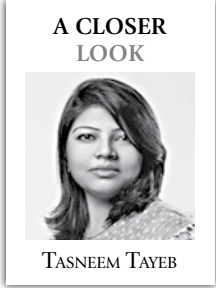


Myanmar's military-commercial complex

How trade and investments empowered the Tatmadaw



TASNEEM TAYEB

A CLOSER LOOK

MYANMAR'S mighty military overthrowing the country's democratically elected government to take full control of power was a well-planned move. The Tatmadaw—as Myanmar's armed forces are commonly referred to—wielded significant power, even when Suu Kyi was apparently ruling the country. They were not only in possession of 25 percent of seats in the legislature, enabling it to veto constitutional changes, it was also in charge of major ministries such as defence, home, and border affairs. Aside from the political, the Tatmadaw has another source of power: commerce.

Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL) and Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC), two of Myanmar's largest business conglomerates are owned and controlled by the Tatmadaw and its senior leaders, including the Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the man currently also ruling the country.

The tentacles of the behemoth conglomerates spread over key economic drivers, including energy, infrastructure, mining, banking, tourism and agriculture among other sectors. These companies have control of most of the country's vast resources and are used to boost the coffers of the Tatmadaw. As reported by a UN fact-finding mission, Myanmar generals control at least 140 companies, partially or fully. "The Myanmar military controls an extensive business empire that enables it to avoid accountability and conduct operations with impunity against ethnic groups, contributing to widespread human rights abuses," a United Nations report in August 2019 suggested.

Chairman of the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission, Marzuki Darusman, in an interview said that, "The Myanmar armed forces are enabled in a very enhanced way to act outside of civilian

control and therefore perpetuate their impunity in their involvement in gross human rights violations".

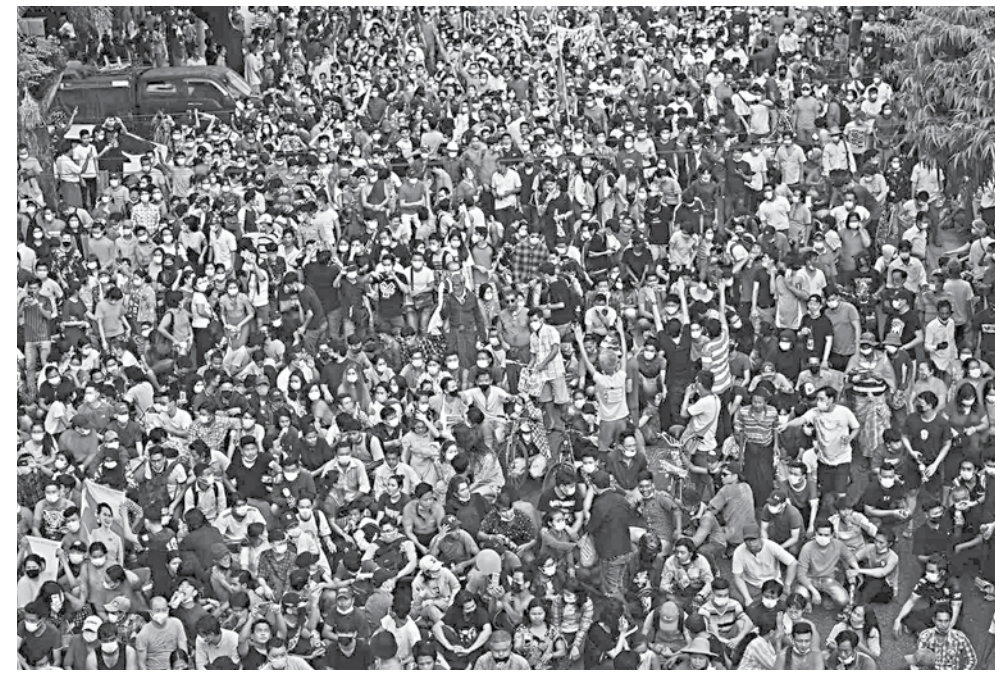
And foreign governments and businesses are directly and heavily involved in trade ties with these Tatmadaw-controlled and supervised businesses. According to report by *Barron's*—a weekly American magazine published by Dow Jones & Company of News Corp. Chinese, Singaporean, Japanese and South Korean companies have direct collaborations and partnerships with the Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL).

According to the same *Barron's* report, an MEHL subsidiary also "reportedly holds the largest number of jade mining licences".

And over the years, the Tatmadaw and its generals and high-ups have systematically fed on this commercial model for both collective and individual gains. According to an Amnesty International report in September 2020, in 2011 alone, General Min Aung Hlaing received USD 250,000 from MEHL in dividends.

Foreign companies such as US's Chevron, France's Total, have collaborations with Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise. The Amnesty International report added that South Korean steel giant POSCO; the same country's property developer, INNO Group; manufacturer and exporter of clothing, Pan-Pacific; Singapore-based oil company, Puma; RMH Singapore, a Singaporean fund; Japanese multinational brewer, Kirin; Wanbao Mining, Chinese metal mining company; among other major foreign corporations have partnerships with the Tatmadaw owned Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL) and Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC).

