

Police under the military coup in Myanmar:

Between Violence, Fear, and Desertions



Police under the military coup in Myanmar: Between Violence, Fear, and Desertion

Anonymous researchers (Nyan Corridor) & Helene Maria Kyed (Danish Institute for International Studies)

The Myanmar Police Force (MPF) has been notably visible on the front lines of the military junta's efforts to control and violently suppress the massive street protests that have occurred across Myanmar since the military coup d'état on 1 February 2021. Police officers have also been tasked with reporting on and arresting anti-coup protesters, journalists, politicians, and those affiliated with the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) that, since the early days of the coup, inspired large scale strikes by public and private sector workers.

The violent crackdowns by the police and army escalated and became increasingly brutal from 8 February, when the junta warned anti-coup protesters that effective measures would be taken against them. By 27 April, the death toll had reached 745.¹ Increasingly police and soldiers are also reportedly engaging in random beatings, shootings, extortions of money from vehicles², and looting houses and street shops without warrants. In some areas of cities such as Yangon, the security forces are occupying neighbourhoods and schools.³ The violence by police and soldiers has been documented by many eyewitnesses, and this photographic and filmed evidence has been widely circulated in the international media, on YouTube and on social media platforms.

Consequently, fear and insecurity among the people - including those who are not protesting in the streets – have grown day by day, along with outrage and resentment of police officers and soldiers. Since the second week of February, this resentment has instigated what has popularly been called a 'social punishment campaign' that encourages people not to sell things to police officers and soldiers, including their family members, and to boycott military-owned products and services.⁴ People have also enquired after the educational and vocational qualifications of officers responsible for shooting or giving orders to shoot protesters, as well as collecting the names of these officers' family members. This information has been posted on social media to publicly shame and punish the officers.

The involvement of the police force in brutal violence since the coup is undeniable, yet there is also another side to the story: the quiet defiance of some police officers refusing to participate in violent crackdowns and the estimated 600 police officers who, since 9th February, have publicly or covertly joined the CDM or sided with the protesters. In media interviews, deserting officers have defended their position, arguing that the army uses police officers as human shields in street demonstrations, and that most shootings of protesters have been carried out by soldiers disguised in police uniform.⁵ Others have highlighted that it is not the ordinary security or civilian police, but the riot or counter-terrorism police, who are committing the violent crackdowns.⁶

In this paper we set our sights on this alternate perspective of the story, by providing some preliminary insights into the perceptions and actions of those police officers who have joined the CDM and those who are trying to circumvent participation in the violent crackdowns. We also dwell on the social ostracism and fears that police officers and their families – who are against the coup but who fear leaving the force – are facing. At a broader level of analysis, the

insights do not deny the brutality of the police force and its submission to army orders and discipline, but rather focuses attention on the diversity within the force and the potentiality for growing splits within the security forces as the military junta's violence against civilians endures.

Since the security situation does not permit overt and in-depth research of a large sample of informants, the analysis is based on secondary media, social media sources and qualitative interviews by phone with two police officers and four wives of police officers who are all close acquaintances of the Nyan Corridor researchers.⁷ The majority of respondents were non-Bamar and were posted in different regions, including Sagaing, Mandalay, Naypyidaw and Kachin State, representing civil or security police of lower-ranks – and not including anyone from paramilitary units such as the riot police. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalised across Myanmar, and must be read as preliminary insights into the ambiguities and fears (at least some) police officers are facing now, including the divisions that exist within the force. We pre-empt our reading of current events by first providing a short background to the organisation and history of the police force in Myanmar.

Policing models and legacies in Myanmar

It is unsurprising that the Myanmar Police Force, numbering roughly 80,000-100,000 officers,⁸ has been expected to aid the junta in quelling resistance, and that violent para-military actions have increasingly dominated how this has played out. The MPF falls directly under the command of the army, as per the 2008 military drafted constitution, while the Ministry of Home Affairs, under which the police are organised, is headed by a military appointed minister. This was also the case in the pre-coup period when the civilian government was headed by the National League for Democracy (NLD) party and its leader Aung San Suu Kyi. The police force also has a long history of being the armed reserve of the military and of being trained in the same doctrine that dominates the military.⁹

Arguably we need to recognise that some efforts to reform the police force in accordance with a democratic community-based policing model¹⁰ – which emphasises the police as a body that services the citizenry rather than the regime in power – have taken place, both in the mid-1990s and also during the partial transition to democracy since 2012. Yet as Aung Myo Maung notes, a quasi-military policing model has continued to be the dominant one in Myanmar since colonial rule. This implies a strong military doctrine and an ethos that values regime preservation, non-disintegration of the union, and the pacification of rebellion – values which are justified with reference to the instability caused by the continued ethnic armed conflicts.¹¹ The rationale here is that those who criticise and rebel against the military regime, which portrays itself as the guardian of the integration of the union, are security threats, criminals and 'enemies of the state' who should be quelled. Ethnic and religious minorities have also frequently been portrayed in this light, with a strong influence of extreme Buddhist Nationalism within the military.¹²

