since Myanmar’s military leaders staged a coup on 1 February 2021, an estimated 2,000 soldiers (by end of October) have defected and joined the ‘people’s side’ in opposing military rule. These defectors refuse to be complicit in the violent crackdowns and killings of civilians by the military, the Tatmadaw, which by November 2021 has led to over 1,260 deaths. Arguably, the number of defectors is low compared to the estimated 300-350,000 strong Myanmar military (Tatmadaw), and so far, there are no signs that the defections have created major splits in the military organization or changed the military leaders’ course of action. Nonetheless, defections constitute a significant symbolic blow to the Tatmadaw’s internal coherence and legitimacy. Also, the degree to which defectors have organised themselves and aligned with the anti-coup, pro-democracy opposition to the military is unprecedented in Myanmar’s long history of military rule. Day by day more soldiers risk their lives and those of their family members to join the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) along with teachers, doctors, policemen and others who refuse to work under the military leadership.

In this context, military defection has emerged as one among other strategies to challenge the military regime, based on the thesis that a disintegration of the Tatmadaw could be decisive in reversing the coup and for bringing Myanmar on a genuinely democratic path. This thesis is supported by comparative literature on civil-military relations, which shows that military defection has been a key factor in facilitating the success of pro-democracy popular uprisings against authoritarian regimes. A key question right now in Myanmar is: What conditions could provoke a large enough scale of defections to make a significant impact on the Tatmadaw’s course of action, its internal coherence, and its operational capacity?

This report, written by Myanmar researcher Ah Lynn and DIIS senior researcher, Helene Maria Kyed, engages with this complicated question by exploring the drivers and obstacles to defection in Myanmar since the 1 February coup. It takes an outset in the voices of those defectors who have spoken up about their defection, drawing on a wide set of data collected between May and October 2021. Knowing why some soldiers have left the army and why others stay, is paramount for any

discussion of the prospects for larger scale defections. The report contributes to the building of such knowledge. It also analyses the various strategies that defected soldier groups and the military opposition are using to encourage defections and what the Tatmadaw is doing to prevent internal splits and defections.

*Key findings:*

- *The Myanmar military is not homogenous:* the Myanmar military, known as the Tatmadaw, is reputed for being a highly cohesive and stable organisation. Yet in reality we must understand that the Tatmadaw is a multi-layered organisation with different sectors, rank levels and a variety of personal experiences, interests, and convictions. This heterogeneity shapes a diversity of drivers and obstacles to defection.
- *Defection patterns since the military coup:* defectors hold ranks from major and below and tend to be from the younger generation but span across multiple military sectors. Very few collective defections have occurred, likely due to high security risks. Defectors seek final refuge in so-called 'liberated areas', under the nominal control of ethnic armed organisations that oppose the coup. To escape, they get help from civilians and/or organised groups of other defectors.
- *Desertions and insubordination:* it is highly risky to defect, as defection is associated with higher penalties for soldiers who leave the army than for deserters. There is a long history of a significant number of desertions in Myanmar, but the number of deserters since the coup is unknown, as deserters would undeniably be in hiding and keep low profile. Defectors provide some evidence that there is a growing scale of insubordination or internal resistance among in-service military personnel, who are providing intel to the opposition or tacitly circumventing orders (e.g., to use violence against civilians), but who find it too risky to defect or desert.
- *Drivers and obstacles to defection:* these are multiple and often overlap across moral, ideological, informational, personal/family security, and pragmatic factors – with the latter spanning from concerns for and often quite calculated risks assessments in relation to survival, access to benefits, economic interests, positions, and status. Any successful strategy to motivate more defections would need to encompass a combination of these factors.
- *Drivers of defection in particular include:*
  - *Morality:* a key catalyst for defecting is a moral concern for the military violence against civilians since the coup. Some defectors express being demoralised by what they see as a loss of the military's legitimacy and betrayal of its obligation to protect the people. Herein also lies a critique of the military leadership as corrupt, self-interested, and representing an unjust order. The split between military and people

becomes a catalyst to not simply leave the army, but to defect and join the people's side.

- *Internal exploitation*: a deeper dissatisfaction among lower ranks of the internal system of the Tatmadaw, which also existed prior to the coup, has motivated some to defect. Defectors recount inhumane treatment, low pay, and imposed salary deductions, forced labour, and violent punishments. Defection here becomes not only an act of avoiding complicity in violence, but also of escaping internal oppression and exploitation, for ideological as well as pragmatic reasons.
  - *Ideology*: defection is rarely driven by the support for a particular political party, like the NLD, but mainly by a deeper wish to join a common struggle against military dictatorship. Some defectors express a desire for a separation of military and government, for democracy, human rights, and freedoms, while others are more focused on the fear of losing the developments and openings that Myanmar has experienced over the past 5-10 years. The report detects a growing political awareness among those defectors who have joined the CDM.
  - *Exit options*: the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) is not in and of itself a reason for defecting, but its existence motivates soldiers to leave the army, as it constitutes an alternative space to identify with and to escape and exit into, with support networks and alliances on 'the people's side'. This has been strongly facilitated by the organised groups of defected CDM soldiers, the People's Soldier and the People's Embrace. Access to online information and social media here plays a significant mobilising role, constituting a strong difference from past military coups and mass popular uprisings.
  - *Organised support from the opposition*: defections are encouraged by the ongoing CDM soldier groups' online campaigns to enlighten in-service soldiers about the poor conditions within the military and the injustices of the military leadership, which have been combined with efforts to provide security, food, medical care, and other support to soldiers who leave the army. This mobilisation strategy has since August been supported by the organised political opposition, the National Unity Government (NUG) with promises of immediate moral and material support as well as future pensions and positions in a new federal army. Such efforts appeal to both pragmatic, moral, and ideological factors that affect decisions to defect.
- *Obstacles to defection are both immediate and structural, including in particular:*
    - *Fear of punishment and family security*: constitute immediate obstacles to defection that impede those soldiers who wish to leave the army from doing so, despite being