The Conversation last month reported that two very prominent British banks "have reportedly lent USD 60 million to a Vietnamese company building a mobile network in Myanmar. The Tatmadaw-controlled Myanmar Economic Corporation owns 28 percent of the network, known as Mytel." The report further mentioned that the Australian Government's, "Future Fund has



Protesters take part in a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon on February 6.

trade ties with foreign countries and companies, one should not be surprised that they have toppled a democratically elected government with complete disregard to the wishes of its own people who elected Suu Kyi to power last year. Perhaps in view of the prevailing realities the response of the world community to the recent political development in Myanmar has been lukewarm, with the exceptions of a few countries.

The foreign actors working in partnership with Tatmadaw controlled holdings are as responsible for the Rohingya genocide and death of democracy in Myanmar, as the perpetrators themselves. The only difference is, while the military acted on the frontlines, the investors supported them with the resources to strengthen their position.

Despite these, however, protests are growing in Myanmar calling for the return to democracy. Saffron-robed monks have joined the hundreds and thousands of people who are defying police brutality to press home their demand. While the army is cocooned in the strategically located new capital Naypidaw, where according to reports, military facilities "form something of a ring around the civilian buildings, which are closer to the centre, effectively reducing the power and strength of popular uprisings in the capital" (The Interpreter), the protests have spread to various corners of the country.

How the ongoing protests will affect the business operations in Myanmar, especially where foreign investments are involved will play a determining role in limiting Tatmadaw's financial resources. Manufacturers such as H&M have already said that they are monitoring the situation. If the protests continue businesses are likely to bear the brunt of it. For how long can the military resist internal pressure and how will the protests will impact the Tatmadaw's trade deals with foreign investors? That remains to be seen.

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invested 3.2 million Australian dollars (about USD 2.5 million) in a subsidiary of Indian multinational Adani, which is doing business with the Myanmar Economic Corporation."

In light of the Amnesty International report, Pan-Pacific said that it was terminating its operations in Myanmar. And while there had been growing calls on these foreign companies to sever business with MEHL and MEC, during the recent wave of the Rohingya genocide, it was only after the February, 2021 coup that Singapore based Puma and Japan based Kirin have announced to pull the plug on their operations in Myanmar.

Apart from the business collaborations with the MEHL and MCE of the companies, foreign countries are also directly investing in Myanmar. Singapore, China and Hong Kong are some of the major investors in Myanmar, with Singapore emerging at the top in the last few years. In 2019-2020 fiscal, the World Bank

estimated FDI commitment to Myanmar would jump by one-third to USD 5.5 billion.

Major world powers have investments in the special economic zones in Myanmar, one of which is located in the Rakhine State itself: Kyauk Phyu. A *Bangkok Post* report in October 2019 suggested, "A total of 106 enterprises from 18 countries and four local businesses have ploughed in USD 1.84 billion" in SEZs.

The investors include, the United Kingdom, the United Arab Emirates, Malaysia, France, Switzerland, Australia, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Panama, China, Brunei, Vietnam, Austria, Japan, the Netherlands, and India, among other countries. A lot of this money is channelled to the control of the Tatmadaw, thanks to the more than hundred crony companies being run under MEHL and MCE.

Given the political and financial prowess of the Myanmar military and their growing

How religious norms can support development



NAWSHAD AHMED

IT is one thing to explore the connection between religion and development, and another to take it for granted and find out ways in which religion can contribute to economic development, deal with social disorders and promote overall welfare of the people. The major religions in terms of number of followers, as far as I understand, have no conflict with development as long as it is for the people, the poor, disadvantaged, exploited, vulnerable and the like. Most religions have no problem with such things as attaining food self-sufficiency, modern education including girl's education, ensuring employment and earning reasonable income, to provide adequate health services, meeting basic needs including housing for all, poverty reduction, etc.

In Bangladesh, historically, Muslims had a very low literacy rate because religious norms prevented education and mass literacy. However, the people caught up once the strong support for education ingrained in the religious scriptures became known to them. This, however, did not happen automatically. The government and non-governmental organisations had to elucidate the value of education in Islam by involving institutions like mosques and madrasas, and by convincing the imams, religious teachers and scholars, who ultimately disseminated the positive messages about education to the society.

In the same way, religion-based justification was given to promote fertility reduction, not only in Bangladesh, but also in other Muslim majority countries. Female

education has helped in lowering fertility rates thereby attaining smaller average family size, and improved living standards. Having said this, we cannot say that there is no superstition, mis-information and mis-interpretation of religion and that there is no hindrance to development. When religious interpretations take ultra-conservative views, it acts against innovation and development. In order to ensure that religion becomes a complementary factor in development, we should look for elements in religion that promote positive change.

