

The Role of Intelligence Agencies in Repression and Torture by Myanmar's Military Junta Intelligence and its Human Rights Abuses During the 2021 Revolution

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Abstract

Myanmar's political landscape has been marked by repeated military coups, leading to prolonged periods of authoritarian rule through systemic human rights violations, particularly repression and torture. This study explores the critical role of Myanmar's intelligence agencies in the systematic repressions and torture practices under the military junta during the 2021 revolution. By utilizing Political Violence Theory, this study exposes authoritarian regimes, intelligence operations, and their methods and strategies to uphold the military's power against civilian uprisings. The primary focus of the study is to discuss how these entities contributed to human rights violations in Myanmar.

Through applying a qualitative approach of in-depth interviews with 35 stakeholders and incorporating historical context, interviews, and secondary data, this research identifies the multifaceted roles of intelligence in enforcing state-sponsored violence and fear. The findings illustrate the operational dynamics of intelligence agencies actively orchestrating arrests and killings through legal and extrajudicial control, enforced disappearances, and torture, alongside pervasive surveillance, targeted repression, and use of civilian Pro-Military Groups. This paper argues for a robust international response to address these human rights abuses, recommending strategies for accountability and structural reform within Myanmar's intelligence apparatus.

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Introduction

Myanmar has experienced extended periods of military control, with brief episodes of civilian rule and democratic movements often interrupted by military coups (Kipgen 2016). The most recent coup in February 2021 overthrew a democratically elected government led by The National League for Democracy (NLD)², reestablishing military dominance and disrupting the nation's path toward democracy (King, 2022). This coup led to mass protests and a violent military crackdown, attracting international condemnation for the severe human rights violations perpetrated by the regime (Quraishi, 2021). The Myanmar military, known as the Tatmadaw, has a longstanding history of repression and human rights abuses (Selth, 2021). The February 1, 2021 coup represented a significant escalation in the military's efforts to consolidate power for themselves, resulting in widespread atrocities, including killings, arbitrary arrests, and torture (Oo, 2022).

Intelligence agencies have been central to these repressive measures, serving as key instruments in the junta's strategy to suppress dissent and maintain control. Despite their profound impact on governance and civil liberties, the role of intelligence agencies in authoritarian regimes, particularly in contexts like Myanmar, remains critically underexplored. This research aims to fill this gap by qualitatively examining how Myanmar's intelligence agencies have facilitated and executed policies of repression and torture. The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform international human rights strategies and provide a comprehensive account of the mechanisms through which authoritarian regimes maintain power and suppress dissent. The study extends the application of Political Violence Theory to the context of intelligence operations in an authoritarian regime through detailed analysis of how these agencies function as tools of state violence. By linking theory with empirical data, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which intelligence agencies perpetuate systemic human rights abuses. This theoretical perspective offers a new lens through which the international academic community can assess the role of intelligence in state violence, a topic that remains underexplored in the context of Myanmar.

Furthermore, this study aims to critically analyze the role of Myanmar's intelligence agencies in the post-2021 coup environment, focusing on how these agencies have adapted their surveillance, repression, and torture tactics to counter pro-democracy movements. By examining the operational dynamics of these agencies, the study seeks to contribute to the broader understanding of how authoritarian regimes utilize intelligence apparatuses to maintain power in the

² The National League for Democracy (NLD) is one of the most prominent political parties in Myanmar, known for its pro-democracy stance and its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi.

face of widespread civilian resistance. By focusing on their strategies, functions, and impacts on human rights, this study provides a nuanced understanding of these mechanisms and offers new empirical evidence gathered from 35 primary interviews, media news, and secondary data. This analysis is vital for documenting and addressing the systematic violations of human rights and contributing to the global discourse on state-led repression and accountability in authoritarian regimes.

The article is meticulously structured into six main sections to delve into the complex role of Myanmar's intelligence agencies during the 2021 revolution and their extended influence on the nation's military governance. The first and fourth sections provide background on Myanmar's political and intelligence history, as well as an overview of current situations to provide historical context on the evolution of Myanmar's intelligence apparatus and its profound impact on the country's political landscape. The second and third sections comprise the literature review and methodology, explaining existing academic literature and theoretical frameworks that address the role of intelligence agencies in authoritarian regimes and the process of research approach. The fifth section presents a detailed synthesis of both the interview data and secondary sources to offer an analytical perspective on the strategies, operations, and impacts of Myanmar's intelligence agencies during the revolution. Here, I present a detailed synthesis of analytical discussions on the strategies, operations, and impacts of Myanmar's intelligence agencies against the 2021 revolution. Finally, the sixth section provides the conclusion, reflecting on the broader implications of the study's findings, particularly concerning human rights and the possibilities for international intervention and reform.

Literature Review

Smith and Brooks, D. J. (2012) mentioned that theoretical frameworks concerning intelligence agencies elucidate their multifaceted roles within national security and political governance. Prominent among these theories is the State Violence Theory, which asserts that intelligence agencies serve as instruments of state power, employed to enforce, control, and suppress dissent across the political landscape (Seigel, 2018). Wardlaw (1989) explained Political Violence Theory through examining the use of violence by states to achieve political objectives, often justified under the guise of maintaining order and national security. Additionally, the Theory of Authoritarian Control provides insight into how authoritarian regimes deploy intelligence agencies to consolidate power and shape public perception (Talmadge, 2015). Berkowitz and Goodman (1991) and Kent (2015) have explored the notion of "strategic intelligence", wherein intelligence functions are crafted to fulfill political objectives beyond mere information gathering. This strategic deployment of intelligence is crucial within authoritarian contexts for controlling the populace

and suppressing opposition (Hatfield, 2022). Escobar (2001) examined the transition from authoritarian to democratic regimes and the evolving role of security intelligence in this process. This strategic deployment of intelligence is instrumental within authoritarian contexts for controlling the populace and suppressing any form of opposition. Lindstaedt and Frantz (2019) explored the distinctions and dynamics between democracies and authoritarian regimes. These literatures offer a critical lens for evaluating the operations of Myanmar's military intelligence.