These legacies influence contemporary police actions and are worthy of consideration when reading and understanding current coup-related events. However, as Andrew Selth, notes, in this context it is problematic to assume that the police force is a homogenous group: despite military indoctrination, the police force also includes a new generation of men and women –

and their families – who have “grown up in a different environment than their predecessors”, that is to say, in an environment marked by 10 years of reform and greater interaction with the outside world. The police likely hold diverse opinions on the democratic transition, and with the landslide victory of Aung San Suu Kyi’s NLD party in the 2020 elections, we may also assume that at least some police and their families support the NLD.¹³ In addition, Andrew Selth’s in-depth historical analysis of the Myanmar police force also reminds us that they have always been divided into two main branches – the paramilitary and the civilian: where the former (especially the Special Branch and security battalions) has assisted the army in detecting political dissent and oppressing civil unrest, the latter has been charged with protecting society against crime and threats, and is thus more closely aligned to a community-based policing model. The civilian branch – unlike the army – live and work among the general population and act as an interface between citizens and government on an everyday basis. This compels the civilian police to feel more accountable to the public, even if they ultimately fall under military command.¹⁴

These legacies and the disparities within the police force provide us with a context for understanding the apparent incongruity of police violence, some officers joining the CDM and others engaged in quiet forms of resistance while remaining on the force.

Police desertions and CDM as protests grow and violence escalates

During the early days of street protests from 6-8 February, before the violent crackdowns began, powerful videos and photos circulated on social media of protesters trying to encourage police officers behind the barricades to join them. In Yangon, youth activists held placards urging the police to stand with the people and to join a civil disobedience movement (CDM) that had already led doctors, teachers, and other government workers to strike in a refusal to work under the military junta. “Stand with the people,” protesters chanted to the police, while one placard addressing the police read: “Which side will you stand for? The oppressor or the oppressed?” “Police should be for the citizens,” other protesters shouted, while they left flowers, bottles of water, snacks, and cigarettes at the feet of the barricading officers.¹⁵ On 7 February, a YouTube video showed protesters handing red roses to police officers barricading the demonstrations while holding shields and wearing riot-gear helmets.¹⁶ A screen shot of an officer cautiously showing the three-finger salute while holding a shield widely circulated on social media. The three-finger salute, inspired by the Hunger Games film series, has become emblematic of the anti-coup protests in Myanmar, thus this gesture by the officer was a clear indication of his support for the protesters.

These actions suggest that some protesters hoped to encourage the police to sever their allegiances with the military, based on the belief that some police support the pro-democracy movement and feel closer to the ordinary people than to the generals. On 9 February, this belief was confirmed, as the first officers joined the protesters: in Magway, some officers protected protesters from water cannon with their shields, while in Patheingyi, police officers broke the barricade and joined the protesters.¹⁷ On the same day, a police lieutenant in the capital, Naypyitaw, sided with demonstrators and gave a speech (which was later shared in print) calling for the ‘fall of dictator Min Aung Hlaing’. He said: “I am aware I will be put in jail with a long prison sentence if our fight for democracy does not succeed [...] But it’s worth fighting for over 50 million people in this country by doing what I believe in [...] My sacrifice for the

people and members of the police force, to fight for democracy and the fall of dictator Min Aung Hlaing, will be worth it.”¹⁸

On 10 February, 49 police officers in Loikaw¹⁹, the capital of Kayah state, followed this example by joining protesters, who in turn protected them from the township police who tried to arrest them.²⁰ But they refused and replied that they wanted peace and to stand with the community.²¹ They were holding placards that read “we don’t want the dictatorship” and “we stand with the people”.²² In Chin state’s Falam township, an officer who also left the force, similarly stated to the media: “How can I shoot peaceful protesters? It is like killing our own family members. That is why I refused to take orders”.²³ Another young police officer who joined the CDM said to Radio Free Asia: “Although we are Generation Z like others, and while other young people are protesting on the road, we are the ones who have to crack down on them. It should not be like that. We will still be proud for our CDM even if we are put in jail in accordance with the police rules and regulations for it.”²⁴

Since these first defections, police across the country have joined the CDM, reportedly including officers from Naypyidaw, Yangon, Mandalay, Tanintharyi region, and Karen, Chin and Kachin states. By 5 March an estimated 600 officers had defected, according to Irrawaddy news.²⁵ Since then more have joined, but it was not possible to verify the number. Most officers have deserted by submitting resignations, while others have just informed their superiors that they joined the CDM.²⁶

