Chapter Three

Power, Administration and Everyday Life

Introduction

The nature of the state is apparent not only in changing ideology, but in the daily workings of the system. It is through the institutional structures of the state that the actions of the regime impacts upon the population. Thus, the way in which the regime controls the institutions of the state has implications for the extent and effectiveness of its authority. This chapter attempts to understand the everyday workings of the political system, by examining not only the bureaucratic structure, but also the different power structures within and outside the state and attitudes to authority by actors within and parallel to the state. An understanding of the political system will be used as a basis to explain the basis of the regime’s lack of autonomy, and the state’s institutional weakness.

These components of state power operate through centre-local power relations (from the highest to the lowest levels of administrative power), and centre-periphery relations (the interaction of the central government in the capital with the regional authorities on the outer edges of the state where central power is weakest). In both these cases, the line where the state ends and society begins is blurred, and, especially in the latter case, the balance of power often favours authorities on the periphery. Overall, the regime’s power is precarious, even with its closest supporters, involving a constant struggle to maintain autonomy. This struggle resembles a ‘push-pull’ motion, with the ‘push’ being the SPDC’s strategies to assert its power within the military and throughout society, and the ‘pull’ being the factors undermining central power.
Consequently, this chapter looks at the administrative hold of the state in remote regions, and in the village. Further, it considers the influence of significant state actors and stake-holders on administrative effectiveness: the military, the civil service, and the ceasefire groups. In addition, the chapter considers how the dynamics of state power are affected by the impact of the regime’s strategies of social control on the population. Finally, by looking at the attitudes of key parts of the population towards the state and regime, this chapter analyses where the support for the regime and its long-term durability (but not legitimacy) comes from.

The Military in Power

Forty years of military rule in Myanmar has closely entwined the institutions of the state with the military. The administration, the economy and key parts of society are heavily militarised. The interests and values of the military elite dominate the governance of the state, affecting the policy agenda, decision-making, and the financial and institutional means by which policy is implemented. This military state is not monolithic. The decisions made in the capital can go awry as differing interests and values within the military produce counter-forces on some policy matters. Overall, however, the military elite considers the state to be in danger of being captured by groups opposed to military interests. Because they believe that what is best for the military is also in the best interests of the state, the military elite has managed to control internal differences enough to present a united front on important matters.

Not all military-run states work in the same way. They vary by degrees of militarisation, the extent to which the different components of the military are unified, and the influence of the military’s corporate interests. Alfred Stepan (1988: 30), whose work is based on the military regimes of Latin America, observes that military regimes have three components: the military as government, comprising the core leadership directing the government; the security community, which consists of the parts of the military directly involved in repression and intelligence gathering; and the military as institution, which is the regular military organisation that does the day-to-day
soldiering. The manner in which these components of the military relate to one another affects the unity of the regime. When the interests of one component endanger the interests of another, the potential for regime change increases (ibid.).

In the case of Myanmar, the SPDC forms the military as government. Constant speculation about factionalism within the regime centres on a possible rift between the military as institution, represented by Deputy Senior-General Maung Aye, the Chief of Army, and the security community, led by General Khin Nyunt, the head of DDSI. However, while these differences have appeared to produce some policy inconsistencies, the perception of the threat to the regime and its goals is sufficient to produce what Stepan (1988: 31) defines as ‘apparent fusion’.

A more serious threat to the regime has been the alternative power bases created by various regional commanders, as will be detailed below. This poses a challenge to the regime, which walks a fine line in dealing with corruption in its ranks. The incentives provided by SLORC/SPDC to the military elite to maintain support, unless closely monitored, can also provide a threat to the regime’s hegemony. Such incentives range from the granting of concessions to extract natural resources and privileged access to trade-related business, to turning a blind eye to corruption and opportunism. If the corruption becomes excessive, or an individual builds up a power base through economic patronage derived from his/her position, the regime attempts to neutralise the individual’s power before he/she is strong enough to challenge the regime’s authority (Selth 1998a: 97). In addition to the regional commanders, ministers with lucrative portfolios have been seen to take excessive advantage of their positions, and are subject to periodic purges. The regime’s reaction to perceived threats from within its ranks is clearly illustrated by the November 2001 sacking of Lieutenant-General Win Myint, Secretary-3 of the SPDC, and a number of ministers. Due to the personalised nature of authority, businesses

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1 For example, there is speculation that the different approaches of Maung Aye and Khin Nyunt are responsible for contradictory actions in certain matters, such as dealing with the NLD (Selth 1998a: 99).
connected to the sacked ministers were reputedly under threat. A major
construction company, in which Win Myint was a major shareholder, declared
bankruptcy a few days after the purge (Ko Thet 2001).

The close involvement of the military government and business is also
pertinent to how much the state is militarised. Samuel E. Finer (1982: 281-282)
points out that even when the military is in government, the militarisation of
the state varies. According to his criteria, Myanmar has the highest possible
degree of militarisation, showing that the state is truly governed by the military.
While that statement may seem obvious, Finer points out that military regimes
can have greatly differing degrees of military influence over the institutions of
the state and society (ibid.). The Myanmar military has been integrated into the
state and society to such a degree that demilitarising the state would be far from
simple. The penetration of military personnel into positions of influence over
business, religion, and all other important sectors, means that a huge cross-
section of the population has ties to the structures that maintain military rule
(Matthews 1998: 14). Even on a basic level, nothing significant can be achieved
without the support of a patron who has close ties to the military elite. This
applies as much to the implementation of state policy as to the private interests
of individuals running a business or engaging in other activities requiring
official sanction.

Moreover, the wide influence of the military over state and society is
backed by the cohesiveness of the military institution. Despite evidence of
dissatisfaction in the ranks as the rapid expansion of the army puts strain on its
institutional resources (Selth 1995: 519), Selth (1998a: 97-100) points out that
military unity is upheld by a number of factors. Many members of the army
believe in the guardian role of the Tatmadaw, and consequently share the
regime’s goals. Many fear retribution for the crimes of the army under a
civilian government, as well as disadvantaging of the Tatmadaw’s corporate
interests, and many, especially senior officers, have personally benefited from the *status quo* (*ibid.*: 102-103).

It is the institutionalisation of the regime in society that contributes to the durability of the regime’s power. Because the military elite has spent the last forty years conflating state and military interests, the two are closely linked. The corporate interests of the military are defined as encompassing adequate budgetary support, autonomy in managing internal affairs, preservation of responsibilities in the face of encroachment from rival institutions, and the continuation of the institution itself (Nordlinger 1977: 65). Because the Myanmar military as institution is so conflated with the state institution, these corporate interests have become tied up in the military’s monopoly on state power. Decades of military rule have established defence as the sector receiving the largest allocation of public expenditure. Privileges have been developed for military personnel, such as better education and health care facilities, and subsidies on rice, fuel and electricity. Military-run businesses have been given the best opportunities from the opening up of the economy. Finally, although conditions for military serving in conflict zones and remote areas are not good, the position of power gives officers opportunities for enrichment though extortion and corruption. Any democratic government would face the necessity of protecting the military’s interests, in order to maintain the support of a large and powerful section of the population (Selth 2000: 82), but the regime is unlikely to have faith that this would happen, and believes that the only way to protect military interests is to institutionalise them further into the state.

These characteristics of the regime have implications for the type of state that the SPDC attempts to shape, and its method of governance. The impact of

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2 See also Callahan (2000), who argues that despite ‘cracks in the *tatmadaw* edifice’, cohesion in the officer corps has been maintained by the vast patronage opportunities under the control of the military, the infiltration of military intelligence units into the ranks of the army, and the siege mentality that unites the military against a hostile population. Another scholar, Maung Aung Myoe (1998: 15-22, 30-31), also maintains that the *Tatmadaw* is a cohesive institution, but argues that the institutional divisions within the institution have been resolved.