Rosenberg, Katz, and Olcott (2010) examined a century of insurgent and counterinsurgent violence in Latin America during the region's long Cold War. These investigations into the roles played by intelligence agencies in specific contexts, such as Pinochet's Chile or East Germany during the Cold War, reveal recurring patterns of behavior, including surveillance, intimidation, and direct political interference. Policzer (2019) explored the intricate dynamics of violence in Latin America, providing a thorough examination of the political, social, and economic factors that perpetuate violence in the region. His work delved into various forms of violence, including state repression, organized crime, and social conflicts, highlighting how these forms of violence are interlinked with political power, governance, and military intelligence. Abrahms (2018) provided a scientific analysis of the factors contributing to the success of militant groups and examined the strategies and tactics that have historically led to successful insurgencies, including the role of intelligence in shaping militant operations. These works have scrutinized how intelligence agencies across various regimes have employed coercion, surveillance, and psychological warfare to suppress political dissent and manipulate political outcomes, thus providing a comparative framework to analyze the operations of Myanmar's military intelligence. Scholars like Mary Callahan (2004) and Robert Taylor (2017) have provided detailed accounts of how the military has historically exploited ethnic divisions and manipulated the narrative of national security to justify its dominance, highlighting the entrenched challenges that impede the transition to democratic governance. Callahan (2004) provided a critical analysis of the processes of war and state-building in Burma, emphasizing how conflict has shaped the state's development and its relationship with the military and its intelligence apparatus. Taylor (2017) explored the complex relationship between Myanmar's military and the country's struggle with federalism; the study delved into how the military's interests and actions have influenced the federal structure of Myanmar, highlighting the challenges and dilemmas faced in balancing central authority with regional autonomy.

Understanding the historical backdrop of Myanmar's military junta is critical for comprehending the deep-seated nature of military governance. Since gaining independence in 1948, Myanmar's military, known as the Tatmadaw, has been a dominant force in the nation's political arena, orchestrating several coups that

have disrupted transient periods of civilian governance (Huang, 2020). Huang (2020) examined the intricate dynamics of Myanmar's regime change, highlighting the paradoxes inherent in the country's transition. Through a comprehensive analysis, Huang explored how the interplay between democratic aspirations and authoritarian legacies has shaped Myanmar's political landscape. Tan (2004) investigated the relationship between legitimacy, coercion, and economic development under the military regime in Myanmar. King (2022) explored the aftermath of Myanmar's coup d'état, focusing on the ongoing struggle for federal democracy and inclusive governance. King's works illustrate that historical analysis underscores significant junctures, such as the military coups of 1962 and 1988, which reinforced military hegemony and established a precedent for leveraging intelligence agencies as mechanisms of political repression.

The military's intelligence apparatus in Myanmar has not only supported but also actively orchestrated campaigns of repression against political opponents, activists, and civilians. Riemer (2021) provided new perspectives on the public disclosure of intelligence by states and explored the implications of these disclosures for national security, international relations, and public perception, offering a nuanced understanding of the strategic use of intelligence in statecraft. According to Jongman (2017), the intelligence and political violence elucidated both the direct and indirect methods through which intelligence agencies engage in acts of political violence. Gill and Phythian (2018) contributed to the evolving field of intelligence studies by developing theories that address the complexities and nuances of intelligence work. They explored the foundational concepts and frameworks that underpin intelligence practices, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive understanding of both the strategic and operational dimensions of intelligence activities. Bakir (2016) delved into the intricate dynamics between torture, intelligence, and *sousveillance* within the context of the war on terror. Robinson et al. (2018) analyzed contemporary political warfare, exploring tactics used by state and non-state actors and suggesting that potential responses and state intelligence agencies act not merely as passive collectors of information, but as active participants in shaping political dynamics through violence and coercion. Through these literature reviews, this study establishes a robust theoretical and historical foundation, setting the stage for an in-depth examination of the specific roles played by Myanmar's intelligence agencies during the 2021 revolution. This foundational background is crucial for contextualizing the empirical findings presented in the subsequent sections of the paper, thereby enhancing our understanding of the complex interplay between intelligence agencies and political repression in Myanmar.

Existing literature on intelligence agencies in authoritarian regimes has extensively covered their role in surveillance, repression, and torture (Smith & Brooks, 2012; Talmadge, 2015). However, there is a significant gap in understanding how these agencies adapt their strategies in response to large-scale

civilian uprisings, particularly in the context of Myanmar's 2021 revolution. While studies have documented the historical role of Myanmar's intelligence agencies (Selth, 2021; Callahan, 2004), there is limited research on how these agencies have evolved their tactics in the face of widespread pro-democracy movements. This study seeks to fill this gap by providing new empirical data on the operational dynamics of Myanmar's intelligence agencies post-2021 coup, focusing on their use of advanced surveillance technologies, pro-military groups, and legal mechanisms to suppress dissent.

Methodology

The research methodology employed in this study on the role of intelligence agencies in Myanmar during the 2021 revolution adopts a qualitative approach with 35 in-depth interviews comprised of ten former military intelligence officers, ten former political prisoners and their families, ten student activists, and five paralegals and lawyers at Mae Sot and Chiang Mai, Thailand, conducted in-person. However, among 35 interviewees, six interviews were conducted through Zoom interviews due to security reasons. This approach is critical for a comprehensive analysis that integrates qualitative data, enhancing the depth and breadth of the investigation into the systemic functions, as well as impacts of intelligence agencies on political repression.

This study is structured around a case study design, focusing explicitly on the conduct of Myanmar's military intelligence agencies during the period following the 2021 coup. These interviews were conducted in covert settings post-2021 coup from January 2023 to April 2023 to draw detailed narratives about the operations and impacts of intelligence agencies under the military junta. The case study method is particularly suited to this research, allowing for an in-depth exploration of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. This approach is vital given the complexities and ongoing nature of the political situation in Myanmar. The study emphasized ethical considerations to ensure the anonymity and safety of participants and enhance the credibility and value of the research. It also contributed new, firsthand perspectives on the role of intelligence in Myanmar's political crisis through following ethical guidelines established by Chiang Mai University.