While most of the defecting officers are from the lower ranks of the civilian police branches, there have also been resignations from higher ranking officers who have served on the force for many years. For instance, a major source of inspiration for the growing number of defections has been acting police colonel Tin Min Tun from the Yangon Police Department, who joined CDM in the first week of March. After 31 years of service, he is now refusing to serve under the military regime, he told the Irrawaddy, adding that the police force is being misused by the military in the violent crackdowns.²⁷ Two higher ranking police station commanders from Mandalay also publicly announced on social media that they had joined the CDM, having already participated in violent crackdowns on protesters. One said he had served the force with loyalty and commitment for 26 years, but now he could no longer follow the unlawful orders and actions of the military regime. He encouraged other officers to join.²⁸ Another older police officer recorded a video of himself that was posted on Facebook in which he said (summarised translation by Nyan Corridor researcher):

I joined the police department in 1971 so my service years as a police officer is over 49 years. I really love to be a police officer and I love my job and I value and respect my work. Therefore, even though the military took the power, I did not resign. However, I could not tolerate anymore what the military did to the people on February 9, 21 and 27. What the military has done to the people is opposite what the law that I know says. So, starting from 1 March I decided clearly to join the CDM and boycott the military until we are free from them.²⁹

In statements by officers who have joined the CDM, there is a strong emphasis on highlighting that it is not the civilian branches of the police that are at the forefront of the violent crackdowns: some of them are ordered to engage in the violence, but they assert that those who are beating and shooting are police who have been drafted in and who they believe are soldiers in police uniform. They say that the arm badge design is different from that of ordinary police³⁰

and that they wear army belts rather than police belts.³¹ A young civilian branch officer, who has now joined the CDM, told Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) about his experience (summarised translation by author):

He was assigned to barricade the protesters at the Myanmar Economic Bank for a week in Hlaing township after having spent a week at Sule Pagoda in Yangon. On the first day, the police did nothing. On the second day, he was assigned to stand in the first line with a shield and crack down on the protesters. But he just threatened the protesters by showing the stick. Later some police shot with guns and the protesters had to run and some fell. Then, the police dragged them along the street and a soldier shot a man in the leg. But these police were not really police. The real police were not behaving brutally. But the people think they are real police. The real police only used rubber bullets, not real bullets. He is very sorry for so many people dying and that is why he joined the CDM.³²

Testimonies like this one suggest, as Mary Callahan also notes in a recent debate, that it is the paramilitary riot police who have been deployed to shoot and be violent against the protesters, alongside special units of the army.³³ A Nyan Corridor researcher similarly reported that in some rural areas, the local police have been kept at their stations and away from the protesters, while other police – likely riot units – have been assigned to conduct violent crackdowns. These divisions within the police force also seem to influence which branches have joined the CDM, namely the civilian ones, who have been working within neighbourhoods and communities prior to the coup.

It is unclear how many of the defecting officers have been arrested and how the military junta is dealing with them. By 5 March the AAPP (Assistant Association for Political Prisoners), which is documenting the number of detainees during the coup, reported that so far only three police officers had been charged.³⁴ They have been charged under the Myanmar Police Force Maintenance Discipline Law which carries a penalty of up to three years in prison for being absent from police duties.³⁵ But there are rumours that officers are forced to go into hiding, as their superiors are hunting them down.³⁶ In addition, there are Facebook postings that suggest that deserting officers have been arrested, tortured and disappeared without their families knowing of their whereabouts.³⁷ Nineteen lower-ranking police officers have also reportedly fled to India through Chin state for fear of being prosecuted. They are being temporarily housed by local Indian authorities while they seek political asylum.³⁸ It is still unknown what the Indian government will do with them.

Despite the lack of clear evidence of what happens to deserting officers, it is reasonable to assume that it requires enormous courage for them to join the CDM, and that out of fear, many would therefore be reluctant to do so, even if they are against the military coup and the violent crackdowns on peaceful protesters. This is also reflected in the small sample of interviews that we were able to conduct, including with the wives of police officers. They suggest that officers who have been accustomed to working within local communities – i.e. the civilian branches – are either excluded from, or reluctant to join, the violence and have been kept in the dark about the military coup, even if they have not joined the CDM.

Uncertainty and quiet forms of police resistance

On the day of the coup, police officers and their wives who were interviewed were just as surprised as the ordinary people in their communities. They were given no pertinent orders or instructions from their superiors, and there was a general feeling of shock and that they had to remain silent about the coup while inside the staff compounds of the police stations. A wife of one police lance corporal in Kachin state said it was difficult to know if they could trust their peers within the compound, while unaware of who was supportive of the coup and who was not, and how the different officers would react. One interviewed officer said he believed that his station commander wanted them to just act normally, because he was concerned that the public might instigate an uprising and start a conflict that would create chaos at the station. The lower ranks also feared that their friends in the community might lose trust in them because of the coup. This feeling mounted as the peaceful protests and the banging of pots and pans began in the early days after the coup: the officers worried that they would be put in a difficult position between the people and the junta, namely that they would be tasked to crack down on the protesters. All the respondents of this research asserted that neither they nor their husbands had personally beaten or shot peaceful protesters. Clearly this is difficult terrain to navigate.