morally and/or ideologically discontent with the coup and the violence against civilians. Punishment for defection is high, and the Tatmadaw is reputed for stringently tracking down defectors and threatening or punishing their family members. Concerns for family survival also plays a role.

- *Restrictions on movement and isolation form external communication:* constitute another set of immediate obstacles, which makes it practically difficult for soldiers to leave the military bases or compounds and to stay in connection with the outside, including assessing information from other platforms than those controlled by the military leadership. While isolation and control of soldiers is not new in Myanmar, the Tatmadaw has heightened these measures since the coup to prevent defections (including cutting off internet, surveillance of social media postings and so forth).
- *Structural obstacles to defection* include those that impede soldiers and officers from desiring to leave the military, keeping them loyal to the organisation or at least tied into its system for pragmatic, habitual and/or ideological reasons. These obstacles are identified in the report to encompass the following:
  - *Hierarchical control and violent patron-client relations:* the internal system of unquestionably following orders and servicing superiors at the different scales of the military hierarchy, through both favours, threats, and punishments, has been the source of discontent among some defectors, but evidence suggests that this system also ties soldiers and officers so tightly into the military that it makes it hard to break free, both physically and mentally. Combined with isolation from information and from the wider civilian population this presents a clear structural obstacle to defection. As some defectors have noted, many lower ranks are blinded from their own oppression within the military system.
  - *Economic ties and internal incentive structures:* for decades the loyalty and coherence of the Tatmadaw's officer corps has been sustained by an internal incentive structure linked to promotions, benefits, and retirement schemes. Since the 1990s' economic liberalisation, incentives to remain in the military has also been associated with officers' access to lucrative business concessions and opportunities, linked partly to the large military-owned conglomerates. While higher ranks stand to lose more in economic terms if they defect, the imbedded notion that the Tatmadaw is a route to wealth and survival also presents a structural obstacle to defection among (some) lower ranks.
  - *Military nationalist ideology and internal enemies:* the deeply entrenched historical narrative of the Tatmadaw as the father of the nation and protector of the Buddhist religion runs deep within the military and is propagated to soldiers from the first day

of training. This nationalist ideology in turn relies on a construction of people who oppose military rule as internal enemies, criminals or terrorists who are destabilising the country. Beliefs in this ideology constitutes a structural obstacle to defection, which simultaneously impede (some) soldiers from having moral concerns over the violence against civilians, who are conceived as existential threats to the nation and the religion.

- *The impact of armed resistance on defection is uncertain:* the shift since May 2021 towards increased armed resistance against the military and the emergence of the People's Defence Forces (PDFs), which has also led to significant losses among military personnel, could both motivate and demotivate defections. Some defectors have joined or aided the PDFs and some PDF's have successfully 'recruited' soldiers by welcoming them and giving them rewards for defecting. Yet the armed resistance is also increasing the risks of defecting and reinforcing the division between civilians and soldiers, which could impede soldiers from desiring to leave for moral and ideological reasons. For those driven by pragmatic concerns, we may however see an increased level of defections if the armed resistance appears to be able to defeat the military.
- *Prospects for large scale defections:* will largely depend on the strategies and developments of the political opposition to the military.
  - The defection campaigns of the opposition to the military – in collaboration with the CDM soldier groups - need to be sustained and upscaled, targeting simultaneously the diversity of immediate and structural obstacles to defection. This includes immediate practical support to soldiers who (wish to) defect and their family members, such as support to escape routes, availability of safe locations, and provision of food and basic services like medical care. It also includes an intensified hearts and mind campaign challenging the pervasive nationalist ideology of the military. Support from civilians towards defectors is also crucial here.
  - To motivate more to (wish to) defect would also need significant trust-building in the opposition's promises to defectors about viable future alternatives in the advent of military regime failure, such as trustworthy guarantees of future positions, livelihood, and amnesty. In the larger picture this also involves the promulgation of clear visions of an alternative order, including how the opposition intends to transform the military organisation.
  - Unified leadership and collaboration across the various anti-coup movements, the National Unity Government (NUG) and the ethnic armed organisations could prove magnetic for large-scale defections.
  - Some military personnel would also likely be motivated to defect if the armed resistance proves likely to succeed in defeating the military, which some defectors

argue, would depend on the opposition being able to implement a unified command structure for the PDFs and other armed groups.