Overview of the Military Junta and Intelligence Structures

In Myanmar, the intelligence structures have evolved significantly from their origins during the British colonial era, wherein surveillance was primarily the responsibility of the police forces. Since Myanmar's independence in 1948, its intelligence services have played a pivotal role in government and society, performing functions ranging from human intelligence gathering to preserving national unity and sovereignty. This extensive influence has led some observers

to refer to the intelligence apparatus as “an invisible government” (Selth, 2021). This framework was substantially expanded following the 1962 military coup led by General Ne Win, leading to the establishment of a pervasive intelligence apparatus that has deeply influenced national affairs (Selth, 2023).

Bertil Lintner (2023) explored how Myanmar's military dictators have consistently relied on a brutal military intelligence unit and secret police force to maintain power. This force, which has undergone various name changes over the years, has been a cornerstone of state power, using fear and repression to suppress dissent. The origins of this force can be traced back to General Ne Win, who established a ruthless and efficient secret police apparatus when he seized power in 1962. This organization, initially known as the Military Intelligence Service (MIS), became notorious for its pervasive surveillance and brutal interrogation methods, creating a climate of fear among the population. Ne Win's intelligence chief, Brigadier General Tin Oo, played a significant role in developing this force, and his influence extended until he was purged in 1983. The evolution of Myanmar's military intelligence continued with General Khin Nyunt, who rebuilt the organization into the Directorate of the Defense Services Intelligence (DDSI) in the 1980s. Despite facing massive civil unrest in 1988, the DDSI managed to maintain the regime's power through brutal crackdowns on protestors. Khin Nyunt's eventual fall from grace in 2004 did not dismantle the intelligence apparatus but led to the establishment of the Office of Chief of Military Security Affairs (OCMSA), which remains active today. Key entities such as the Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence (DDSI) and the Office of the Chief of Military Intelligence (CMI) played dominant roles from 1983 to 2004, extending their influence across nearly all aspects of government and society. In the current regime, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing relies heavily on the OCMSA, led by Lieutenant General Ye Win Oo, to maintain control. Following the 2021 coup, the OCMSA had intensified its repressive measures, employing torture and other human rights abuses to quell opposition, while adapting to new technology and methodology. It continues to operate both domestically and internationally to monitor and suppress dissent.

Myanmar's intricate historical legacy traces the evolution of its intelligence services from independence through the quasi-civilian government under Aung San Suu Kyi, up to the recent military takeover; he mentioned that the intelligence services' focus has primarily been on domestic affairs, driven by a commitment to preserve the Union and counter internal threats such as insurgencies and political dissent. The armed forces have always dominated the intelligence apparatus, with a preference for human intelligence over technical sources due to Myanmar's economic and technological limitations. Despite attempts to reform and civilianize the intelligence services under quasi-civilian governments, the military has maintained significant control (Selth, 2023). Torture and severe mistreatment are endemic within Myanmar's detention facilities, with intelligence agencies frequently employing brutal methods such

as beatings, electric shocks, and psychological abuse to extract confessions, intimidate, or punish those who oppose the regime.³ The use of sexual violence and other severe abuses are widely reported, highlighting the ruthless tactics employed by the intelligence apparatus. The February 2021 coup d'état underscored the prominent position of intelligence services in Burmese politics, reaffirming their longstanding role.

The intelligence agencies in Myanmar have been crucial in implementing comprehensive surveillance and information gathering during the coup, particularly targeting NLD members, political activists, ethnic minorities, and any perceived threats to the military junta.⁴ Alongside the Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs (OCMSA)⁵, the Myanmar Police Force (MPF)⁶ maintains its own sophisticated surveillance operations through branches like the Special Branch (SB)⁷ and the Criminal Investigation Department (CID).⁸ These entities, supported by the Bureau of Special Investigation (BSI)⁹, form a comprehensive and technologically advanced network for state surveillance, illustrating a continued trend of intense governmental oversight and control. These intelligence entities not only gather information but also play active roles in infiltrating protest groups, civil society organizations, and political parties to disrupt their activities. They conduct extensive disinformation campaigns to undermine the credibility of opposition movements, using state-controlled media

³ Interviews of Former military intelligence officers and student activists who were arrested by military and now release.

⁴ Interviews of Former military intelligence officers.

⁵ OCMSA refers to the Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs, which is the military intelligence agency of Myanmar. The OCMSA plays a significant role in the country's political and security landscape, particularly in monitoring and controlling dissent and opposition activities. It has been involved in various aspects of surveillance, intelligence gathering, and operations to maintain the military's grip on power, especially during and after the 2021 coup d'état.

⁶ The Myanmar Police Force (MPF) is the national police service of Myanmar. It operates under the Ministry of Home Affairs and is responsible for maintaining law and order, preventing and investigating crimes, and enforcing the laws of the country. The MPF has a broad range of duties that include traffic control, riot control, counter-terrorism, and drug enforcement.

⁷ The Special Branch (SB) is a division of the Myanmar Police Force (MPF) focused on intelligence gathering and national security.

⁸ The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) is a key division of the Myanmar Police Force (MPF) responsible for investigating serious crimes and enforcing the law through detailed investigations. The CID handles a wide range of criminal activities, from homicides and fraud to organized crime and cybercrime.

⁹ The Bureau of Special Investigation (BSI) is a specialized agency in Myanmar responsible for investigating serious and complex crimes, often focusing on corruption, economic crimes, and other high-profile cases. The BSI operates under the Ministry of Home Affairs and works to uphold the law by conducting thorough investigations into activities that threaten national security and economic stability.

and social media platforms to spread false narratives and discredit activists. This robust network has enabled the military to proactively identify and neutralize potential opposition, often leading to the arbitrary arrests of thousands, including politicians, activists, journalists, and ordinary citizens. These arrests are typically executed without due process, and detainees are frequently subjected to inhumane treatment and denied legal representation or family contact.¹⁰ In more recent developments, OCMSA has significantly enhanced its surveillance capabilities, incorporating advanced technologies to monitor internet activity, intercept communications, and utilize social media tracking. The deployment of CCTV systems with facial and license plate recognition technology, supplemented by drone surveillance, has been notable in urban areas, significantly enhancing the state's ability to monitor and respond to civil unrest and opposition activities.¹¹

The junta's reliance on detention without trial, torture, extrajudicial killings, and enforced disappearances as tactics to intimidate and eliminate opposition is a grim testament to the role of intelligence in the ongoing civil conflict in Myanmar. These methods are systematically employed to weaken resistance movements and maintain control, underlining the dire human rights situation in the country and the crucial role of intelligence in the dynamics between the junta and the opposition, including the National Unity Government (NUG) and its military wing, the People's Defence Force (PDF).¹² PDF revealed that they employed counterintelligence strategies by recruiting individuals known as "Watermelons". These recruits outwardly appeared to support the military (green on the outside) but were, in fact, supporters of the NLD or the revolutionary movement (red on the inside). This complex intelligence war not only involves traditional espionage but also leverages modern surveillance technologies and strategic information warfare to suppress dissent.