With limited data at our disposal, our interviews suggested that police in smaller, more remote towns were to varying degrees expected to participate in crackdowns, whereas the civilian branches of the police in areas close to the larger cities of Naypyidaw and Mandalay were kept away from the protests, with riot or counter-terrorism police instead deployed to enforce the crackdowns alongside soldiers.³⁹

The police on duty in Naypyidaw and Mandalay were ordered to remain ensconced at the police station and were not instructed to take part in the crackdown. The wife of one such police corporal said: “Our superior officer instructed us not to take sides with any parties and stay inside the station compound only. We cannot go anywhere. My husband also stays at the station. He has to go out only when there are VIP visits.” While speaking, her son interrupted and asked the researcher: “Aunty, you live in Yangon, don’t you? Why don’t you go for the protest? I would like to participate in it so much, but I cannot go out of the station compound.” Similarly, when the wife of a police officer stationed in Mandalay, who did not stay with him, pleaded with him not to use violence against the protesters and to not arrest anyone, he assured her: “We are just security police. Now the assigned ones are the counterterrorism police. So, it [the violence] has nothing to do with us. The counterterrorism police come from Naypyidaw. We are instructed not to go out. We just have to take care of the station security.” The other police officer we interviewed from Naypyidaw claimed that the police who were brutally cracking down on protesters were not genuine officers. Their arm badges and caps were different from those of police, he said. Similarly, in Mandalay, the caps of the police who were cracking down on protesters bore a white star with a green background, which is different from the standard police cap.

In Sagaing and Kachin’s more rural areas, far away from Naypyidaw, the situation was different. Here the civilian police were also ordered to control, gather intelligence, and crack down on protesters and those who joined the CDM. These orders came from superiors and from those army majors who, since the coup, had been assigned by the military State Administrative Council (SAC) to serve as township council chairpersons, thus working alongside district and township administrative officers. According to the interviewees here, the

civilian police had nonetheless tried to avoid engaging in violence by communicating and negotiating with the protesters. They did this based on their unspoken personal disapproval of the coup and because they have close connections and empathy with the ordinary people in what are small communities where people know each other and the police well.

In Kachin state, the wife of a police corporal told the researcher that the police met covertly with the protest leaders and they agreed where and when to protest to avoid violent crackdowns. Otherwise, the police told the protest leaders, the police would have to shoot, according to the instructions they had been given. The protest leaders agreed with the officers' suggestions. An information police officer at a Sagaing police station also participated in tacit negotiations to avoid violence. He had been tasked by the township administration to watch and collect information about the protesters and CDM participants, and to crack down on them if necessary. He reported to the administrative army major daily, and as a result he became closely acquainted with the major. One day he was invited to join him at a tea shop. While they were sipping tea and having a casual conversation, the major suddenly issued an impulsive order, saying: "Just shoot and crack down the protesters". The information police officer responded to the major:

A Bah [typical address to a high-ranking military officers], please let me discuss this with my local people. I can convince them. Besides, we have an issue with ammunition. We are not supplied with any rubber bullets, tear gas, bullet proof jackets. We have only real bullets. If we handle them violently, they will not tolerate it. Please just let me handle those protesters in my own way.

The information officer subsequently visited the protesters, many of whom were civil servants that had joined the CDM, including some of his own friends and relatives. He tried to convince them to protest in a controlled manner and when possible to avoid open protests – otherwise they would risk being cracked down upon and face criminal charges, he told them. Moreover, to avoid breaking the Covid-19 prevention law, he asked the protesters to only gather in groups of 50 and to practice social distancing. Henceforth, the protesters only marched in groups of 50.

This information police officer said in the interview that he condemned how the military had forcefully overthrown the elected government, but as the police department is under military control, he could not express this view openly. Although he would like to join the CDM, he was scared that he would be charged with treachery and face ten years imprisonment. It would be difficult to take care of his family in these circumstances, so even though he dislikes the military regime, he must remain silent.

This fear of joining the CDM was shared by other interviewees. One wife of a police officer who is non-Bamar said that she strongly condemned the coup, because in her mind the military did not have good intentions for the country. As an ethnic minority she has experienced the inhumane cruelty and oppression of the military, and she does not want her children to face the same experiences. But she is afraid that if her husband openly opposes the military coup and resigns, she and their three children will be arrested and tortured. If her husband joins the CDM, they will also find it hard to survive. So even if the police do not want to work for the military regime, they cannot escape the situation, she explained.