3 This also ensures that, even if a political transition took place, the military would still have a major role to play. Selth (2000: 77) points out that compromise with the military would be necessary to hold free and fair elections, and other elements of political transition.
military values on SLORC/SPDC’s goals will be examined in the next chapter. In terms of governance, the most important consideration, and a major preoccupation for the SPDC, is the agendas of agents within the state which conflict with the leadership’s prerogatives. Consequently, most institutional change under the rule of SLORC/SPDC has occurred in order to increase the centralisation of the state in order to concentrate power in the hands of the most senior generals, and to strengthen control over the bureaucracy and administrative structures that was lost in 1988. The exception is the granting of autonomy to ceasefire groups, which at the time was the only valid choice the regime could make.

The Administration System: the Tatmadaw and the bureaucracy

Administrative control of the Myanmar state is maintained through two parallel institutions: the bureaucracy\(^4\) and the military. Both of these are top-down hierarchies that originate in the SPDC, which is at the apex of the state administrative system. In accordance with the security priorities of the state, however, administration is subordinated to military objectives; thus while the bureaucratic structure remains much the same as when it was set up under colonial rule, it operates as an auxiliary system to the military hierarchy, especially in the regional areas.

The core of the SPDC is formed by its top three members. These are Senior-General Than Shwe, the chairman of the SPDC; Deputy Senior-General Maung Aye, the vice-chairman of SPDC and commander-in-chief of the Army; and General Khin Nyunt, Secretary-1 of SPDC and head of state intelligence. The structure and membership of the rest of the council are more fluid. As of July 2003, the remainder of the SPDC consists of ten high-ranking generals, all based in key positions of military leadership in Yangon.\(^5\)

\(^4\) The civil service in Myanmar is legally defined as including: all employees of government agencies in central and local administration, local authorities, parastatal organisations, government sponsored and controlled boards and corporations, autonomous agencies, universities, state economic enterprises, and personnel of the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. This includes the police, but not the army (de Weerd 1992: 68).

\(^5\) For an updated list of SPDC members, see www.irrawaddy.com research pages.
The SPDC holds the greatest concentration of real policy-making power, as well as the final say on how policy is carried out. There is no doubt that all major policy decisions of the state come from the handful of senior military officers that are the permanent members of the SPDC, who consciously shape the state, and for that reason are answerable to a large degree for its abuses and deficiencies. Personalisation of authority in the political and cultural systems of the country makes the role of the top leadership crucial. According to Steinberg (2000: 94), when a society believes power cannot be shared for the benefit of all, power and loyalty become invested in people, instead of institutions, and patron-client relationships form the basis of power. The rumour-mill in the capital is constantly attributing the baffling ad hoc orders emanating from the government to the whim of one or other of the generals. The closure of a nightclub or the banning of motorcycles on the road is not too small a matter to be put down to the personal distaste of SPDC members. While such rumours may be exaggerated, they reflect a situation in which even senior bureaucrats cannot anticipate radical changes in policy. Without a doubt, all major political and economic decisions are made directly by the SPDC. But, as will be seen below, how they are implemented is another matter.

The division of labour among the core of the state leadership assigns economic policy to Deputy Senior-General Maung Aye, and social policy to General Khin Nyunt. Senior-General Than Shwe chairs the Special Projects Implementation Committee, which plans major infrastructure development, and the Central Committee for the Development of Border Areas and National Races, and is Patron of the USDA. This division of labour reflects the relative importance of the policy areas, with the high-priority areas being under the

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6 See Chapter Six for detail of the policy-making process.
7 It has often been noted that Burmese culture is very status-oriented (Hanks Jr. 1949: 287). This tendency is enhanced by the dominance of the rank-oriented nature of the military institution.
8 Policy on matters without political connotations, however, is made in a more piecemeal fashion, being formulated in the bureaucracy, and later approved by the SPDC (Cook and Minogue 1997: 191).
direct control of the senior-general, and the lower-priority areas under the control of the lowest ranking of the three, Secretary-1.\textsuperscript{9}

The chairman of the SPDC, Senior General Than Shwe, is also the prime minister and head of cabinet.\textsuperscript{10} The latter includes 34 ministries, which operate with restricted decision-making powers.\textsuperscript{11} Of 37 ministers in the cabinet, all but four are active or retired military officers.\textsuperscript{12} The Office of the Chairman of the SPDC, and the Office of the Prime Minister assume a management support role, and an attorney-general and auditor-general are responsible for law-making and fiscal management, respectively, under the direction of SPDC. The bureaucracy is administered by the Civil Service Selection and Training Board (CSSTB), directly responsible to the Chairman of SPDC, and conducts recruitment, training, procedural matters, and running of the University for the Development of National Races (Myanmar Ministry of Information 1999: 71-78).

At the central level, there are also numerous theme-specific committees that exist for the purposes of inter-sectoral coordination, and which are the primary forums for policy formulation.\textsuperscript{13} These are all chaired by one of the top three members of the SPDC. No government body below the central level is anything more than an administrative organ, although in some cases leeway to adjust policy on a localised scale is possible.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{9} However, Secretary-1 is recognised as the chief architect of the ceasefire agreements, and the driving force behind the expansion of foreign relations with China and ASEAN, and talks with the NLD. Deputy Senior-General Maung Aye is seen as being behind the push for political and economic self-sufficiency (Matthews 2001: 230-231). It is commonly assumed that the inconsistency of policy arises from the process of decision-making by consensus within the SPDC (Steinberg 1997a: 4). However this is no doubt influenced by the military hierarchy; Senior General Than Shwe, as the ranking officer, would have the final say in any dispute.

\textsuperscript{10} Unlike in SLORC, where most Council members doubled as government ministers, under the SPDC only the chairman is a member of the cabinet.

\textsuperscript{11} A minor example is that the Ministry of Education had to submit the application for my research visa to the cabinet – run by Senior General Than Shwe – for a decision.

\textsuperscript{12} In addition, over half of the deputy-ministers are military officers (see \url{www.irrawaddy.com/res/cabinet.html} for a full list). However, most director-generals in the ministries are civilian civil servants or retired officers (Standley and Etherton 1990: A.3).

\textsuperscript{13} These committees include: the Special Projects Implementation Committee, which plans major infrastructure development in the country directly under the Chairman of SPDC; the Central Committee for the Development of Border Areas and National Races; the Myanmar Central Committee for Drug Abuse Control; the Myanmar Naing-Ngan Education Committee; the National Health Committee and the Myanmar Industrial Development Committee.

\textsuperscript{14} However, in the cases I have heard of, this was due to intervention by a regional commander who had an interest in some health programs.
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From the SPDC, administration formally passes to the State or Division Peace and Development Councils (S/DPDC), which oversee the seven states and seven divisions in the country. These have mainly a supervisory and coordinating role for the levels below them. For practical reasons, the northern and eastern areas of the Shan State are administered as sub-states (Myanmar Ministry of Information 1999: 120), while a number of special administrative regions are under the control of ceasefire groups, and have their own administrative organisations.

Next, there is the district-level (now called the township zone), reintroduced by SLORC, which consists of four to five townships. It seems to be of little administrative importance, mainly replicating the functions of the township, and adding another layer to the administrative hierarchy (Royal Institute of Public Administration 1991: 14). Its function is more likely to be one of security, as the chairman of each District Peace and Development Council is a military officer with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel (interview 1, Canberra: February 1999). Officially, the justification for the reintroduction of the district-level was to better represent the territorial location of ethnic groups, as a precursor to the SLORC’s plans for ethnic self-administration within a ‘decentralised unitary state’ that was later detailed in the National Convention (Diller 1993: 402).

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15 This division is probably due not only to the sheer size of the state, but also the continuing state of insecurity that requires additional military presence.
The most significant local administration unit remains the township, of which there are 324. It is the level where policy implementation is carried out, and where contacts between administrators and the community are most prominent. The township is made up of several village tracts or urban wards, and is administered by the Township Peace and Development Council (TPDC). A civilian chairman heads the TPDC. In addition, the heads of locally-based military units, military intelligence and police assume significant influence, although they may not hold formal administrative positions.

