

# Myanmar's brutal military was once a force for freedom - but it's been waging civil war for decades

Thursday 8 April 2021, by [Tharaphi Than](#) (Date first published: 5 April 2021).

**Every March 27, the Myanmar military celebrates its anniversary with a parade. The day of the 2021 parade, soldiers killed at least 90 pro-democracy protesters.**

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With great fanfare – but few guests – Myanmar's armed forces recently celebrated their [76<sup>th</sup> anniversary](#) in the nation's capital of Naypyitaw.

Only Russia, China, Thailand and a handful of other Asian countries sent representatives to attend the March 27, 2021, parade showing off Myanmar's modern war machines – mostly imported from [Russia and China](#) over the past decade, to the tune of US\$2.4 billion.

The Myanmar military has been terrorizing civilians since a [coup two months earlier](#). On the day of the parade, soldiers killed over 90 people for protesting military rule, [including a 5-year-old boy and three teenagers](#). An estimated [564 people](#) have been killed in Myanmar since the Feb. 1 coup.

One of Asia's poorest countries, Myanmar spends twice as much on defense as it does on [education and health combined](#). With [half a million soldiers](#), at least on paper, Myanmar has the world's 38<sup>th</sup> strongest military, according to Global Fire Power, which ranks 140 nations on their capability to wage war.

Myanmar's military wasn't always a repressive force. It began as an [adored liberating force founded to end colonial rule](#).

## History of the Burma army

Burma's first national army came out of World War II and [the quest for independence](#).

Led by a group called the "30 comrades" who [received military training from the Japanese](#), the Burma Independence Army allied itself with Japan to fight the British. Everyday people sold their gold to support this revolutionary force.

The Burma Independence Army forced the British out in 1941. The Japanese then occupied Burma,

fighting [Britain, the U.S. and other Allied forces from this strategic location in Southeast Asia](#).

Soon, though, Burma's army [wanted Japan out of Burma](#), too. So did many Burmese people. Thousands of members of ethnic and religious minorities from rural border areas joined the army.

Historically, these minority groups had kept their distance from the country's Buddhist majority, called Bamar, and from each other. The British [maintained and strengthened these ethnic divisions](#) as a tactic to maintain their colonial rule.

But during the 1940s resistance movement against the Japanese, [everyone was united behind Burma's army](#), my research finds – including women.

In 2007 I interviewed the [first five women soldiers who joined Burma's struggle for independence](#).

"When the resistance movement began, we were ready to give everything, including our lives," Daw Khin Kyi Kyi, then in her 80s, told me.

The women attended military training, traveled to villages near army camps to explain why the army was now fighting against the Japanese, and convinced locals to offer food and shelter to the soldiers. The women also enlisted locals to spy on Japanese troops.

## **Civil war begins**

The Japanese surrendered to the Allied forces in 1945 and withdrew from all occupied territories, including Burma.

That put Burma back in British hands, with promises of full sovereignty.

Before the British would grant Burma independence, however, they demanded that the country's Bamar leadership prove that its many minority groups also wanted independence as one nation. Burma's revolutionary army leader Aung San convened a summit in the town of Panglong with the leaders of various ethnic groups to negotiate the foundations of a unified, independent Burma.

However, [the Karen](#), a mostly Christian population from the country's southeast, had previously been promised British help in establishing their own free state. Karen leaders refused to join the 1947 [Panlong Agreement](#).

Burma became independent in 1948. The next year, elite Karen troops staged an armed revolt against the new national government.

Ever since, Myanmar's military, called Tatmadaw, has essentially existed solely to fight against Myanmar's minorities.

## **Myanmar's war economy**

For about a decade after independence, Burma had a democratic government. But the army was more powerful. Between [1962 and 2010, Burma was a military dictatorship](#). Military rule endured through [occasional uprisings, show elections](#) and several coups in which one set of generals overthrew another.

Civil war is costly, so Myanmar developed a war economy. At first, it funded its battles with rice

exports and loans from the U.S. and Soviet Union. Over time, Burma's military entrenched itself in the global economic system.

In 1962, the military junta regime established [Burma Trade Limited](#) in central London as its "legitimate" international brokerage. The military also mined and sold jade, mostly in areas that were home to repressed ethnic minorities and profited from a lively [opium trade](#) in Burma.

This military-controlled economy enriched Burma's generals, but the money did not translate into national economic growth. In 1987, the United Nations rated Burma among the world's "[least developed countries](#)."

Burma's name was changed to Myanmar in 1989.

## **Sanctions and boycotts**

Today, Myanmar's economy is almost entirely controlled by the military, from telecommunications to drugs. The military's sprawling business networks - which [some rights groups call "cartels"](#) - have protected the generals from attempts to democratize.

In 2008, for example, the Myanmar military assented to a new Constitution officially giving 75% of seats in Parliament to civilian politicians and reserving 25% for army representatives.

Unofficially, though, the military largely continued to run the nation. That included unrelenting repression of minority groups, including the Karen - who have [maintained their insurgency for seven decades](#) - and the Rohingya Muslims.

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Elections in 2015 were supposed to mark a turning point in this quasi-democratic system. Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of the revolutionary Aung San and leader of a prior democratic uprising, and her National League for Democracy [won in a landslide](#).

Suu Kyi faced criticism for failing to stand up to the military, particular in its assaults on the Rohingya. Even so, she was deposed in the February 2021 coup and is now detained in an unknown location. Some dissidents are fleeing into Karen territory and other rebel-held ethnic areas to escape [the military](#).

As the [death toll in Myanmar mounts](#), international pressure is growing for [countries to impose harsher sanctions](#) on the junta and for companies to cease trade. [Japan's Kirin beer](#) and [a German company that supplies the Myanmar mint](#) are among those that have cut ties with Myanmar.

Meanwhile, civil disobedience inside the country continues. Choking off the military's funding could give the protesters and deposed civilian government a fighting chance.

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**P.S.**

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