The police who are against the military coup face a difficult situation in which they are fearful of defecting and fearful of being ostracised by the wider community, while they also maintain a sense of duty to provide for their families. Simultaneously, they are affected by divided views within the police force.

A police officer's wife from Kachin highlighted this latter point. Not all the people at her police station compound are against the military, and therefore they must be careful when expressing any critique of the military. She repeatedly heard other police officers' wives at the station saying things like: "If that old lady [Aung San Suu Kyi] keeps on governing, the Burmese will be extinct. Kalar⁴⁰ and other ethnic groups have been moving into the middle of Myanmar. The old lady is destroying Buddhism. Only if the military rules we can keep our nationality and religion." She said that these women seem to prefer the military regime – a view that was echoed by one of the six respondents, the wife of a police officer in Naypyidaw, who felt that the country could only be peaceful and develop under military rule.

It is evident here that some police – and their wives - adhere to the anti-NLD, Buddhist nationalist rhetoric that lies at the heart of the military indoctrination that the security forces are subjected to, including via social media. Not only does this rhetoric convey that the Burmese military is the guardian of the nation and of Buddhism, but also that Aung San Suu Kyi is aligned with foreign forces and supports a Muslim intrusion, which is presented as an existential threat to the nation and its religion.⁴¹ In this optic, the security forces view the protesters as enemies and the army as protectors. How extensively this view pervades the police force is impossible to verify, but along with fears associated with deserting, it can be assumed to play a significant role in the current dynamics of military violence and dissent.

Social punishment and ostracism

Police officers may fear joining the CDM, but as the violence against the protesters has grown, they also increasingly fear ordinary people. In many respects, the 'enemy lines' between people and security forces are intensifying on both sides. The now widespread social punishment campaign, for instance targeting family members of army generals, including their sons and daughters who study abroad⁴², is also affecting lower-ranking police in more remote areas, according to our interviewees. The wife of a police officer in Kachin explained with fear in her voice:

We dare not go out [of the station compound] alone like before. About three or four women from the police station have to go out together. The shop owners do not want to sell things to the police families. Therefore, we have to buy for many days at a time. We cannot let our children go out too as we are afraid they might get beaten. It is already time for my young daughter to go to preschool. However, whenever I made queries to the schools, the teachers said the schools were not open yet. In fact, the schools were open. It is not good for the children too. We really want this crisis to finish soon.

The wife of the police officer from Naypyidaw reiterated that police station officers asked them to buy enough groceries for one, or sometimes two weeks. At other times, they had to stay at the station behind closed doors, while at a station in Sagaing, the gate was fully locked. The interviewees said that police families cannot eat or sleep well. They are constantly worried that the people will set fire to the station. So they have packed all their important documents and

national identity cards ready for emergency situations. They also take turns to guard the station. At a Kachin police station, they were warned that the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) – the largest Kachin-based ethnic armed organisation - would attack the station.⁴³ So all the police families had to relocate overnight. They took turns to sleep and keep guard.

The wife of a police officer in Mandalay said that even the police who did not partake in the violent crackdowns suffered because of the violent actions of other officers. One day, while her husband and four other police officers were guarding the police station, people came and destroyed the main gate. The five officers had to hide in a monastery with the help of a monk. It was early morning and all five of them had not eaten breakfast yet, but they did not dare go out, because they were afraid the shop owners would not sell food to them and also the monk did not offer them food. They were afraid to meet people. They only returned to the police station when they were escorted by a group of 100 counterterrorism police and soldiers. Those observing this ‘rescue’ may have their view of the police being on the side of the army reinforced, despite the possibility that many may privately be unhappy with the military coup – as at least was the case for our interviewee’s husband. It is undeniable that numerous police officers are placed in an extremely difficult situation, as evidenced in this summarised translation of a Facebook posting from 24 February:

A police officer approaches a street stall and wants to buy a cold drink with coconut milk – all the customers who are drinking cold drinks there did not want to look at him and were turning their eyes. The officer asked to buy a drink for 500 kyat, but the street vendor told him that he does not sell to police officers and soldiers. The officer said that he was very thirsty, that he had been standing outside in the sun all day, not eating and drinking all day. People standing around were waiting to see what the vendor will respond. The vendor denied again. Then, the officer said almost crying in a breaking voice: in our lives we do not have any choice. We only follow the orders given from above. In my heart I am the same as the people. We are very sad that we are being hated by the people in this situation. We are doing it [cracking down on protesters] even though we do not like the pressure from above.⁴⁴

Conclusion

The participation of the MPF in the violent crackdowns on protesters in Myanmar is undeniable, and in the process, the boundary between police and people is reinforced. The hatred and anger towards the police are growing, expressed through boycotts, attacks, and social ostracism. This is supported by the military junta’s use of the police as its extended arm – or more precisely, as an armed reserve to suppress popular resistance through an optic that views the people as enemies of a nation state that the army purports to protect.