The various ministries are organised in a line-position structure; that is, their administrative hierarchies run parallel to the institutions of government. Therefore, each ministry has a department office at each administrative level that implements its programs. The line departments and the general administration bodies, as well as other significant institutions, hold monthly coordination meetings. However, inter-sectoral coordination is very poor, with overlapping functions and poor communication between departments (Cowater International Inc. 1993a: 4.6).
Some departments are more significant and have wider powers than others. The Department of General Administration (under the Ministry of Home Affairs) is responsible for the actual administration of the township. The role of the department was expanded only a few days after the SLORC coup. Since 22 September 1988, this department has been responsible for urban and rural administration; for registration of land records; land uses [sic], land rent and assessment value of urban land; for developing the urban, rural and border areas, for administration of municipalities; for coordination with the officials of other ministries rank to rank; and for principal participation in the Law and Order Restoration Councils at all levels (Cowater International Inc. 1993a: Appendix E, 2).

By 1990, the department employed around 40,000 personnel at the township level, about a third of whom were clerks for the urban ward or village tract Law and Order Restoration Councils (Standley and Etherton 1990: B9). The wards and village tracts form the final level in the administrative hierarchy, responsible for liaising between the community and the state authorities. The village tract is the lowest level of formal reporting, and is made up of representatives of the Village Peace and Development Councils (VPDC). Within the villages and wards, ‘ten-household’ leaders carry out micro-governance, although these play only a minor role, if active at all (interview 61, Yangon: September 2000).

In addition, the Community Development Law of 1993 gave the Ministry of Home Affairs the authority to form township development committees (TDCs) for town planning and development works, to operate under the Department of General Administration. This law requires the TDCs to be self-financing. They have the ability to draft by-laws for development works for submission to the Department, and to implement these works using their own funds (Cowater International Inc. 1993b: Appendix E, 2).

Within the two largest cities, general administration is carried out by the Yangon City Development Committee (YCDC) and the Mandalay City

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16 The population of a township ranges from 1,400 to 382,000, with a mean of 136,000. A village tract has an average of five villages, of around 650 households (Cowater International Inc. 1993a: 1.7).

17 Law and Order Restoration Councils were the administrative predecessors to the Peace and Development Councils, and held exactly the same role.
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Development Committee (MCDC), which are directly responsible to the SPDC, and have the status of a government ministry. These two committees are responsible for the civil works and development within their jurisdiction, including maintenance of roads and water supply (N.D. Lea International Ltd. and Haskoning Royal Dutch Engineers & Architects 1993: B-13).

In the border areas, the administrative situation is complicated by the position of the Department of Border Areas Administration, which was set up under SLORC to implement the Border Areas and National Races Development Programme. This department is situated below the regional commander, but has administrative jurisdiction over the other line departments. It also implements many of its programs in areas where ceasefire groups have autonomy. However, as many of the ceasefire arrangements were only verbal contracts, there is much overlap between the two authorities (interview 22, Yangon: March 2000).

The actual operation of the bureaucratic and administrative hierarchy does not correspond quite so neatly to the formal administrative structure. There are two main reasons for this, the first being the incorporation of administration into the military hierarchy, the second being the informal and personal nature of power in the Myanmar system.

From the SPDC, the military and bureaucratic hierarchies pass into the control of twelve regional commanders (see map 2). During the BSPP era, they held only a security role, and were low in the political hierarchy. However, after the coup, SLORC relied on the regional commanders to rebuild the state; their responsibilities ranged from building infrastructure, to developing industry and countering dissent (Callahan 2000: 27). To do this, the regional commanders were invested as the sole authority for administrative, political and economic matters (including control of economic enterprises) in each region, in addition to their military role. Callahan opines that this produced a state apparatus ‘beholden to the whims of regional commanders’ (ibid.: 27).

At this high point in the hierarchy, the one individual makes all policy for the region, ostensibly within the framework of central state policy. Naturally this gives the twelve officers considerable personal power, especially
those in control of regions adjacent to the border, as the opportunity to build up economic patronage through concessions of valuable resources is much greater. This poses a considerable dilemma in terms of central state control. To extend and strengthen the power of a state throughout its territory, it is necessary for the state leadership to cede considerable autonomy to officers who are physically present in the regions. However, the lack of institutional strength of the state means that the regional commanders build up warlord-type power structures. To counter this SLORC used regular rotations of the commanders, common to all the civil service, to break power bases and patronage structures. In 1992, the officers who had been serving as regional commanders since 1988 were brought to Yangon by SLORC and appointed as government ministers, and a new set of officers took over the Regional Commands. Reappointment of most of these positions was repeated in 1995 and 1997 (interview 1, Canberra: February 1999). In particular, the change of regime in 1997 gave the top military leadership the opportunity to purge several cabinet ministers, who had built up their fortunes as regional commanders, on the charge of corruption, as well as to appoint relatively junior officers as the new regional commanders (Callahan 2000: 39).

The change of government in November 1997 enhanced the position of the regional commanders, when the replacement of the State Law and Order Restoration Council by the SPDC resulted in slight structural adjustments in the hierarchy of power. Instead of former regional commanders being appointed as SLORC members and cabinet ministers in Yangon, the newly appointed regional commanders were made members of the SPDC, extending their power from the region to the centre. They remained in their respective territories on active military duty, with the entire council only meeting together in the capital every four months (interview 1, Canberra: February 1999). However, this arrangement must have been unworkable, as in November 2001 all but one of the regional commanders were promoted from major-general to lieutenant-
The most important transfer, according to Maung Aung Myoe (2002), was that of Major-General Thura Shwe Mann, who was made the Joint Chief of Staff for the Army, Navy and Airforce. There are indications that he is being groomed for a leadership succession (ibid.). Six of the former commanders were appointed to the War Office, and four were appointed to the Bureau of Special Operations (BSO). All the former regional commanders remain members of the SPDC, once again centralising state power.

This is particularly apparent in the consolidation of regional military command into the hands of four officers, now based in the capital. The BSO, which controls all army operations, had been leaderless since the death of Lieutenant General Tin Oo ten months earlier. His duties have now been divided among the four officers who have been appointed to the BSO. The regional commands have been consolidated into four groupings, in which the officers have control over military operation duties, as well as political, economic and social authority. This arrangement exists alongside the old regional command structure, with junior officers posted in each regional command serving as deputies (Burma Courier, 15 December 2001). Yet even if the SPDC is able to exert greater central control over the regional commands, the nature of the situation is such that the commanders will still have considerable influence and local authority.

All of the regional commanders are chairmen of the State/Division Peace and Development Councils in their respective areas. However, because there are two more administrative state/divisions than regional commands, and because the boundaries of the two do not overlap, the delineation of authoritative boundaries is not clear (although it can be assumed that the

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18 The regional commander that was not included in the restructuring was General Aye Kywe of the Coastal Command (Win Htein 2002). He was arrested in March 2002, for his alleged involvement in the coup plot (Maung Aung Myoe 2002).

19 Major-General Ye Myint, formerly of the Mandalay regional command, now has authority over the Magwe, Sagaing and Mandalay Divisions and the Chin and Kachin States. Major-General Aung Htwe, formerly of the Western Command, has authority over the three commands in the Shan State and the Kayah State. Major-General Khin Maung Than, commander of the Yangon Division, has additional authority over the Irrawaddy and Bago Divisions and the Rakhine State. Major-General Maung Bo, formerly of Southern Shan State command, has authority over the Kayin and Mon States, and the Tanintharyi Division (Burma Courier, 15 December 2001).
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military boundaries take precedence). As of 2000 (and there has been no indication that this has changed), the four chairmen of State/Division PDCs who are not regional commanders (and thus not members of the SPDC) were less senior military officers (Maung Aung Myoe 2000b: Appendix Six). While the regional commanders held the rank of major-general, the chairman of Magwe DPDC was a brigadier-general, and the chairmen in Kayin, Chin and Kayah states were colonels. The Kayah SPDC chairman was also the head of the regional operational command (ROC) based in Loikaw (Maung Aung Myoe 2000b: Appendix Six). Thus, it seems that the most senior military officer in the area fills the leadership of the state or division PDC.