Research Findings

Surveillance techniques and Technological Adaptation

The central aim of this study is to dissect the role of Myanmar's intelligence agencies in perpetuating state violence and supporting the military dictatorship during the 2021 revolution. This finding section discusses how these agencies have orchestrated a campaign of repression and torture to reflect a severe abuse of state power with catastrophic consequences for human rights. Intelligence agencies in Myanmar have long been pillars in the architecture of Myanmar's military governance, exerting considerable influence over political outcomes. Findings provide that following the 2021 coup, their operations have intensified.

¹⁰ Interviews from detainees.

¹¹ Interviews from urban underground groups of revolution.

¹² Interviews with PDFs.

They have incorporated advanced surveillance alongside traditional repressive tactics to target and suppress pro-democracy movements. This multifaceted approach has allowed the military to tighten its grip on power and effectively quash resistance. Initially, military intelligence adapted to using technology by sharing information on the Russian social media platform Vkontakte after Facebook banned many pro-military pages and accounts. Additionally, they disseminated information through Telegram channels. Myanmar's intelligence and law enforcement agencies have reportedly received training and technology from countries with sophisticated surveillance capabilities. This assistance has enhanced their ability to deploy these technologies effectively.¹³

The use of software to monitor social media platforms is a significant component of the intelligence strategy. This includes tracking posts, messages, and networks on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and local applications to gather intelligence on public sentiment, potential protests, and organizing efforts. Public figures like actress Poe Kyar Phyu Khin (RFA Burmese, 2023) and rapper Byu Har (BBC News, 2023) were arrested for supporting pro-democracy sentiments. Ko Yuan's¹⁴ case reflects the harsh reality of peaceful activism under the regime, wherein he faced severe torture and imprisonment due to his democratic affiliations. Journalists Finster (BBC News, 2021), Kubota, and Than Htike Aung (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2022) were also unjustly detained to underscore the junta's broader assault on press freedom and international diplomacy. These cases exemplify how Myanmar's military intelligence agencies use technology to monitor, silence, and repress dissent, posing significant challenges regarding human rights protection and governance in the digital age. Robust international efforts are essential to address these systemic abuses. The case studies of Poe Kyar Phyu Khin, Byu Har, Ko Yuan, and journalists Danny Finster and Toru Kubota, alongside other celebrities and journalists¹⁵, highlight the extensive repression of dissent in Myanmar, particularly under the military junta.

Using non-state actors, the junta has actively been formulating strategies to curb internal violence, including the deployment of various surveillance technologies like wiretaps, as well as monitoring telecommunications and social media platforms through agencies referred to as telecommunications security companies. There have been reports of collaborations between the government and telecommunications companies that allow security forces direct access to user data without requiring judicial oversight. This can include call records, text messages, and internet usage data.¹⁶

¹³ Interviews with Defectors.

¹⁴ Name Change.

¹⁵ Secondary data from various sources. Like RFA, of and among them, I get chance to interview with three victims.

¹⁶ Interviews with Political prisoners who arrest by social media

Following the February 1, 2021 military coup, the escalated use of these technologies has been associated with increased violence against protesters and the suppression of dissent. The absence of protective legal frameworks, coupled with the suspension of critical sections of the Law Protecting the Privacy and Security of Citizens (2017), has led to unchecked arbitrary detentions and warrantless surveillance. These actions contravene international human rights standards and have profound implications on the freedoms of expression, association, and assembly. Initiated under the "Safe City" program, this system utilizes 335 cameras installed across eight townships in Naypyidaw, incorporating technology capable of scanning faces and vehicle plates and identifying individuals from a wanted list. Despite these technological advancements, there is minimal transparency regarding how personal data is collected, stored, and utilized, raising concerns about privacy and the potential for misuse in the hands of the military junta (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Moreover, the government has occasionally enforced internet blackouts in specific regions, particularly in conflict-affected areas like Rakhine State, to control the flow of information and curb the organization of resistance or protests.

The use of technology and crackdowns has severely affected civil society organizations (CSOs) and peaceful associations, many of which have been forced to shut down, operate underground, or relocate.¹⁷ The heightened risks associated with civic activism have led to a chilling effect on free expression and assembly. Legal aid services have been restricted, particularly for those in pre-trial detention, making it difficult for detainees to access legal representation and increasing their vulnerability to abuse. This systematic suppression has stifled the activities of CSOs and further entrenched the junta's authoritarian rule. Under the control of the Myanmar military junta, intelligence agencies have systematically employed legal, administrative, and extrajudicial measures to suppress dissent and maintain control over the population. These actions have resulted in widespread human rights abuses, including arbitrary detention, torture, and extrajudicial killings. The oppressive role of intelligence agencies in the junta's efforts to consolidate power is evident, reflecting a deliberate strategy to eliminate opposition and silence critical voices.

Many victims have witnessed¹⁸ that the military has engaged in widespread arrests of protesters, activists, and journalists, with numerous reports of poor detention conditions, torture, and ill-treatment through checking phone and social media accounts. These arrests serve not only to remove opposition figures but also to instill fear among the general population. The regime often publicizes the names and photos of detainees, showing signs of physical abuse, as a deterrent against anti-junta activities. This tactic aims to terrorize the population and discourage any resistance. The junta employs various tactics to intimidate and

¹⁷ Interviews with CSO leaders now relocated in Thailand.