At the same time, there is some evidence to suggest that the civilian branches of the police are either not deployed or are tacitly defying orders to participate in the violent crackdowns, for instance through negotiations and advice to the protesters. In addition, while it is a numerically small number in comparison to the size of the force, at least 600 police officers have left the force to join the protesters and the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). As we have tried to flesh out in this paper, these desertions and tacit forms of defiance by (some) police officers, draw attention to divided views within the MPF, that are not only generational but informed

by political views, the past years of reform, and the extent to which police officers are closely connected to ordinary people in the communities they serve. Loyalty to the military can therefore not be generalised across the force, despite the fact that the police have been subjected, by and large, to similar forms of indoctrination as the army.

The question of why more police officers are not deserting the force, must on the one hand be understood against the background of divided views of the democratic transition, the NLD and the role of the army. On the other hand, it is also informed by personal fears of being prosecuted, losing means of survival, and placing relatives at danger. In that sense, it may be likely that many more police officers than those we have been able to interview, are caught in an ambiguous position. For these officers to desert would require significant protection – including of their families – and alternative routes of income.

Some scholars have argued that splits within the security forces could trigger a solution to the current crisis and make the military junta step back from its current power grab. As Terence Lee and Gerard McCarthy argue, withdrawal of the support of armed forces and police would deprive the military regime of the means of violence on which their survival depends. “For protesters, the defection of security personnel is thus a material, psychological, and moral victory”.⁴⁵ Defections may also have a snowball effect, as those who previously had no option realise that there are alternatives. Cracks in the army and splits between the police and the army, Andrew Selth also notes, would be a serious blow to the army generals, especially given that they lack any popular mandate and entirely rely on coercive powers to control the civilian population.⁴⁶

Thus far, there are few signs of any such schisms appearing. While the number of army soldiers and police defecting has risen in the last month, the figures are still low, and the army’s long history of stability and institutional integrity makes large scale mutiny a major obstacle. Yet there may be some openings. In that regard, Lee and McCarthy have argued that the ongoing deterioration of the economy and the boycotts not only of large military conglomerates, but also of the businesses of lower-ranking soldiers who often survive due to supplementary incomes, could incentivise the increase of soft-liners within the security forces, since much of the loyalty to the army relies on patronage and access to economic benefits. For this to translate into large-scale desertions would require alternative options and futures, including protections and assurances of survival put forward by the pro-democracy movement, they argue.⁴⁷ Based on the insights of this paper, these incentives would also be important for those police officers who are against the coup, but who see few options other than remaining within the force to protect themselves and their families. Likely for the majority, the benefits of joining the CDM must outweigh their fears of leaving the force and facing unpredictable futures.

¹ See the website of the *Assistance Association for Political Prisoners*: <https://aappb.org/>

² For examples of money extortions see: *Myanmar Now* (2021) ‘Soldiers and police robbed 10,000 pieces of silver from a citizen,’ 15 April 2021: <https://www.myanmar-now.org/mm/news/6509>; *Myanmar Now* (2021) ‘Military council fines dentist for free medical treatment,’ 11 April 2021: <https://myanmar-now.org/mm/news/6471>

³ See for instance the following video: ‘Taking lawful action,’ Youtube.com, *Radio Free Asia (RFA)*, 14 April 2021: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jg38C4gmYhE>

⁴ The social punishment campaign took off after a young female protester was shot in the head by security forces in the capital city Naypyidaw on 9 February (see *Human Rights Watch* (2021) ‘Myanmar: Lethal Force Used Against Protesters: Draconian Measures Violate Right to Free Assembly’, 9 February 2021: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/09/myanmar-lethal-force-used-against-protesters>)

⁵ See RFA on 5 March: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=367807690847907>

⁶ See RFA on 5 March: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=367807690847907>

⁷ Due to the current political situation, the telephone network is not secure, so the researcher used different mobile phone SIM cards to call each respondent. Moreover, the interviews were conducted in ethnic languages, to make the interviewees feel safer, but when it was necessary to switch to Myanmar language words when these words were not easily available in the ethnic language, the interviewees felt uncomfortable about answering some of the questions. This highlights the risks that the police and their wives are facing in the current situation.