Although the control lies with the regional commander, a divisional commander performs the actual duties of public administration (interview 1, Canberra: February 1999). In terms of military infrastructure, each regional command is assigned ten infantry battalions and ten supply battalions, as well as one military operational command (MOC). The MOCs, along with three ROCs, were formed in 1996 as semi-autonomous bodies to ‘provide greater operational focus and flexibility, but also to permit closer military administration of critical areas, such as the eastern Shan State’ (Ashton 1998b: 29; see also Ball 1998: 37).

The light infantry divisions (LID), which operate as mobile units, are under direct control of the war office (Selth 1995: 515). However, in normal situations these tend to come under the influence of the closest authority (interview 1, Canberra: February 1999). The central authorities also retain direct control of the intelligence units posted around the country (Selth 1997b: 23), and the senior members of SPDC are constantly visiting places around the country to open bridges and dams, to open training courses, and so on. The generals’ need to maintain a physical presence beyond the capital is telling of the personal nature of their power. Just as the administration of the state is fragmented, so too is military power. Unless countered by a direct order, what goes on in the regions is frequently far removed from the influence of the capital.
The Bureaucracy

To control the state, the regime at the centre struggles to deal with two types of authority relations. One is centre-periphery relations, dealing with insurgents, ceasefire groups and military officers operating in a volatile context that in many ways is the key to the economic and military power of the state, but seems far removed from Yangon (see following section). The other concerns relations with the agents of the state within the bureaucracy who are responsible for implementing the SPDC’s policy, and are the point of contact between state and society down to the village level.

Since civil servants formed a core element among the demonstrators during 1988, the SLORC took measures to depoliticise the bureaucracy and weed out dissenters once the situation normalised. In addition to pay rises at politically sensitive times and subsidies for essential goods to appease discontent (already mentioned in Chapter Two), coercion and indoctrination were used as methods of control. In contrast to the socialist era, where membership of the BSPP was the key to advancement in the bureaucracy, civil servants were banned from joining political parties (Khin Maung Win and Smith 1998: 133). All civil servants were also required to complete a questionnaire in 1991 that included questions such as, ‘Is it appropriate to elect somebody who is married to a foreigner as the Head of State?’ and, ‘How should the military regard the organisation that considers the military, which is shouldering all the country’s welfare, as its enemy?’ It has been reported that over 15,000 doctors were fired for not answering the questionnaire correctly. The purges also occurred extensively in other sectors, particularly education (Human Rights Watch 1997: 7).

20 This question was an obvious reference to Aung San Suu Kyi.
21 A translation of the questionnaire is reproduced in Fink (2001: 78-79).
22 The fact that so many civil servants risked their jobs to join the protests in 1988 is significant considering the intense competition for government positions. By 1987, only 142 of the 560 doctors who graduated in that year were appointed to the government service, and 10,000 graduates sat the civil service examination in competition for around 10 jobs (UNESCO 1989: 6). The competition for civil service positions also helps explain the effectiveness of SLORC in forcing them to go back to work.
Like the Revolutionary Council, the SLORC/SPDC attempts to indoctrinate military organisational values into the bureaucracy through the requirement that all civil servants undertake regular military training. Upon recruitment or promotion, all civil servants are required to attend a training course at the Central Institute of Public Services (run by the CSSTB), which began operating in 1956. Operated by retired military officers with administrative backgrounds, the courses have been described as being run in ‘a regimented fashion with a strong emphasis on discipline and conformity’ (Cooper 1991: 3). The conclusion is that ‘the present style of training produces dedicated, disciplined and conforming staff who will not perform well in the developing situation’ (ibid.: 30). Paramilitary exercises are included alongside administration courses, although little of the overall training is directly related to practical requirements of the job (de Weerd 1992: 66).

Throughout their careers, as well as regularly attending ‘refresher’ courses, Thawnghmung (2001: 171) reports that it is common for civil servants (including military personnel) are transferred to new posts every two or three years, in order to prevent personal power bases or networks being developed. Often, a transfer might involve being posted in a remote part of the country, with little regard for where the skills of the individual are most needed, or whether families in which both parents are civil servants will be split up (Skidmore 1998: 66). Bureaucrats also face strong pressure to join the USDA and participate in pro-regime activities, such as the mass rallies that regularly took place across the country in the late 1990s, which were intended to demonstrate a lack of popular support for the NLD (Mya Maung 1998: 57). Schoolteachers are particularly subject to these pressures, due to their potential to influence students (ibid.: 38).

23 Teachers in secondary and tertiary education are subject to measures of control to ensure their loyalty to the regime, and are used to monitor students. Because of the major role of students in the 1988 movement, teachers were targeted as being in positions of influence. It is reported that between 1988 and 1992, all teachers were required to attend a ‘re-education’ course which included indoctrination in military values, and since then regular ‘refresher’ courses (Brandon 1998: 240). Over the same period, thousands of teachers were dismissed from their positions, and many more relocated to other parts of the country in order to break up networks (ibid.). Another method of control has been to make teachers responsible for the actions of their students, and to add patrolling of the campus to their list of duties (Fink 2001: 181). It has also
The regime’s focus on controlling the bureaucracy prevents it from addressing the institutional weakness of the administration. The civil service that the SLORC took over was already riddled with systemic problems. A macro-analysis in 1992 identified ‘fundamental deficiencies’ in public administration (de Weerd 1992: 8). The structure of the public service suffers from a combination of excessive centralisation of policy-making, with a high degree of fragmentation on basic matters, such as personnel management, and weak inter-ministerial coordination (ibid.: 13). This causes much inconsistency, and burdens senior staff in each department with basic management duties, taking a large amount of time away from policy implementation (ibid.: 9-10). The constant rotation of staff postings alone is a major burden. The fragmentation and ‘departmentalism’ of the system has the effect of ‘weakening the whole structure and endangering coordination and policy-output’ (ibid.: 13). One example is the difficulty that foreign investors and aid organisations have in negotiating Memoranda of Understanding (MoU), as there is no particular ministry that coordinates foreign businesses and organisations. Each ministry has its own processes in these matters, and some are much less open and flexible than others (Purcell 1999: 80-81).

In fact, the administrative style of the different ministries is very important to policy implementation. Cook and Minogue (1997: 190) argue that ‘[s]ome ministries adopt a “minimum reaction” position, seeing their role primarily in terms of administering particular laws. Other ministries adopt a more innovative “directive” approach, in which they use the scope provided by the various laws in the economic domain for creative interpretation, and also act to identify problems which require further action and possibly legislation. Which of these stances is adopted seems to depend partly on the personalities of specific officials and ministers, and partly on the character of their policy responsibilities.

been reported that university professors have been encouraged to overlook cheating in exams, in order to prevent students’ frustration with the education system being transformed into political opposition to the regime. Because of the focus in tertiary education on ‘the containment of student activism’, Fink argues that ‘[n]eedless to say, the idea of actually learning something in the classroom has been largely lost in all of this’ (Fink 2001: 179).
Since the early 1990s, the attempt to increase the administrative strength of the state has produced some minor reforms in civil service management. There has also been a major emphasis on such values as inter-ministerial coordination, which has produced a plethora of specialist committees at the central level, as mentioned earlier. However, policy analysis and implementation has been characterised as ‘ad hoc arrangements which, below the Cabinet level, do not appear to be widely perceived and understood’ (ibid.). Moreover, at the local level conflicting interests of various government departments hinder the coordination of administration. Overall, measures of reform remain insubstantial as the major problems of the administrative system lie in the dearth of resources, and the unmotivating culture of the system.

Recently, a retired ambassador, who had served under the AFPFL government, the Revolutionary Council and the BSPP, wrote:

In Myanmar, where [the bureaucracy] has gone through seachanges of politicization in the BSPP period and martialization since until it can acquire an analogy to the national game of cane-ball where each player does his bit to keep it in the air, bureaucracy seems to be a lost cause (Thet Tun 1999a: 12).