¹⁸ Interviews with 5 political prisoners after 2021.

harass activists and their networks. These include raiding homes and offices, detaining family members of wanted individuals, and offering financial incentives for information on anti-coup activities. The military has also reinstated night-time household inspections and guest registration requirements, increasing the risks for those involved in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and other anti-junta activities. These measures are designed to create a pervasive sense of insecurity among activists and the broader population. The involvement of intelligence agencies in the repression and torture executed by Myanmar's military junta during the 2021 revolution exemplifies a severe abuse of state power, with dire consequences for human rights. Detailed case studies reveal that the Myanmar military employed a systematic and institutionalized approach designed to suppress dissent and maintain control through aggressive and violent means. Myanmar's military junta has long utilized a sophisticated intelligence apparatus to maintain control and suppress dissent. Following the February 2021 coup, intelligence operations intensified, employing advanced surveillance methods alongside traditional tactics to monitor and target pro-democracy activists and dissenters. This multifaceted approach has enabled the junta to sustain its authoritarian rule and stifle any form of resistance.

The military has repeatedly been implicated in severe human rights abuses, reflecting not merely sporadic incidents or actions of rogue elements but a systemic practice directed from the highest levels of military leadership. Their methodical strategy includes "four cuts" or "clearance operations," aiming to strip opposition groups of vital resources such as food, funds, intelligence, and recruits (Fishbein, Lusan, & Vahpual, 2021). Initially used against the ethnic Karen and subsequently against the Rohingya in Rakhine State (Selth, 2018), these tactics have proven both effective and devastatingly harsh. To mitigate the potential for the military intelligence services to become overly dominant and to prevent the instillation of fear among the ranks—a notable issue during General Kan Hun's administration—the structure of the military was altered. Previously, military and security officers at national and state levels were appointed as military commanders under the supervision of district commanders. This adjustment ensures that intelligence gathered at the ground level is directed to the army headquarters, bypassing the intermediate military commanders.

Military CDMers reveal a concerning pattern where nearly two-thirds of senior army commanders, many of whom are trained in Russia, act as technological advances in control. They are now in charge of units responsible for helping them to conduct grave human rights abuses, arrests, disappearances, killings, rape, and torture. Alarming, many of these commanders received promotions after such abuses occurred, indicating an institutional reward system for officers who effectively carry out such brutal acts. This promotion of known human rights violators clearly indicates the military hierarchy's endorsement of these repressive tactics. Intelligence agencies' role in these operations likely includes collecting information on opposition figures and orchestrating targeted

suppression tactics, implicating them in the broader schema of state-sanctioned violence. The secretive nature of these operations and the extensive control exerted over the state apparatus pose significant challenges to holding these agencies and their leaders accountable.

Legal and Extrajudicial Control

The military junta in Myanmar has reinstated a requirement for all households to register overnight guests with local authorities. This tactic, a holdover from previous regimes, permits warrantless searches and monitoring of the population, fostering an environment of fear and control. Additionally, the regime has expanded its surveillance capabilities through legal amendments, empowering local authorities to monitor and report on the activities and movements of individuals. These measures particularly target activists and dissidents, further tightening the junta's grip on power. Based on the analysis of Centre for Law and Democracy (2021), amendments to the Penal Code, notably Section 505-A, have been employed to criminalize dissent and free speech. The expanded definitions of high treason and sedition in sections 121 and 124A facilitate the conviction of individuals for merely criticizing the military, effectively stifling free speech. Additionally, new sections 124C and 124D criminalize any obstruction of military or government work, further broadening the scope of what constitutes a punishable offense. A revised section 505(a), distinct from 505A, makes it illegal to undermine the morale of military or government employees, adding yet another layer of repression. These laws enable the arrest and prosecution of individuals accused of spreading "false news" or criticizing the government. Similarly, the Electronic Transactions Law and the proposed Cyber Security Law include provisions that criminalize online activities perceived as causing "public panic, loss of trust, or social division". Martial law, enforced in certain areas since March 2021, mandates that offenses under these sections be tried by military tribunals. These tribunals have the authority to impose severe penalties, including death or life imprisonment with hard labor. These legal changes reflect the junta's strategy of using surveillance and intelligence to monitor and suppress opposition. By expanding the scope of offenses and imposing severe penalties, the military leverages legal mechanisms to justify its repressive actions, further entrenching its control over the country. This systematic use of legal amendments to criminalize dissent highlights the regime's reliance on legal cover to legitimize its crackdown on freedom of expression and opposition activities. From a legal and ethical standpoint, the utilization of intelligence for such repressive purposes raises significant concerns regarding the legal frameworks governing these activities in Myanmar. The lack of oversight and accountability in military intelligence operations suggests a pressing need for comprehensive legal reforms aimed at establishing checks and balances to prevent further abuses. Internationally, these human rights abuses have drawn reactions ranging from sanctions to public condemnations from global organizations and governments.

In Myanmar, intelligence agencies such as the Military Intelligence (MI) and Special Branch (SB) play pivotal roles in the state machinery of repression, particularly against critics and members of the opposition. Their operations are extensive, involving tactics like phone tapping, social media monitoring, and direct threats and harassment toward individuals deemed antagonistic to the military regime. These intelligence bodies are integral in orchestrating broader repressive actions including arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and torture within detention facilities. Their ability to identify and target individuals enables the systematic execution of these repressive measures.¹⁹ The role of intelligence agencies in repression and torture, particularly in the context of Myanmar's military junta during the 2021 revolution, highlights a deeply troubling aspect of state power and its impact on human rights. The Myanmar military's approach, as detailed in the case study provided, reflects a systemic and institutionalized strategy to suppress dissent and maintain control through violent means.

The repercussions of these intelligence-led operations extend far beyond political dissidents, affecting civilians indiscriminately. Reports written by (Koumjian, 2024), (Corritti, Mie Mie, Matthias, & Ko Banya, 2023), (OHCHR Myanmar, 2022), and (Karen Human Rights Group, 2021) indicate that actions ordered or informed by intelligence findings have led to widespread violence against civilians, manifesting in brutal crackdowns on protests and the torture of detainees who may not even be politically active. Such indiscriminate violence underscores the pervasive impact of military-led intelligence operations on the general populace. For example, intelligence agencies have been crucial in identifying and rounding up participants in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and anti-coup protests. Many detainees have reported brutal interrogation methods aimed at breaking their spirits and deterring further resistance. Ethnic minority groups, long marginalized in Myanmar, face intensified repression post-coup. Intelligence agencies have been pivotal in coordinating operations against these communities, involving arbitrary detentions and systematic torture.

