

Burma

Atrocious Myanmar Military at Risk of Splitting: Army Defectors

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With a record-breaking number of defections unmatched in nearly six decades and brewing discontent among the ranks against their superiors, Myanmar's more than 300,000-strong military is now at risk of splitting, according to some ex-army officers who have deserted their units recently.

Currently, around 2,000 soldiers and police have joined the country's Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), a nationwide boycott by Myanmar civil servants against the regime following their takeover in February. Many more are in the pipeline and out of the current 2,000 defectors, one-third are military personnel, said the officers who have joined the CDM as they are not pleased with the country's military regime.



Military deserters: Captain Lin Htet Aung (left) and Sergeant Yin Lei Lei Tun.

Though the number of defections is small for now, it is unprecedented in Myanmar's military history going back to 1962 when the then dictator Ne Win staged a coup and consolidated the country's armed forces. Some soldiers protested against the army during pro-democracy uprisings in 1988 but the number at the time was far less significant.

So, it's worth asking why so many are doing so now.

"[Under the regime] people are ashamed to be soldiers, to attend the Defense Services Academy or to join the military. This is a very sad thing for the future of the military" said one of the officers, Captain Nyi Thuta.

After graduating in 2010 from the 52th Intake of the Defence Services Academy, he served at his base in Naypyitaw until the coup. When he learned about the takeover, he felt Myanmar was heading into a dark age. When the junta escalated its nationwide deadly crackdowns on peaceful protesters who were against their rule in March, the captain left his unit. He said "You can't kill people who express their views."

The regime's brutality has shocked the world. They shot dead more than 100 people in a single day in March. They have sprayed bullets in residential areas. During raids, they have indiscriminately

killed people, including children as young as 6. Arbitrary arrests and extrajudicial killings by the soldiers persist. As of Thursday, the junta had killed 1,019 people during their crackdowns, raids, arrests, interrogations, arbitrary killings and random shootings, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), which is compiling the deaths and arrests since Feb. 1 coup.

Another defector, Captain Lin Htet Aung, said what his fellow soldiers did during the crackdowns were totally contradictory to the codes of conduct they were supposed to follow.

“They have changed into thugs with guns,” he said.

As a result, people detested the military so much that it demoralized the men in uniform like never before. The regime’s atrocities against protesters became an immediate push factor for some military personnel to join the CDM as they have become more aware of the true colors of the military junta, which has been committing atrocities and murdering its own people.

Sergeant Yin Lei Lei Tun used to be proud of being a soldier. But her faith in the armed forces she joined in 2016 was lost with the coup when she saw the junta’s atrocities against peaceful anti-regime protesters. So she joined the CDM in April after defecting from her military base in Yangon Region.

“After the coup, I feel insecure about being a soldier, as people hate the military. Our military is also doing the wrong thing” said the sergeant.

Currently, about 5 to 10 junta soldiers have been defecting from the military daily, according to the People’s Soldier group, a Facebook page co-founded by Captain Nyi Thuta to provide assistance to striking soldiers and to persuade more military personnel to leave their barracks to join the CDM.

Most of the soldiers who have joined the CDM are privates and sergeants. Officers ranking from lieutenants to majors account for around 100.

The Myanmar military has been notorious for attacking its own people rather than protecting them. Its atrocities like arbitrary killings, arrests and looting in ethnic areas are internationally well known. The coup in 2021 and follow-up atrocities have worsened its already tarnished reputation while pushing its leadership into a corner, as they are facing growing armed resistance in both urban and rural areas, forcing coup leader Min Aung Hlaing to admit he couldn’t fully control the country yet. Then they face another big blow: defections by their subordinates who detest their bosses’ actions.

Captain Nyi Thuta said the image of the military is now the worst in history, as more military personnel are realizing that the reputation of the military and soldiers have been totally shattered.

“So, this momentum [of defections] is going to grow. The sure thing is that the time has come for the people and people’s soldiers to unite,” he said.

Cracks in the military

Everyone familiar with Myanmar politics knows it is hard to imagine that change in Myanmar can come about without the involvement of some men within the military, which has remained the country’s most powerful institution since 1962.

Now with defections growing like never before, Captian Nyit Thuta said the military has potential to

split into two groups: those who want to inherit the bad legacy of the military and others who don't want to do so.

The junta's troops are seen during a crackdown against the anti-regime protest in Yangon.

"Anyone defecting said they want to be people's soldiers—professionals who protect the people. They don't want to hand over the institution's bad legacy to their juniors," he said.

Another defecting military official, Captain Lin Htet Aung, also realized they were working for the coup leaders who put their personal benefits before the country or the military institution itself.

The captain, who graduated from the 54th Intake of the Defense Services Academy, left the military barracks in Shan State a few months after the February coup after seeing the regime's atrocities against unarmed peaceful anti-coup demonstrators and civilians. Later he formed the People's Embrace group to help military personnel who want to defect.

"We are seeing cracks in the military. There are many injustices in posting and other human rights violations that create discontent among the ranks against their superiors. So, the military could face a split," said Captain Lin Htet Aung.

For examples, he explained, some military troops have been unfairly posted on the frontline for years while others who have good connections with people upstairs are being posted in safe areas like Naypyitaw, he added.

International and local observers are convinced that the military institution must split up in order to restore the path to democracy in Myanmar, as there is a lack of effective actions by the UN and international organizations and neither the armed resistance of the people nor the ethnic armed groups can defeat the junta.

Captian Lin Htet Aung also agreed with the point that without the split within the military, it's unlikely democracy will be restored.

"Years-long bad habits [like corruption] and systems [like oppression] are deeply rooted in the military. We also need to fight to force those ingrained bad habits out in order to restore democracy. So, the institution needs to split up" he added.

In an attempt to encourage more defections, Myanmar's parallel National Unity Government (NUG) on Monday issued a statement urging military personnel to join the CDM by promising to keep not only their original positions and pension allowances, but also their safety.

It also said that security forces personnel who left the military barracks can join the federal union army and police forces reformed by the NUG.

Meanwhile, people's reception of defecting soldiers has been quite encouraging, Captain Nyi Thuta said. Both the People's Soldiers and People's Embrace groups are now able to support the striking soldiers due to donations made by the public.

"They now realize that people just hate soldiers who support the institution that oppresses them with guns. They know now that you will be showered with love once you are no longer affiliated with them," he said.

For most defectors from the military, they believe that only a split within the military itself will bring about a radical change for the armed forces to become the people's military.

Captain Lin Htet Aung said the armed forces can't be changed even with the death of coup leader Min Aung Hlaing, as another would take his place.

"To wipe out the deeply rooted bad habits and systems of the military, reform is the only way. It can only happen when it splits," he said.

"It could happen if we are more united."

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