This assessment alludes to the burden on civil servants of working in a system characterised by inconsistency, ad hocism and fear of retribution. It results in widespread demoralisation and apathy, even at the highest levels (interview 43, Yangon: July 2000).

The coping methods of a reluctant bureaucrat are the same everywhere: foot-dragging, petty corruption and avoidance of decision-making. In particular, the historical development of the bureaucracy, reinforced by the long-term culture of fear and insecurity produced by the militarisation of state and society, has produced a prevailing value orientation within the bureaucracy described by James Guyot (1969: 222) as the ‘clerk mentality’. This consists of ‘submissiveness towards formal authority and…a ritual devotion to routine

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24 For example, Yawngmhung (2001: 195) argues that officials responsible for agricultural development and irrigation tend to inflate statistics of yields and production, in order to fill the demands of their superiors for successful implementation. On the other hand, land record officials will underreport the numbers of land ownership and cultivated acres, in order to take their cut from farmers wishing to reduce their contribution to the government’s mandatory rice procurement scheme. These conflicting interests lead to lack of trust and communication between the government agencies (ibid.: 198)
tasks under an imminent fear of failure’. This is acknowledged with typical Myanmar humour in the unofficial motto of the bureaucracy: *ma loke, ma shoke, ma pyoke*, which translates as ‘do not work, do not get involved, will not get fired’ (interview 1, Canberra: February 1999).

While there are committed officials who manage to stay motivated despite the prevailing culture, they are held back by the bottlenecks in the hierarchy that result from the formalism and excessive emphasis on procedure that characterise the system. Most senior bureaucrats seem to be overworked, but there is an excess of staff at clerk level who do not have enough to do. The working time of bureaucrats is dominated by meetings (Thet Tun 1999a: 12). The resources of local government departments are drained by the high-profile visits of central authorities, to the extent that ‘[j]unior professional officers [spend] more time on preparation for high ranking officials (and their relatives) from the city, than on handling and resolving their department’s issues and responsibilities’ (Thawnghmung 2001: 202). Also, much time is taken up with the paper chase – monthly reports that work their way up the hierarchy – yet nothing substantial is reported, as it is not a system that encourages the reporting of bad news.

Of course, many of these features are similar to bureaucracies everywhere, but in this case the frustrations of bureaucrats are exacerbated by the lack of a system of redress. The apathy of the civil service represents a fundamental failure of the state to control the most basic of state functions, and is as damaging to the regime’s goals as overt political actions. However, administration in the periphery of the state is further complicated by the dominance of alternative authorities.

On the other hand, an ICG report distinguishes between the majority of bureaucrats who shun initiative, and technocrats and political appointees who have more of a concern for results, and a greater ability to achieve them (ICG 2002b: 12-13).

Between 33 and 50 per cent of public health workers’ time is spent keeping records (Chandler 1998: 249).

The careers of bureaucrats are subject to the whims of their superiors, who, also being subject to the unwillingness of the central government to hear that its policies are unsuccessful, do not wish to be given bad news that they are obliged to pass on to their own supervisor. According to Thawnghmung (2001: 201), a senior manager of the Myanmar Agricultural Service threatened to transfer an agricultural officer who had reported crop failure in his jurisdiction.
Centre-Periphery Relations

While the patterns of administrative power remain fairly constant in the central plains where the state is firmly established, the administration of the periphery is quite different. This has less to do with the administrative structure of the state than with the actions of the military in the area. How the centre relates to the border regions varies according to whether the region is a war zone or a ceasefire zone; and in the ceasefire zones it varies according to the terms of the ceasefire. Further, the central government must deal not only with alternative authorities who are still fighting (and who themselves compete with splinter groups) and those with whom they hold tenuous ceasefires, but also with the *Tatmadaw* officers posted in the regions, whose presence in places where crucial military and economic deals are being made gives them significant power, and the ability to ignore certain directives from the centre.

The pattern of a diffusion of power outward from the center of the state, as a character of the pre-colonial state, still exists to some extent in Myanmar. During the colonial era, it was reinforced by the administrative separation of the centre and the periphery. After independence, the political divisions that had become entrenched during World War II produced civil war, the most extreme manifestation of resistance against central power. It was not until the 1970s that a status quo had been reached where it could be said that the state controlled the central plains of Burma while the insurgent movements were in control of the mountainous border regions. Insurgency became institutionalised, as political ideals took second place to movements that were ‘conducted in part as economic enterprises providing careers and incomes for many people’ (Taylor 1983a: 105).

A major change in centre-periphery relations occurred in 1989, when the collapse of the CPB gave the regime a political opportunity to negotiate the first ceasefire agreement. Within a decade, all but a few insurgent armies had

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28 Smith (1999a: 38) makes the valid point that many leaders of ethnic minority groups prefer not to make the distinction between areas under ceasefire and those still under conflict, instead referring to all as ‘war-affected’ communities.

29 Bertil Linter (1991: 181) points out that the greater control of the central government over the country has come at the price of ‘an internationalisation of its previously internal conflict’, due
negotiated ceasefires with the regime that gave them autonomy to administer and conduct unrestricted economic activities in certain territories, and to receive services from the state, in return for ceasing their opposition to the state.\textsuperscript{30} Other points between the various agreements varied; for example, the agreement with the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) included the provision that that INGOs would be permitted to operate in Kachin State (ICG 2001b: 13). In particular, all the former insurgents were given the right to retain their arms until a new constitution was inaugurated (Smith 1996b: 8). Ananda Rajah (1998: 144-145) argues that this effectively amounts to a federal structure, saying that ‘national sovereignty in the sense associated with a unitary state has been compromised’.

The terms and strength of the ceasefires vary considerably. The most significant were the first agreements, negotiated with the former groups of the CPB.\textsuperscript{31} These gave the Wa and Kokang groups considerable autonomy in four special administrative regions that were set up in the eastern Shan State. Within these regions, a regional administration committee oversees a separate administration structure, with a budget and taxation system separate from the rest of the country (FAO and IFAD 1992: 18). The Tatmadaw has given up the right to enter these territories at will, yet is committed to providing development programs under the Border Areas and National Races Development Programme. The most significant aspect of these ceasefire agreements was the \textit{carte blanche} it granted to these groups to produce and export narcotics, which over the subsequent decades has established them as powerful economic and military authorities – not only in the border regions, but in the capital as well. The regime now cannot afford to be anything but

\textsuperscript{30}This included recognition of the legitimacy of SLORC, and an agreement to not have any contact with anti-government groups (Maung Aung Myoe 2000a: 12).

\textsuperscript{31}See Lintner (2000: 168-170) for detail of the background to the first ceasefire agreements. The second set of ceasefires was with former members of the National Democratic Front, an alliance of ethnic insurgent groups formed in 1976 (Smith 1999a: 27).
close allies, but has not found it easy controlling the actions of the powerful UWSA that grew out of the ceasefire (Hawke 1998: 25-26).

Apart from the earlier agreements, most of the ceasefire arrangements have enabled the regime to make inroads into territory that no central government has been in control of since before independence. For example, although the Tatmadaw cannot go armed into territory under the jurisdiction of the KIO (interview 22, Yangon: March 2000), the autonomy of the KIO is much weaker than that of the UWSA. A resident in the Kachin State reports the situation as an uneasy coexistence, maintained by the mutual desire for economic exploitation (interview 34, Kachin State: June 2000). In this case, the KIO had no choice but to agree to a ceasefire in 1993, after China reneged on a pre-paid US$7 million arms deal (Hawke 1998: 23).

By the time the New Mon State Party (NMSP) entered into an agreement on 29 June 1995, the negotiating power of the regime was much stronger. Consequently, the ceasefire was purely military-oriented, and concerns raised by the NMSP about forced labour and portering for the military, taking up business activities involving lucrative resources such as logging and fishing, and political representation for the Mon, were all put on the backburner (Lang 1999: 128-130). Meanwhile, Tatmadaw troops moved in and around the area, with just twelve military deployment areas, each of a five-mile radius, placed under NMSP control to safely repatriate refugees (ibid.: 130).