Therefore, delving into the reinstatement of oppressive laws to mandate household registrations and allow warrantless searches reflects the junta's strategy to instill fear and control. The expansion of legal definitions to criminalize dissent under the guise of protecting state security showcases how the junta leverages legal amendments to legitimize and escalate its suppression efforts. This chilling effect of these strategies on free speech and civil liberties have acted to cement the military's power through a facade of legality.

Use of Pro-Military Groups Inside Myanmar

¹⁹ Interviews with political prisoners.

The Myanmar military junta uses the strategy of employing non-state actors of pro-military groups and informants to execute and obscure acts of violence and repression. The objective of this section is to provide the methods on how these groups contribute to the junta's control mechanisms by executing tasks that extend state violence while providing the regime with plausible deniability. The deployment of non-state actors by state institutions, especially in conflict zones or under authoritarian regimes, is a multifaceted and contentious strategy. Employed typically to achieve goals indirectly, this approach allows for maintaining a level of deniability and minimizing the state's direct accountability. In Myanmar, the military junta's use of non-state actors, such as prisoners and criminals, to execute violent acts is a critical component of its strategy to quash opposition and consolidate power. This tactic affords the regime several strategic benefits.

Recently, it was disclosed that the CID in Myanmar shortly called “Sa ya pha” are utilizing both covert and overt techniques to train operatives and conduct espionage and subversion activities. Accusations have surfaced concerning the involvement of party leaders (The Union Solidarity and Development Party USDP²⁰)²¹ in acts of sabotage and the fostering of partisan divides. It has also been alleged that the military junta has enlisted local administrators to assist in intelligence collection. The intelligence network in Myanmar relies heavily on human intelligence and signals intelligence, with assistance from cyber intelligence units, as its driving force to execute its repressive strategies. Human intelligence involves the use of informants and spies, known locally as Dalans²² (spies recruited by the military, or spies sent by the military), to gather information on activists and dissidents. Meanwhile, signals intelligence, (the Telegram unit supported by Cyber Intelligence operators in the military) are involved in intercepting communications and surveilling digital activities to monitor and control opposition movements. The junta's reliance on these sophisticated techniques has facilitated widespread human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrests, torture, and extrajudicial killings. The Dalans, a paramilitary force, have been particularly instrumental in these operations, executing unlawful detentions and committing violence against protest leaders. Therefore, Dalans, or pro-military spies (comprised of both military and police intelligence services), are embedded within communities to identify and report on pro-democracy activists. Their tasks include photographing and videotaping protest leaders, reporting the presence of wanted individuals to the police, and assisting in raids by directing security forces to the homes of targeted individuals. Moreover, the extremist organization Pusawhtee, who's members mainly consist

²⁰ The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) is a major political party in Myanmar, known for its close ties to the military.

²¹ Interview of former CID officer CDMer on May 2023 at Mae Sot, Thailand

²² "Dalans" in Burmese refers to spies used by a military to gather intelligence, conduct surveillance, and perform covert operations. These spies operate secretly, collecting data on enemy activities and vulnerabilities to inform military strategies.

of people from the MaBaTha extremist Buddhist groups, has systematically been restructured and expanded by the military security unit known as the Military Security Force (Sraf), alongside the police special branch (SB/Special Branch). This strategic enhancement aims to fortify the organization's intelligence and information-gathering capabilities and even become para-military. Concurrently, there has been a reorganization of the chain of command to ensure a more seamless transmission of information and directives from senior leadership to the operational level. Moreover, these actors may operate under a veil of anonymity, shielded by the broader conflict's chaos. This network of informants has become a crucial component of the junta's strategy to suppress dissent and maintain control over the population.

Utilizing non-state actors (i.e. Pro-military groups) grants the junta plausible deniability, as it can claim these violent actions are not state-sponsored, thus managing domestic and international perceptions and distancing itself from direct responsibility for human rights abuses. These actors are instrumental in suppressing dissent, as they can intimidate, harass, and attack not only armed resistance groups but also civilians, activists, and community leaders. The unpredictability of such violence induces fear and uncertainty, stifling public dissent and diminishing active participation in movements against the junta. Moreover, engaging non-state groups often requires fewer resources than deploying official security forces, making it a cost-effective and resource-efficient method for extending the military's reach and impact without the logistical and financial burden of formal military operations.

The use of non-state actors for violence breaches international laws and norms related to the conduct of war and the protection of civilian populations, potentially amounting to war crimes or crimes against humanity, especially in cases of torture, extrajudicial killings, or other severe abuses. This practice erodes the rule of law, creating an environment where law and order are replaced by arbitrary violence and retaliation, perpetuating cycles of violence and further destabilizing society. Accountability poses significant challenges; tracing the links between the state and the individuals committing these acts often requires substantial evidence, which is difficult to gather in conflict zones. In response to the threat posed by Dalans, extremist groups, and pro-military groups, communities have developed strategies to identify and manage these informants. Community surveillance involves forming committees to monitor suspicious activities and gather evidence before accusing someone of being a Dalan. This ensures that accusations are substantiated with evidence to prevent false accusations and social unrest. Moreover, maintaining respect for human rights and dignity is crucial, even when dealing with suspected informants. This involves fair treatment during detainment and interrogation, adhering to the principle of "innocent until proven guilty." However, the identification and punishment of Dalans raise significant ethical concerns during revolution. Ensuring due process and fair, unbiased investigations is essential to avoid

miscarriages of justice by mass. Avoiding extrajudicial punishments is critical to maintaining the moral high ground in the fight against the junta. Additionally, preventing vigilantism is necessary to maintain community trust and cooperation. Balancing these ethical considerations while effectively countering the influence of Dalans poses a significant challenge.

