

Guest Column

Myanmar Military's Culture of Atrocities

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Myanmar's military, known locally as the Sit-Tat or military, has embarked upon a massive campaign of violence since last year's coup and, over the past 17 months, has intensified and expanded its use of terror. The Sit-Tat has a notorious history of committing atrocities, so much so that its opponents often label it as "fascist." Since its founding under the patronage of Imperial Japan in late 1941, the casual and systematic employment of atrocities in warfare has become deeply internalized within the institutional culture of the Sit-Tat.

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The military's most recent atrocities are thus not an aberration but rather a historical pattern emanating from its institutional culture. This culture of atrocities is the product of a complex interplay of its guardianship ideology, internal brutalization, longstanding legal impunity, and 'situational logic'. The military's atrocities do not appear all at once, but emerge over time as a result of an escalatory process. Thus, it is highly likely that the current war will see further escalation in the Sit-Tat's employment of mass violence as it continues.

Despite the recurrent nature of this violence across many decades, the international community largely chooses not to act. The global community has seemingly not realized the true nature of the Sit-Tat's deep-seated culture of atrocities, as well as its inability to change or reform. Some international actors are thus unrealistically hopeful regarding the Sit-Tat's vague promises of reinstalling civilian rule, while others believe the Sit-Tat's narrative about its supposed role as a stabilizing force in Myanmar.

Yet history exposes the flaw in these two views, a history that Myanmar's people know all too well. With the ongoing revolution, the majority of Myanmar's people are endeavoring to end the Sit-Tat's culture of atrocities and bring the country back to a democratic and stable future. The responsible international community should therefore find all possible ways to aid and abet the Myanmar people in their struggle against the monstrous Sit-Tat and bring an end to its use of mass violence.

An Endless Cycle of Atrocities

Radio Free Asia (RFA) recently published images and video depicting junta soldiers bragging about how they murdered civilians in cold blood. The photos and video, retrieved from a cache of files in a soldier's cell phone obtained by a villager in Sagaing Region's Ayadaw Township, are evidence of a series of atrocities committed by the Sit-Tat since it launched its massive offensive against [the](#)

[People's Defense Forces](#). The report revealed images recording the mass arrest and execution of civilians, as well as the cruel torture of a detained villager, and a selfie video that shows soldiers chatting in crude terms about how many people they have killed and by what means, what they did with the bodies, what their commander ordered them to do, and admitting that they looted villagers' properties.

[In the video](#) a soldier asked another, "You said you killed 26 people. How did you kill them? Just shooting them with a gun?" He then boasted that he killed five by slitting their throats. The third claimed that he had killed eight people. One soldier said his superior ordered him to cut a body in three pieces before burial, while another added exuberantly, "I had to cut off the head. I had to chop it five and six times...Pieces of flesh came out, like pork. But human flesh is yellowish." The soldiers show no sign of remorse and appear to speak proudly about committing unspeakable crimes and atrocities. The images and video in the report are the clearest evidence that the Sit-Tat regularly commits abhorrent war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The RFA report exposes just one incident from one of the many operations launched by the Sit-Tat nationwide. [Data for Myanmar, an independent group monitoring the junta's atrocities, has estimated](#) that 18,886 houses in 435 locations, of which the village in the report is just one of them, have been burned down in the Sit-Tat's operations from February 1st, 2021 to the end of May this year. In fact, the actual extent of damage is wider, as data from some conflict areas is unavailable. As the Sit-Tat has done for decades, wherever it operates, it has committed arson attacks, mass arrests, torture, looting, wanton destruction and summary executions - including burning villagers alive and killing children.

The Sit-Tat's Institutional Culture of Atrocities

The Sit-Tat's brutality is a core element of its institutional culture as practiced throughout the modern history of Myanmar. In the country's long-running and bloody civil war, the Sit-Tat has persistently and extensively executed its signature indiscriminate violence against not only its opponents but also non-combatant civilians, particularly in ethnic minority areas.

This is best reflected in its "Four Cuts" strategy, meaning the cutting off of food, money, intelligence, and potential recruits. This doctrine was developed by the Sit-Tat in the 1960s and used extensively and repeatedly over decades in its many counter-insurgency campaigns. The original aim of the "Four Cuts" was to cut off insurgent groups from essential support within the local population, and it predominantly targeted civilians instead of armed combatants.

Over seven decades of internal conflict, campaign after campaign has transformed Myanmar's military into a battle-hardened institution shaped by its institutional culture of systematic atrocity infliction. The brutal clearance operations against the Rohingya, which the United States ruled a "genocide," are the most internationally notorious example of how deeply entrenched the atrocity culture is within the institution.

As some analysts argue, ideology plays a crucial role in shaping the patterns of violence perpetrated by armed groups in civil war. In this case, the Sit-Tat's atrocity culture is intertwined with its long-established 'guardianship ideology' that justifies its violence, including the "Four Cuts" strategy. Successive military leaders have long claimed that the military is the "guardian of the State and defender of the religious faith". This 'guardianship ideology' is entrenched within the institution via constant indoctrination and propaganda campaigns amongst both the officers and enlisted men. Military personnel are indoctrinated to believe that they are indispensable to Myanmar because the country will disintegrate and Buddhism will be destroyed without their active protection. Any action

by the guardians – even extreme atrocities – is justified as being for the sake of the country.

Soldiers are taught that they stand above all civilians, who are incapable of preserving the country and religion by themselves. As an institution guided by this ideology, the Sit-Tat rejects the notion of ‘civilian control’, which it regards as incompetent civilians unnecessarily attempting to restrict its actions, and it thus feels justified in undermining any constraints on its prerogatives.