Economic and social development of the border regions formed a key element of the ceasefire agreements, and is an explicit strategy of SLORC/SPDC to consolidate the hegemony of the state. The Border Area and National Races Development Programme covers 17.5 per cent of the population and over 19 per cent of the total of the country that was previously unreachable to the central government (Myanmar Ministry of Progress of Border Areas and National Races and Development Affairs 1994: 3). Under the program,

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32 Callahan (1998b: 61) argues that the local autonomy granted by the ceasefires ‘represents the most extreme concession of central control over Burmese territory in modern history, even more extreme than U Nu’s plans in 1962 to grant statehood to the Mons and Arakanese and to consider seriously Shan and Kayah efforts to exercise their secession rights’. If the government
infrastructure, particularly roads, has been completed that entrenches the military presence in these areas, and would make it immensely difficult for full-scale insurgent control of the territories to be regained (Smith with Annie Allesbrook 1994: 99-101). Logically, one benefit of this would be to win over the support of people weary from decades of fighting. However, several ceasefire groups have complained that the promised development assistance is yet to come. The regime continues to rely on less subtle methods of extending its hegemony, and the ceasefire process remains shaky (see Hawke 1998; Smith 1999a).

However, it is important to understand the motivations behind the ceasefires. As Martin Smith (2001: 32) notes, there has been surprise from observers that many ethnic minority groups have deemed recognition from the military government more of a priority than supporting the NLD, in obtaining an overall political settlement. What this does not take into account is that the ceasefires have given the ethnic minorities the one thing they have not had for decades: political recognition (Seng Raw 2001). In war-ravaged communities, many are not prepared to wait for a political change to begin social and economic development (ibid.: 161-162).

In the areas where the civil war still goes on, the military has pushed its opponents right up to the border, and in many cases right over it into Thailand.

33 For example, the new roads built in the Eastern Shan State combined with increased security has reduced travelling time for a Toyota Hilux between Kyaingtung and Tachileik from approximately 10-12 hours in 1988 to 3-4 hours 6 years later, and the time to drive between Kyaingtung from Taunggyi from 10-15 days to 12 hours (Institute of Economics 1994: 30).

34 In addition, SLORC/SPDC attempts to control what development activities the ceasefire groups undertake on their own resources. Martin Smith (1996b: 12) reports that the Border Area Development Program ‘even limits the size of hydroelectric power stations that the ceasefire forces are allowed to build and, instead, has insisted that all power is bought from the state sector, which is notoriously unreliable’.

35 However, while the ceasefires are yet to be transformed into political agreements, Smith (2001: 38) argues that that important progress has been made in the dialogue going on at the local level between communities, and political, social and religious organisations that had long been divided by warfare.

36 Along with exclusion from political representation, the ethnic states have long been denied the resources and investment of the state, causing significant economic disparities between the remote areas and the central plain (Brown 1994: 52). Consequently, groups such as the Pao Nationalist Organization and the KIO are attempting to pursue ‘peace through development’ (Smith 1999a: 19). However, Smith (ibid.: 26) argues that after decades of fighting the desire for
The two major groups still fighting, the KNU and the SSA-South, along with the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), have been so weakened that they have been described as ‘more of a developmental obstacle that a serious military threat’ (Tin Maung Maung Than and Mya Than 1997, 212). This is not surprising considering the estimation that between 1988 and 1996 the army’s strength increased by over 50 per cent, while the numerical strength of the armed opposition decreased by more than 80 per cent (ibid.). Yet, the Tatmadaw is still unable to completely secure the eastern border areas of the country. The continuing insecurity of the state is shown by the measures taken to control civilian populations in contested areas, such as large-scale forced relocations. Most of southern Shan State, about 18,200 square kilometers, has been cleared of civilian population, and is reputed to be a free-fire zone where people are shot on sight (Hawke 1998: 27).

Major development projects in these areas have also contributed to the extension of the central state’s institutional and infrastructural strength. One of the more controversial signs of this has been the Yandana gas pipeline, which was built over an area controlled by Mon and Karen insurgents. The process of building the pipeline, along with a railway built to bring supplies into the area, effectively established a military dominance over the territory. By the time the pipeline was finished, the NMSP had signed a ceasefire agreement from a weak position, and the KNU were seriously weakened through the loss of their headquarters and severe factional divisions. In the Shan State, a proposal to...
build a dam over the Salween River, right in the centre of SSA-South territory, is considered likely to produce a similar result (Coakley 1999). Resources are a key element of power, not only forming a major motivation for the regime, but also providing an element of contention. The ceasefire with the KNPP allegedly broke down as a result of disagreements over profit-sharing from logging deals (Hawke 1998: 24).

One result of the ceasefires is the considerable expansion of Tatmadaw presence in the periphery. The regional strength of the military in 1988 lay in nine regional commands, and eight LIDs. By 2000, this had increased to twelve regional commands, ten LIDs, six ROCs, fifteen MOCs, two artillery operation commands and one armoured operation command, including around 450 infantry battalions spread across the country (Maung Aung Myoe 2000a: 24). The battalions are divided among the regional commands and the LIDs (Selth 1995: 515). With the full strength of a battalion being 750 troops, the military hold over the country is considerable. The Shan and Kayah states now have a permanent deployment of 120 battalions (ibid.: 23-24), while every township in the Rakhine State has at least three battalions (Karen Human Rights Group 1996b: 1). In some areas, like the government-controlled areas of the Kachin and Kayah states, army camps are located every three to six kilometres on main roads (Matthews 2001: 232).

Such concentration of troops leads to increased human rights abuses against civilians; this applies especially, but not exclusively, in the warzones. Also, there are strong indications that individual officers are involved in narcotics, smuggling, extortion and excessive repression (Karen Human Rights Group 1998). The SPDC must turn a blind eye to such things in order to preserve morale and loyalty in these hardship postings. Although the mobile battalions are allocated a requisition fund, the officers generally pocket this, and the troops are forced to rely on whatever source they can (Karen Human Rights Group 1996a). Desertions by Tatmadaw troops, many of whom were

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41 Battalions that are stationed in one place are expected to grow food to support themselves (interview 1, Canberra: February 2000). Soldiers can be seen tending fields even in the middle of Yangon.
forcibly conscripted, are frequent (Hawke 1998: 26). Overall, between the challenges of reining in the power of senior officers in the regions, maintaining mutually agreeable relations with ceasefire groups, and extending the institutional reach of the state through development programs and militarisation, a considerable portion of the central leadership’s energy is devoted to holding onto its hegemony in the periphery.

Life in the Village: local organisation in a militarised society

The previous sections have considered the organisation and dynamics of groups closely connected to the state. However, since Myanmar is primarily rural and agricultural, it is in the village that most of the processes of the state impact upon the population. In particular, state-society relations are affected by the ‘mediating role of local governing authorities’ (Thawnghmung 2001: 351). Despite the attempts of the colonial government to ‘rationalise’ administration, there is common agreement that authority remains personal and hierarchal, and local identity remains strong (personal conversation 3, Yangon: December 1999; interview 52, Yangon: August 2000; interview 62, Yangon: September 2000).

Regardless of measures taken under each regime to strengthen social control, such as the militarisation of the administrative structure under the Revolutionary Council, and the use of regimented mass organisations by all the military regimes, the primarily negative connotations of contact with the state have created a degree of disassociation from the state structure at the local level. The common theme of state-local relations is coercion, which has produced community strategies to run village affairs parallel to the demands of the state.

With such an emphasis on local identity, it might be asked whether the chairman of the VPDC relates to his position more as the head of his village and

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42 Manning Nash suggests that one reason that leadership is personal and charismatic, rather than institutional and structural, is the influence of an individualistic Buddhist culture. This promotes individual autonomy, inhibiting the formation of non-religious organisations beyond the family grouping (Nash 1969: 113).

43 During the colonial era, this took the form of a peasant boycott movement that attempted to reject the modern state and its burdens (Taylor 1987: 151).
according to his status as a traditional patron, or as the representative at the bottom of a state hierarchy that eventually goes up to the SPDC. Historical evidence combined with current anecdotal evidence suggests that political and social organisation in the village has retained its core features, despite the tumultuous happenings throughout the country.