Therefore, the deployment of non-state actors significantly impacts communities. It often leads to trauma, displacement, and a breakdown of social cohesion among communities. Families and entire communities can be torn apart by both the violence and the ensuing mistrust and fear these strategies generate inside the same community. While the short-term benefits might seem appealing to regimes like Myanmar's military junta, in the long run, this approach undermines the prospects for peace and stability. Reconciliation and rebuilding efforts become exceedingly difficult when communities have been the target of orchestrated violence by irregular forces. The junta utilizes these non-state actors for purposes such as intimidation, violence against civilians, and surveillance. Specific attention is paid to the roles of these groups in perpetuating violence, their integration into the broader strategy of repression, and the impacts on the civilian population.

The Role of Military Intelligence in Human Rights Violations in Myanmar

Myanmar's military intelligence has perpetrated the grim reality of human rights violations in Myanmar. This section discusses military intelligence as a crucial tool in the systematic suppression of free speech, assembly, and opposition through direct and indirect means of violence. This suppression has included the strategic targeting and arrest of journalists who report on government abuses or organize independent thought. Independent media outlets have been forcibly shut down, curtailing the free flow of information and leaving the public in a state of enforced ignorance. Online communications are heavily monitored, with intelligence units intercepting messages and scrutinizing social media platforms to prevent the organization of protests. This surveillance extends to real-time monitoring, allowing the military to preemptively identify and violently disperse public gatherings. Such gatherings are often met with disproportionate force, including the use of live ammunition, resulting in injuries and deaths. These actions have created an environment of fear, where citizens are reluctant to express dissent or participate in collective actions, effectively stifling any form of public opposition. Intelligence agencies such as the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI) and the Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs (OCMSA) have been central to the junta's strategy of political repression. These agencies employ both overt and covert methods, including surveillance, arbitrary arrests, torture, and extrajudicial killings, to suppress dissent and instill fear among the population. The systematic use of violence and intimidation by intelligence agencies exemplifies how authoritarian regimes leverage state power to maintain control, suppress opposition, and deter any form of resistance.

Intelligence operations have specifically targeted ethnic and religious minorities in Myanmar, exacerbating historical tensions and perpetuating systemic discrimination. The Rohingya, Kachin, Karen, and other minority groups have been subjected to increased surveillance, arbitrary arrests, and state-sanctioned violence. This targeting is part of a broader strategy by the military to maintain control over regions with significant minority populations, which are often perceived as hotbeds of resistance. Intelligence agencies have facilitated these operations by gathering detailed information on the movements and activities of minority leaders and activists. As a result, many members of these communities live under constant threat, facing harassment, detention, and even extrajudicial killings. The pervasive surveillance and targeted repression serve to further marginalize these communities, denying them their basic human rights and perpetuating a cycle of violence and discrimination.²³

The military in Myanmar has cynically exploited the COVID-19 pandemic to tighten its control over the population, with intelligence agencies playing a crucial role in this strategy. Access to medical care has been selectively restricted, with areas and individuals perceived as supportive of the opposition being deliberately denied necessary medical supplies and treatment. Reports indicate that medical resources are being diverted to military facilities, ensuring that the armed forces remain well-supplied while the general population suffers. Healthcare workers who have participated in the civil disobedience movement have been particularly targeted; many have been arrested, harassed, and in some cases, tortured. This deliberate manipulation of the pandemic to undermine opposition efforts highlights the regime's willingness to use any means necessary to maintain its grip on power, regardless of the human cost. Consequently, the intelligence operations conducted by Myanmar's military junta have had devastating effects on individuals, communities, and the political landscape. The use of intelligence for repression has led to widespread human rights abuses, including severe privacy violations, torture, and extrajudicial killings. These abuses have created a climate of fear, where individuals are afraid to speak out or engage in political activities. The militarization of intelligence, while also employed by opposition groups for survival, introduces ethical and humanitarian dilemmas, particularly regarding the use and justification of intelligence activities.

The junta's efforts to disrupt communication networks in opposition-held areas have further isolated these communities, hindering their ability to organize and communicate effectively. Intelligence teams fluent in various languages intercept communications, using information from both deliberate informants and unwitting sources to spread disinformation. This manipulation of public perception through social media and other platforms seeks to undermine the

²³ Interviews with three Minority Activists in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai, Thailand

credibility of opposition movements and leaders. Addressing these complex issues requires robust international pressure, strong support for the rule of law, and concerted efforts to promote accountability and justice for the victims of such repressive strategies. The international community has responded to these human rights abuses with a mix of condemnation and calls for stronger sanctions and accountability measures. However, the effectiveness of these responses is often hindered by geopolitical interests and the intricate nature of the conflict in Myanmar. Sustained international efforts are essential to pressure the military junta to end its repressive tactics and to support initiatives aimed at restoring the rule of law and protecting human rights.

Therefore, focusing on the strategic and often brutal actions, military intelligence abuse their role through conducting targeted arrests, surveillance, and the violent suppression of dissent. By detailing specific instances of torture, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings, the intelligence agencies have become the key players in executing the military's agenda of fear and repression.

Discussion

In this final section, I synthesize insights into the overarching role of intelligence agencies within Myanmar's political landscape. They have emphasized their impact against the struggle for democracy and human rights. The objective of this discussion is to elucidate how intelligence practices have shaped the political repression landscape and to consider strategic approaches that could mitigate these agencies' repressive influence. The intelligence conflict in Myanmar represents a critical facet of the broader struggle, carrying profound implications for the nation's future and the safety and rights of its citizens. For analysts and human rights advocates, a nuanced understanding of this dimension is essential to fully grasp the ongoing conflict and to devise effective strategies that might contribute to peace and human rights protections. The ultimate resolution of the conflict between the junta and the opposition may hinge more on strategic intelligence maneuvers than on sheer military power, underscoring the complexity of modern conflicts where information serves as a potent weapon. Myanmar's intelligence agencies, particularly military intelligence units, play a pivotal role in orchestrating crackdowns on civil disobedience movements and protests. Their operations include strategic planning, intelligence gathering on key activists, and the establishment of informant networks within civil society. This reflects a systematic approach to repressive governance, where intelligence agencies are instrumental in maintaining state power through fear and coercion. Their involvement in acts of violence against civilians, such as coordinated raids, torture, and the management of detention facilities rife with human rights abuses, starkly illustrates the mechanisms of state violence. Understanding these mechanisms is crucial for analyzing how such violence is perpetrated and normalized within authoritarian regimes.