The preoccupation of the capitalist system with profit maximisation as its goal is now being questioned seriously by religious scholars since it benefits a small minority of

the population. The faster rate of economic growth in the emerging economies together with rising income inequality in many countries which threaten our future and the general wellbeing of the populations, is not in line with religious spirit. There has been increased interaction within the inter-faith groups on emerging global challenges like exclusionary growth phenomena, climate change, gender disparity and violent conflicts. In early 2020, the global religious leaders met at the World Bank to call for and commit to ending extreme poverty by 2030. The Filipino Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagel, who has been the head of Caritas International since 2015, exhorted the business leaders to help address poverty by including the poor in their vision

and mission statements, and produce the goods and services they need. The Roman Catholic Church's position is also not blindly pro-business: it is calling businesses to work for poverty alleviation and move away from unfettered pursuit of money. Religious groups, to set examples, are doing different things with their limited financial resources, to reduce poverty and vulnerability, in many parts of the world.

The Muslim faith is based on the importance of a set of good deeds which include pursuing productive activities, hard work, profit, fair distribution of wealth, equity, honesty, justice and right to inheritance of property, in relation to economic aspirations. As stated in Surah An-Nahl verse 97: Allah has promised that "whoever does righteousness, whether male or female, while he is a believer, will be surely given a good life not only in this world but also hereafter". This verse encapsulates, in essence, the value of human progress and welfare in this world to receive its rewards in the "world after".

Similarly, in Hinduism, the work that is honest and dedicated to the well-being of the people and is supposed to free oneself to attain freedom of the soul, has been highlighted by Swami Vivekananda, the acclaimed Hindu philosopher.

Religious faith, different aspects of religion and personal beliefs associated with religion, or even traditional values drive the actions and interactions of individuals. In some countries, there was strong religious sentiments against vaccination efforts and lot of information and communication campaigns had to be carried out by the government to free the minds of the people of such prejudices by showing that there was nothing in religion against vaccination since it reduces morbidity and mortality rates.

There is near universal support among religious leaders in favour of savings and entrepreneurial activity as well as social capital, environmental preservation and human capital development. Many people who follow one religion or the other today, care about the society they live in, and do not equate religion with only a contemplative affair. This attitude is positively contributing to social and economic progress, and is the outcome of both institutional and non-institutional education and learning. As per a global survey, 65 percent of respondents felt comfortable and closely related themselves to religious beliefs. Given the importance religion plays in the lives of people, their beliefs and practices have to be considered in developmental thinking, and when necessary, have to be discussed, if the predominant religious thinking tends to block social change. As religion has significant value in people's lives, religious views should be respected.

Since development touches everybody in society in one way or the other, the development process should thus be informed about religious norms for maximising its outcomes. In our society where several religions are practiced, no preference for one religion over others should, however, be made. There are common messages in all religions such as honesty, dedication to work and tolerance. In today's world, where corruption is rampant and which did not go down even during this Covid time, waste of common resources and public money is the popular trend, environment is under threat, and fundamental values of the human soul are deteriorating, religious messages are still pertinent to development of just, equitable and inclusive societies.

Dr Nawshad Ahmed is an economist and urban planner.



QUOTABLE Quote

MAE WEST
American actress
(August 17, 1893–November 22, 1980)

You only live once, but if you do it right, once is enough.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 "Like that'll ever happen!"
- 5 Floppy cap
- 10 Madrid mister
- 12 Kitchen come-on
- 13 Eager for an acting career
- 15 Soaking spot
- 16 Ave. crossers
- 17 Golf peg
- 18 Flowering shrub
- 20 Crystal gazer
- 21 Bee attack
- 22 Casino figure
- 23 Boat's back
- 25 Stare in disbelief
- 28 Learns about
- 31 Swelled heads
- 32 Concur
- 34 Keg need
- 35 Genetic stuff
- 36 Pilot-policing
- 37 Rock concert activity
- 40 First odd prime
- 41 Time being
- 42 Western, in slang
- 43 Sediment

DOWN

- 1 Helpers: Abbr.
- 2 Arrangements
- 3 Shortly
- 4 Visibility lessener
- 5 Cave creatures
- 6 Screw up
- 7 Beat decisively
- 8 Led the game
- 9 They accept bets
- 11 Bristle at
- 14 Theater worker
- 19 Gets up
- 20 Sub system
- 24 Win back
- 25 Influences
- 26 Christie of mysteries
- 27 Warhol field
- 29 Do ore work
- 30 Spooky gathering
- 33 Wise ones
- 35 Woodland grazer
- 38 "My word!"
- 39 Abbr. on a remote

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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

S	T	O	P	C	L	I	P	S			
T	O	N	I	R	E	W	I	N	D		
O	X	E	N	A	T	O	N	E	R		
V	I	N	C	E	N	T	B	E	A		
E	N	D	U	R	E	S	A	R	M		
A	P	P	L	E	R	I	D	P	L	E	A
L	O	I	S	M	I	N	A	R	D		
S	I	N	F	O	R	W	A	R	D		
A	S	H	O	N	E	H	O	U	R		
C	O	O	T	I	E	R	M	A			
E	N	L	I	S	T	E	T	O	N		
S	E	C	T	S	L	A	R	K			

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