⁸ On the rough estimates of the MPF see Selth, Andrew (2012) ‘Myanmar’s Police Forces: Coercion, Continuity and Change,’ *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 34(1): 53-79: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/41446244.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Adb4ff7a3acec679583c2841418fb8947>

⁹ See Selth, Andrew (2012) ‘Myanmar’s Police Forces: Coercion, Continuity and Change,’ *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 34(1): 53-79: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/41446244.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Adb4ff7a3acec679583c2841418fb8947>

¹⁰ Since 2013 the EU has financed a pilot project on community-based policing in the cities of Yangon and Mandalay. See Muang, Aung Myo (2020) ‘Administrative Reform in the Myanmar Police Force: Decision-Making and Community-Based Policing,’ *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 39(3): 428-443. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1868103420942781>. The EU has also provided training of riot police in crowd management training particularly geared towards how the police act in demonstrations, and according to the EU, in ways that are more in adherence with modernised technologies and human rights. A batch of about 4,000 officers in total were targeted for training. See *Myanmar Times* (2014) ‘Police force completes first round of EU training’, 21 February 2014: <https://www.mmmtimes.com/national-news/9638-police-force-completes-first-round-of-eu-training.html>

¹¹ See Muang, Aung Myo (2020) ‘Administrative Reform in the Myanmar Police Force: Decision-Making and Community-Based Policing,’ *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 39(3): 428-443. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1868103420942781>

¹² On these views inside the army, see *Tea Circle Oxford* (2021) ‘Critical Juncture: Being a Soldier’s Son in Burma’s Ongoing Crisis,’ 12 April 2021: <https://teacircleoxford.com/2021/04/12/critical-juncture-being-a-soldiers-son-in-burmas-ongoing-crisis/>

¹³ See Selth, Andrew (2021) ‘Myanmar’s coup will test the loyalty of the security forces,’ *The Interpreter*, 19 February 2021: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/myanmar-coup-will-test-loyalty-security-forces>

¹⁴ See p. 69 in Selth, Andrew (2012) ‘Myanmar’s Police Forces: Coercion, Continuity and Change,’ *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 34(1): 53-79: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/41446244.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Adb4ff7a3acec679583c2841418fb8947>

¹⁵ See Nachemson, Andrew (2021) ‘In Myanmar, protesters urge police to join democracy fight,’ *Aljazeera*, 8 February 2021: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/8/in-myanmar-protesters-urge-police-to-join-democracy-fight>

¹⁶ ‘Myanmar: Protestors give flowers to police officers at Yangon rally,’ Youtube.com, *Ruptly*, 7 February 2021: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PRM2xA88UEo>

¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/HeleneKyed/status/1359051967998406656>;
<https://twitter.com/7daynews/status/1359024155383922689>

¹⁸ Myanmar Now (2021) ‘Handful of police officers join Myanmar’s uprising against military regime,’ 9 February 2021: <https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/handful-of-police-officers-join-myanmars-uprising-against-military-regime>.

¹⁹ ‘ဆန္ဒပြပြည်သူတွေနဲ့ ပူးပေါင်းတဲ့ ရဲဝန်ထမ်းတွေကို လိုက်လံဖမ်းဆီးနေ,’ Youtube.com, *RFA*, 10 February 2021: [ဆန္ဒပြပြည်သူတွေနဲ့ ပူးပေါင်းတဲ့ ရဲဝန်ထမ်းတွေကို လိုက်လံဖမ်းဆီးနေ - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PRM2xA88UEo)

²⁰ https://twitter.com/Myanmar_Now_Eng/status/1359361727134072832; <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/police-breaking-ranks-amid-rising-unrest-in-myanmar/2165936>

²¹ ‘ဆန္ဒပြပြည်သူတွေနဲ့ ပူးပေါင်းတဲ့ ရဲဝန်ထမ်းတွေကို လိုက်လံဖမ်းဆီးနေ,’ Youtube.com, *RFA*, 10 February 2021: [ဆန္ဒပြပြည်သူတွေနဲ့ ပူးပေါင်းတဲ့ ရဲဝန်ထမ်းတွေကို လိုက်လံဖမ်းဆီးနေ - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PRM2xA88UEo)

²² https://twitter.com/Myanmar_Now_Eng/status/1359361727134072832; <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/police-breaking-ranks-amid-rising-unrest-in-myanmar/2165936>

²³ https://twitter.com/Myanmar_Now_Eng/status/1359361727134072832; <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/police-breaking-ranks-amid-rising-unrest-in-myanmar/2165936>

²⁴ RFA video on Facebook 5 March (translation by Nyan Corridor researcher): <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=367807690847907>

²⁵ *The Irrawaddy* (2021) ‘More than 600 Police Join Myanmar’s Anti-Regime Protest Movement,’ 5 March 2021: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/600-police-join-myanmars-anti-regime-protest-movement.html> .

²⁶ *The Irrawaddy* (2021) ‘More than 600 Police Join Myanmar’s Anti-Regime Protest Movement,’ 5 March 2021: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/600-police-join-myanmars-anti-regime-protest-movement.html> .

²⁷ *The Irrawaddy* (2021) ‘More than 600 Police Join Myanmar’s Anti-Regime Protest Movement,’ 5 March 2021: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/600-police-join-myanmars-anti-regime-protest-movement.html> .