Detailed research on local politics in Myanmar consists largely of a few anthropological studies undertaken in the early 1960s, just preceding the advent of military rule. One of these was a study of village life in central Burma by Manning Nash (1965: 85), who observed how the village power structure dealt with the modern state’s fondness for forming committees.

In this political structure... there is no clearly defined political process. The whole range of nominal offices like fire brigade, village sanitation, education, agriculture, security, roads, water, and reception committees are just 170 names on paper. They are never operational, but are only to show, if an official asks, that the offices are filled. No official is naïve enough to ask. It is the man of [power] who turns a collection of offices into a political structure.

More generally he noted:

Government is identified with the unrestricted use of force... villagers seek means to avoid or subvert the force of government, except when there is a local man who also has the kind of power that governments are thought to have. Administration, on the other hand, is seen as a necessary burden. It is a formal way of getting certain essential things done, and is sometimes the source of service (ibid.: 75).

In addition, John Badgley’s (1970) study of community leaders around the same time found that in the towns military and police officers and retired civil servants were the most influential in the community, but were few in number. Rather, most community leaders came from business and religious backgrounds, exercising a significant degree of informal authority in towns and villages (ibid.: 17-19).

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44 There is no ambiguity of roles in conflict zones. An interview with a refugee in Thailand, who had fled from central Kayin state, suggests that the position of village headman is very unpopular, as it involves liaison with state authorities - usually local military units. In the village in which this woman used to live, the village head was frequently rotated to share the unpleasant duty, as one individual cannot survive repeated beatings (Karen Human Rights Group 1995).

45 See also Melford E. Spiro’s (1977: 35-39) analysis of a village around the same time, which he characterised as ‘not the unit of an artificial administrative system, but a natural social system’.

46 See Badgely’s profiles of community leaders (1970).
Thus, to some extent it seems that village organisation has not changed under the rule of various regimes. The duties of the village governing body have varied a little: in 1955 the Democratisation of Administration scheme replaced the system of rule by a headman and village elders that was established by the colonial administration, with an elected village council that had administrative and judicial authority. During the period of direct military rule under the Revolutionary Council, from 1962 to 1974, a Village Security and Administrative Committee, appointed by the township authorities, was directly responsible for economic and social affairs. When this was replaced by an elected Village People’s Council under socialist one-party rule, there still was no apparent change in the way local affairs were organised (Mya Than 1987: 80). Despite extensive transformations in the ideology and structure of the state, Robert Taylor (1987: 331) observed:

Village People’s Council leaders in one village studied came from the same families as the former headman and other village elders, and these tended to be the individuals who represent the ‘upper layer’ of the village and live in the best houses. The same individuals also tend to dominate the leaders of other local branches of organisations such as the BSPP, the Lansin Youth and cooperative society….Though traditional village authorities such as monks and elders seem to be less influential than in the past, their place is not necessarily being taken by agents of the state. Outside influence is still being mediated by the same families as before.47

Taylor’s findings, from a longitudinal study of a village near Rangoon by the Rangoon Institute of Economics, concluded that the lack of change in political leadership was because ‘the majority of villagers are indifferent, have no time, interest nor education to take part in these administrative bodies’ (Mya Than 1978: 14). The study also found that apart from population increase in the 1970s, there had been little economic, cultural or religious change in the village between 1956 and 1978, which have instead been characterised by social and economic stagnation (ibid.).48

During the current period of direct military rule, an appointed council once again rules the village, yet local governance of rural communities appears

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47 However, Taylor’s (1987: 331) personal observations suggested a greater degree of state penetration in Rangoon and central Burma.
48 See also Mya Than (1987).
to remain unstructured and ‘traditional’, dependent on the nature of the local authority figures. Each village is governed by a Village Peace and Development Council. Each group of five or so villages is administered as a cluster, with only one of the VPDC chairmen, usually from the largest village, reporting to the township.\textsuperscript{49} The others are not required to have very much regular contact with the administrative hierarchy above them, and appear to remain as fairly insular and self-contained units, trying to avoid not only the government, but also outsiders in general (interview 59, Yangon: September 2000; interview 61, Yangon: September 2000; Skidmore 1998: 55).

The VPDC chairman is responsible for a range of activities, such as facilitating and monitoring the implementation of government programs, applying punitive measures against those who fail to follow government directives, organising the village’s contribution to involuntary labour obligations (see below), and hosting visiting officials (Thawnghmung 2001: 108, 182, 194).

Customarily, the village leader (known as \textit{thugyi}) gains his position through social status (Kyaw Yin 1963: 49). For the most part, the \textit{thugyi} is a man of ‘local knowledge and social standing’ (Thawnghmung 2001: 152). Personal authority is based on a charismatic concept of power known as \textit{pon}. Almost exclusive to males, \textit{pon} is based on personal attributes such as material success, application to work, mercy, good judgement and perspective (Nash 1965: 76-77). A village leader is a man with great \textit{pon}, which means he is able to get people to follow him (\textit{ibid.}). Most importantly, in terms of political organisation, Nash argues that ‘the presence of pon cannot be institutionalized….In the political sphere a man of pon does not build an organization, he builds a clientele’ (\textit{ibid.}: 79).\textsuperscript{50} Thus, the village leader is usually the primary patron in the village. He is not always the government-

\textsuperscript{49} The chairman of the village tract is nominated by the other village chairmen, but is subject to the approval of the TPDC (Thawnghmung 2001: 107).

\textsuperscript{50} Khin Maung Kyi (1966: 134) argues that the Burmese are adverse to formal power structures, and authority is customarily contained in a framework of charismatic and diffuse power (such as \textit{pon}, \textit{awza}, and the sense of personal obligation know as \textit{anade}). Therefore, power is based on ‘individual relative obligations’ (\textit{ibid.}: 129).
appointed headman, who chairs the VPDC, although the government generally finds it easier to appoint the village’s choice (interview 52, Yangon: August 2000).  

However, as the militarised state has become more intrusive, village leadership has become more susceptible to opportunists. Although *pon* is still important in authority relations, the modern administrative structure has made formal positions of village leadership a burden. In addition to the extensive duties it involves, without remuneration (Aguettant 1998: 59), the chairman is caught between the often irreconcilable imperatives of authorities at the township and central levels, and the local community. As Thawnghmung (2001: 185) points out, it is rare that a leader can protect the interests of the community as well as please his superiors. Most township authorities, being frequently transferred, have no personal connection or local knowledge of the area they administer, and impose the unrealistic policies of the central government, which villagers either cannot or will not meet. Those who try to meet both sets of expectations usually resign from the position when the burden becomes too great. As a result, men who see the position as an opportunity for advancement usually dominate village leadership (*ibid.*: 180). A VPDC chairman can gain remuneration for his position through methods such as the imposition of fines, charging fees on land contracts, and accepting bribes from villagers (*ibid.*: 183).

Generally, ‘the higher the socio-economic status of a chairman, the less he is likely to be corrupt, and the better relationship he will have with his villagers. Further, a village headman who relies on farming as his main source of income is more likely to share similar interests with his residents and thus is more protective of his villagers and sensitive to their difficulties and need’ (*ibid.*: 335). What this means is that the nature of village organisation, and its

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51 In some cases, villages are given the opportunity to elect the VPDC chairman, usually when the TPDC has little local knowledge of the community, or its previous appointment was unpopular in the village (Thawnghmung 2001: 179).
52 The obligation of the VPDC chairman to entertain visiting officials out of his own pocket is a large financial burden (Thawnghmung 2001: 182).
53 Village leadership was not welcome even in the days of the parliamentary democracy, particularly in areas where insurgents operated (Badgely 1970).
relationship to central authority, is highly variable and dependent on personalities.