Another key driver of this culture is the Sit-Tat’s legal impunity. The Sit-Tat has historically enjoyed [decades-long legal impunity, as reflected in the 2008 constitution](#) that reserved substantial powers, including 25 per cent of parliamentary seats and key ministerial positions, for the military even under civilian rule. Such a privilege of impunity impeded the coup-leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing to boldly claim that “there is nothing I dare not do” before the coup and military personnel to believe that they can get away with any sort of fiendish crimes. As the United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights said, the current crisis [“was born of impunity”](#).

Furthermore, the Sit-Tat’s atrocity culture is sustained by a system of harsh discipline. [Historian Bret Devereaux observes in his Foreign Policy article](#) that brutal discipline, such as harsh treatment between superiors and subordinates and brutal training, are enabling factors for the military’s atrocities. In the military’s repressive hierarchy subordinates, who have “found themselves on the receiving end” of harsh treatment by their own superiors, “replicate the pattern to atrocious effect” while in a position of power over unarmed civilians. Likewise, soldiers mistreated by brutalizing military training stand ready to “apply what they have learned in basic training” to others, particularly defenseless civilians.

The interplay of harsh discipline and war crimes is not unique to Myanmar. Studies on the brutality of the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) concur with this statement. Japanese historian Saburo Ienaga wrote that the IJA practiced “a cruelty towards subordinates...snowballed as it rolled down the ranks, till all the tensions and abuse landed on the recruits...the lowest of the low.” Professor Yang Daqing related this practice inside the army with atrocities towards outsiders in his study of the Nanjing massacre in 1937. Moreover, Ienaga also observed that the brutal military training in the IJA installed “a penchant for brutality among its soldiers against enemy prisoners and civilian noncombatants”.

[Within the Sit-Tat’s climate of fear](#), individuals at the lower end of the military hierarchy are as ill-treated as slaves. Major Hein Thaw Oo, a military officer who broke ranks after the coup, told Myanmar Now that “in the military, for whatever reason, you’re always scared of anyone who has a higher rank than you.” Moreover, [as one analyst observed](#), “training for military infantry troops is invariably rigorous and often brutal” and “a level of brutalization is par for the course in the training process”. It therefore comes as no surprise that soldiers brutalized by internal military hierarchies are predisposed to unleashing their frustrations and grievances on civilians.

Finally, the institutional culture of atrocity, long-established, inculcated, and embedded within the Sit-Tat, often erupts as a direct result of the ‘situational logic’ of the battlefield. [Commanders, frustrated due to severe backlash, massive losses and abject failures in achieving their operational objectives, often push their troops to increase their level of violence](#), which therefore readily spirals into wartime atrocities. The Sit-Tat, which has suffered its heaviest losses in recent memory during the current fighting, has scaled up its brutality with the aim of creating a reign of terror by indiscriminately shelling and bombing civilian areas, extensively launching arson attacks and scorched earth campaigns, and committing mass murder in the name of reprisals. In the foreseeable future, it is safe to say that the increasingly overstretched and overburdened Sit-Tat will only escalate and intensify its atrocities, particularly under the pressures of a metastasizing rebellion.

In the Sit-Tat, a culture of atrocities has become so deeply entrenched that there is little hope of resurrecting the institution. During the democratic transition period, international actors attempted to engage the military in an attempt to reform it and ensure civilian rule. Yet, as demonstrated in its continued violence against ethnic minorities, the genocide of the Rohingya, and the February 2021 coup, the Sit-Tat's institutional culture is fundamentally rotten to the core due to its potent mix of ideology, impunity, internal brutalization, and eagerness to resort to mass violence. The military's atrocities did not "appear all at once," but are only the latest incidences in a long string of tragedies.

The World Should Not Stand By

[While the crisis in Myanmar, and the Sit-Tat's future, will likely be decided on the battlefield](#), inaction by the international community to stop it will only contribute to the unfolding humanitarian [cataclysm](#). Yet many in the international community look the other way as Myanmar's military commits atrocious crimes against its fellow countrymen. This wilful ignorance stands in stark contrast to [the international community's response to the Russian military's atrocities in Ukraine](#).

The global community has yet to fully realize that the Sit-Tat as an institution is unsalvageable and must be replaced, a fact that Myanmar's people know all too well. Many in the international community still argue that the Sit-Tat will reinstall civilian rule through negotiated settlement and restore stability. But this is not realistic, as ["successive generals of the military have always presumed that negotiation comes from a position of weakness, and that compromise is about losing"](#). Even if they enter into negotiations, it is not for genuine reasons but rather to buy time.

As history shows, the military with its profoundly internalized culture of atrocities is, as one analyst observed, [an army of darkness](#). It will not concern itself with democracy, stability and the country's future, but only with maintaining its grip on power by whatever means it deems necessary. And, considering its guardianship ideology and culture of atrocities, this includes escalating the mass violence.

Expecting the military with a deep-seated institutional culture of atrocities to bring the country back to a democratic and stable future is pure fantasy. Without radically reforming the institution, the Sit-Tat will always be a poison pill for the future of the country. The Myanmar people are experientially well aware of this fact, so they sacrificially set themselves towards the Herculean task of taking on the Sit-Tat to bring the country back to a stable democratic state. As Myanmar's people embark on this struggle, the international community must do more to support and stand together with the people against the monstrous Sit-Tat.

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P.S.

• The Irrawaddy. 12 July 2022:
<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/myanmar-militarys-culture-of-atrocities.html>

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