The activities of Myanmar's intelligence agencies have directly resulted in severe repression and widespread torture. Arbitrary arrests and detention are rampant, with thousands of individuals detained based on intelligence reports, often without formal charges or due process. Many detainees are held in undisclosed locations, complicating efforts by families to locate or secure the release of their loved ones. Torture in detention centers is pervasive, with methods including severe beatings, electric shocks, waterboarding, stress positions, and sexual violence, employed to extract information, force confessions, and instill fear among the population. Enforced disappearances have become a common tactic, with individuals taken by security forces without any legal process, their whereabouts remaining unknown. This practice aims to eliminate opposition figures and foster an environment of fear and uncertainty among their supporters. Families often face extortion and threats when seeking information about their disappeared relatives. Extrajudicial killings are also prevalent, with intelligence reports leading to the targeted killings of activists and protest leaders. The bodies of those killed frequently bear signs of torture, indicating executions following interrogation. These killings serve as a deterrent to those considering joining the opposition or participating in protests.

Based on the Authoritarian state theory viewpoint, the intelligence agencies are instrumental in enforcing the junta's authoritarian rule. These agencies conduct extensive surveillance, monitor communications, and infiltrate opposition groups to preemptively neutralize threats to the regime. The intelligence apparatus acts as the regime's eyes and ears, ensuring that any dissent is swiftly and brutally suppressed. This approach not only reinforces the regime's grip on power but also perpetuates a culture of fear and compliance among the populace. The intelligence agencies' role in these operations highlights the centrality of surveillance and coercion in the maintenance of authoritarian control. Moreover, the role of Myanmar's intelligence agencies can be analyzed through the lens of authoritarian resilience – a concept explaining how authoritarian regimes maintain stability and power despite potential threats. Over decades, Myanmar's military intelligence has adapted to changing political contexts to sustain military dominance, including strategic shifts in response to international pressure, adopting digital surveillance technologies, and modifying tactics in response to civil resistance movements. The military's crackdown since the coup has included acts of murder, imprisonment, torture, and enforced disappearance, all part of a broader campaign to suppress opposition. The use of live ammunition against peaceful protesters, resulting in over a thousand deaths, is a clear violation of international human rights standards.

Crimes against humanity committed by the military include targeted killings of protesters and activists, arbitrary detention of thousands without due process, systematic torture in detention centers, and enforced disappearances to silence opposition figures. These actions are part of a widespread and systematic attack on the civilian population, violating international law. Myanmar's intelligence

agencies have systematically co-opted elements of civil society and opposition through infiltration and surveillance. This not only weakens opposition movements but also integrates them into a controlled framework, significantly limiting their impact and reach. For example, the actions of the intelligence agencies extend beyond direct violence and repression, facilitating broader human rights abuses. These include the suppression of free speech and assembly, targeted repression of ethnic and religious minorities, and manipulation of the COVID-19 pandemic to maintain control. Such actions have led to allegations of crimes against humanity and war crimes, characterized by systematic and widespread attacks against civilians. The mechanisms through which intelligence agencies have facilitated state violence and repression, including surveillance, misinformation, and direct violence have led to drastic consequences on Myanmar's society and governance, as well as the weakening of Myanmar's prospects for democracy and international human rights standards.

Therefore, the intelligence conflict in Myanmar is a crucial element of the broader struggle, significantly impacting the nation's future and the safety of its citizens. Myanmar's intelligence agencies play a central role in perpetuating state violence and repression, using tactics such as arbitrary arrests, torture, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings to maintain authoritarian control. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for human rights advocates to devise effective strategies for peace and protection. The resolution of Myanmar's conflict may depend more on strategic intelligence efforts than on military might, highlighting the importance of information in modern conflicts. Therefore, the role of intelligence agencies in Myanmar's 2021 revolution provides a comprehensive view of how state violence, authoritarian resilience, and the suppression of dissent are interconnected. This discussion not only contributes to the theoretical understanding of authoritarianism but also highlights practical approaches for international advocacy and policymaking aimed at protecting human rights.

Conclusion

The involvement of Myanmar's intelligence agencies in the repression and torture carried out by the military junta during the 2021 revolution represents a profound and systematic abuse of state power with significant implications for human rights. This study has meticulously analyzed the historical and contemporary roles of these agencies, revealing how their operations have been integral to enforcing state-sponsored repression and perpetuating a culture of torture. The findings indicate that the intelligence agencies utilized a range of coercive measures to suppress dissent, including surveillance, arbitrary arrests, and brutal interrogation techniques. These actions were not isolated incidents but part of a deliberate strategy orchestrated by the highest levels of military leadership. The case studies presented provide vivid evidence of the brutal tactics employed,

highlighting the pervasive impact on political activists, ethnic minorities, and ordinary citizens.

This study has demonstrated that Myanmar's intelligence agencies have played a central role in the junta's efforts to suppress dissent and maintain control following the 2021 coup. By adapting their strategies to incorporate advanced surveillance technologies, legal mechanisms, and pro-military groups, these agencies have effectively tightened the junta's grip on power. However, these tactics have come at a significant cost to human rights, with widespread reports of arbitrary arrests, torture, and extrajudicial killings. The findings of this study have important implications for understanding how authoritarian regimes utilize intelligence agencies to maintain control in the face of widespread civilian resistance. Future research should explore how these tactics evolve over time, and how the international community can more effectively respond to such abuses. In the meantime, targeted sanctions, enhanced monitoring mechanisms, and robust support for pro-democracy forces within Myanmar are critical steps toward achieving accountability and justice.

Thus, the systematic use of repression and torture by Myanmar's intelligence agencies during the 2021 revolution highlights the need for sustained international attention and action. By addressing these abuses and supporting efforts for democratic reform, the international community can help ensure that the people of Myanmar can realize their rights and freedoms in a just and peaceful society.

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