²⁸ *Myanmar Now* (2021) ‘Two high-ranking police officers in Mandalay join CDM,’ 3 March 2021: <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/two-high-ranking-police-officers-in-mandalay-join-cdm>

²⁹ Link to the video (translation done by the Nyan Corridor researchers): https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=4288175684544715&id=100000569785922

³⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=367807690847907>

³¹ Interview with CDM police by Democracy Vision on 25 February: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/DemocracyVision/>

³² Democratic Voice of Burmese (DVB) 9 March: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2824947197759244>

³³ See Mary Callahan in interview: ‘Beyond the Headlines: Mass Movements and State Violence in Myanmar,’ Youtube.com, *Frederick S. Pardee School of Global Studies*, 15 April 2021: https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=F_pc8h5PXPM&feature=youtu.be

³⁴ *The Irrawaddy* (2021) ‘More than 600 Police Join Myanmar’s Anti-Regime Protest Movement,’ 5 March 2021: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/600-police-join-myanmars-anti-regime-protest-movement.html> .

³⁵ *The Irrawaddy* (2021) ‘More than 100 Myanmar Police Officers Join Anti-Regime Movement,’ 4 March 2021: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/100-myanmar-police-officers-join-anti-regime-movement.html> .

³⁶ *The Irrawaddy* (2021) ‘More than 100 Myanmar Police Officers Join Anti-Regime Movement,’ 4 March 2021: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/100-myanmar-police-officers-join-anti-regime-movement.html> .

³⁷ See for example: <https://www.facebook.com/216265185075061/posts/4304515189583353/>.

³⁸ *The Irrawaddy* (2021) ‘More than 600 Police Join Myanmar’s Anti-Regime Protest Movement,’ 5 March 2021: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/600-police-join-myanmars-anti-regime-protest-movement.html>; Goshal, Devyot (2021) ‘Exclusive: Nineteen Myanmar police seek refuge in India, more expected,’ *Reuters*, 5 March 2021: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-politics-india-exclusive-idUSKCN2AW007>.

³⁹ It is unclear from the interviews whether the police participating in the crackdowns were counterterrorism (in Burmese *Ar Kyan Phat Hmu Nein Hinn Yay Ye*) or riot police (*Ar-Kyan Phat Nein Hinn Tit Ye*), or a combination of the two, and it has not been possible to verify this information.

⁴⁰ In daily discourse, Kalar, is applied to categorise Muslims and Hindus, referring to ‘foreigners from India’, even though many of these Muslims and Hindus were born in Myanmar.

⁴¹ See: *Tea Circle Oxford* (2021) ‘Critical Juncture: Being a Soldier’s Son in Burma’s Ongoing Crisis,’ 12 April 2021: <https://teacircleoxford.com/2021/04/12/critical-juncture-being-a-soldiers-son-in-burmas-ongoing-crisis/>.

⁴² On the Social Punishment Campaign see: Myint, Sithu Aung (2021) ‘“Social punishment” campaign turns the tables on military elite,’ *Frontier Myanmar*, 18 March 2021: <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/social-punishment-campaign-turns-the-tables-on-military-elite/>; *Thai PBS World* (2021) ‘Social Punishment and Civil Disobedience, the weapons of the Myanmar people,’ 8 March 2021:

<https://www.thaipbsworld.com/social-punishment-and-civil-disobedience-the-weapons-of-myanmar-people/>.

⁴³ These rumours of KIA attacks on the police station may be likened to previous attacks carried out by KIA on a number of police outposts as part of their resistance to the military, for instance in Hpakant and Shwegu of Kachin State. See *Myanmar Now* (2021) ‘KIA attacks police bases in Hpakant: the offensive in the wake of the deadly crackdowns against anti-coup protesters in Myikyina’, 18 March 2021: <https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/kia-attacks-police-bases-in-hpakant>; <https://www.facebook.com/theirrawaddy/posts/kia-attacks-police-station-in-shwegumarch-31-2021-the-kachin-independence-army-k/4282756865102471/>

⁴⁴ https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=371262220614055&id=358280618578882

⁴⁵ Lee, Terrence and Gerard McCarthy (2021) ‘Are “Softliners” the Key to Ending the Crisis?’ *Global Asia*, 16(1): https://www.globalasia.org/v16no1/focus/are-softliners-the-key-to-ending-the-crisis_terrence-leegerard-mccarthy .

⁴⁶ See Selth, Andrew (2021) ‘Myanmar’s coup will test the loyalty of the security forces,’ *The Interpreter*, 19 February 2021: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/myanmar-coup-will-test-loyalty-security-forces>

⁴⁷ Lee, Terrence and Gerard McCarthy (2021) ‘Are “Softliners” the Key to Ending the Crisis?’ *Global Asia*, 16(1): https://www.globalasia.org/v16no1/focus/are-softliners-the-key-to-ending-the-crisis_terrence-leegerard-mccarthy