The monastery (or the church in majority Christian areas such as parts of the Chin, Kayin and Kachin states, and mosque in Muslim areas on the western border) is indisputably the most significant social institution in village life. In addition to religious guidance, the abbot may organise redistribution of rice to poor households during times of hardship. Through his moral authority, he has considerable influence over the secular affairs of the village. Community activities and social works such as ceremonies, festivals and funerals are carried out by informal young men’s and women’s groups, mostly organised through the monastery when the need arises. Even the poorer members of the village are obliged through social pressure to contribute regularly and donate to village ceremonies, in order to maintain their social standing (Thawnghmung 2001: 138). The household is the main unit of social organisation (Nash 1965: 44). Family networks, which often include distant relatives and neighbours, form the essential patron-client networks that still permeate every aspect of life (interview 52, Yangon: August 2000).

There are generally at least a few other agencies of the state represented in the village, such as a sub-rural health centre or an agricultural cooperative. However, the under-resourced administrative agencies of the state often have little ability to supervise the implementation of their policies, so, except in matters where the security arm of the state intervenes, the village will simultaneously go about its affairs as it always has, regardless of which government is in power. The involvement of the same members of the village elite, the elders (lungyi), who tend to defer to the authority of the village leader and the abbot, indicates the administrative irrelevance of formal state

54 Contrary to SPDC’s and some of the UN agencies’ emphasis on the volunteerism of the Burmese people, David Steinberg noted that ‘[g]roup activity…focused on the monastery, for the Burmans rarely engaged voluntarily in social group activities beyond the family except as they related to Buddhism’ (Steinberg 1982: 106).

55 On the nature of kinship, Nash (1965: 61-62) argues that ‘beyond the family, kinship does not necessarily entail mutual rights and duties, but it does confer opportunity to develop a role relationship of mutuality, of intimate exchange’. Thus, ‘kinship links are only a background for the unfolding of daily behavior and serve as a sketch, not a map, or social relations’ (ibid.: 64).

56 Customarily, the elders are men with moral authority (Nash 1965: 84).
structures. Effectively, this means that decision-making is undertaken as it always has been, and various committees remain dormant while the village leaders concentrate on what they consider important.

For most villagers, the task of subsistence is so preoccupying that few institutions in the village, excepting the religious organisation, enter into their lives in a significant manner. A United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) (1999b, a) survey of twelve villages throughout the country sought to determine which institutions in the villages were significant. All these villages were recipients of UNDP’s Human Development Initiative (HDI) programs to varying extents, which encouraged the formation of village health committees, village water committees, income generation groups, soil conservation groups and parent teacher associations. Some of these, like the health committee and the parent teacher association, have long been part of the government structure on paper, but are rarely formed without outside support from the UN agencies or INGOs. Even in those cases, the effectiveness of the committees varies greatly according to the resources and motivation of the village, and whether the village leadership is already addressing the issues in a more general manner. Many villages are keen to do something to address their health problems, but are inhibited by lack of training and resources. It is places like this where the UN and INGO programs are successful. Other places, where the village leadership does not consider health issues to be of much importance, or simply does not have the capacity within the community to address health problems, will have difficulty getting anything off the ground, even with assistance (interview 33 and personal observations, Kachin State: June 2000).

The relevance of the other UN-initiated committees depends solely on how much they have helped the villagers; the most useful are income generation groups and water resource committees that build wells within the village. Of government institutions, the VPDC was often described as the most significant in the lives of the villagers, in several cases because of welfare assistance, although probably also because the VPDC chairman is required to organise the village to meet its ‘obligations’ to the state, such as road-building. Where government-organised non-government organizations (GONGO)
as the USDA and, less often, the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association (MMCWA) are present, the villagers interviewed by UNDESA never mentioned them as important. Thawnghmung (2001: 113) notes that in one village, the USDA occupies the same office as the VPDC, and the two organisations are perceived as inseparable, however, most farmers dislike the USDA (ibid.: 301).

Another major government institution present in most villages is the Myanmar Agricultural Service (MAS), of the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation, which provides credit and technical advice. However, the credibility and effectiveness of the MAS is reportedly undermined by the lack of commitment and condescending nature of many agricultural officers, as well as the bureaucratic obstacles to obtaining agricultural credit (Thawnghmung 2001: 127, 189-192).

Even within each village, the experience of institutions differs according to gender and levels of income. In Kyaukkhwet village, located southwest of Mandalay, a focus group discussion revealed:

> It is typically said among worse-off households that they do not get any...help from village institutions. For them, the most important ‘institutions’ appear to be social networks with neighbours and kin from whom they borrow food and money easily, rather than formal groups/organisations (UNDESA 1999b: 33).

In villages in the Rakhine state, a Muslim-dominated area on the western border with Bangladesh, another significant institution is the Border Immigration Headquarters, which was set up to prevent illegal immigration and provide more security in this tumultuous area. Among other things, it prohibits marriage to women under the age of eighteen and polygamous marriage, which the UNDESA (1999a: 29) study reports is very welcome to most Muslim women with whom they talked. In this area, the VPDC is reported to have a greater role in providing a secure environment, which is vital to the ability to earn a regular livelihood. Further, it has a direct impact in each individual’s life, as it liases with the Border Immigration Headquarters and the Military Intelligence office to obtain permission for marriages, business licences and job applications (ibid.: 48,83,102). Because of the constant challenges to government authority in this area, either overtly by insurgents or covertly by
the population fleeing over the border into Bangladesh, the institutions of the state are especially intrusive in daily life, and local government officials are encouraged by this system of more blatant coercion to become clients of powerful military authorities in the area (FIDH 2000: 6-7). In this region, it is common for the VPDC chairman to ‘buy’ his position from township authorities (ibid.: 7).

Thawnghmung argues that the nature of local authorities is the primary determinant of state-society relations in rural areas. Specifically,

[t]he central government may formulate programs for the building of irrigation, bridges, and roads, for providing agricultural assistance, and for providing agricultural loans. However, it is the local governing authority that actually implements them, and the extent to which their implementation diverges from the intention of policy makers (either for better or for worse) has significant implications for farmer’s perceptions of the state.

Thus, authority relations in rural areas, and rural committee’s conception of the legitimacy of the state, are determined by the behaviour of local authorities, and the degree to which their living standards are affected by the economic policies of the state (Thawnghmung 2001: 25). In some cases, when local authorities are exploitative, villagers may perceive that their troubles are due to the corruption and abuses of village and township authorities that is taking place without the knowledge of the central government. This situation is indicated by the frequent desire of villagers to appeal to the central government for help against local authorities (ibid.: 219, 277). The result, Thawnghmung maintains, is ‘pockets of legitimacy’ for the military regime at certain times and in certain places (ibid.: 90). In other cases, the authority of sympathetic local authorities who try to alleviate the harshness of government policy may be respected, while the central government is considered illegitimate (ibid.: 220). Alternatively, both levels of authority might be unpopular. However, for the most part, peasants who are adversely affected by government policy and implementation react by evading authority, trying to make deals with local officials, or appealing to central authorities (ibid.: 361).
Human Insecurity

The apolitical approach of the UNDESA study is useful to gain a sense of the everyday reality of life under a militarised state, but belies the fact that the security apparatus of the state poses the greatest threat to the wellbeing of its citizens. The human insecurity produced by the state has been well documented by human rights organisations, especially in the border areas where various insurgent organisations have not been totally subdued (see above). In these areas, the only representatives of the state are the army, the members of which have been indoctrinated into an institutional culture of brutality that encourages hatred and abuse of ethnic minorities, including torture and sexual violence (Apple 1998).57

For people in more stable areas of the country, where the regular functions of the state are better established, threats to human security come more from repression and economic extortion, in particular, the state rice procurement program that was detailed in Chapter Two. Like most other government policies (and military practices) this has been applied inflexibly, and there are many stories of how farmers were forced into debt during poor harvests when they had to buy rice to fulfil their quota (Mya Maung 1998: 121).58 Even in the middle of Yangon, there is no protection from arbitrary actions of the Tatmadaw. Not only are arrests in the middle of the night common, but there are also numerous reports of men in urban areas being taken off the streets or from teashops to work as porters in the border areas, or forcibly conscripted into the army (Skidmore 1998: 30). If they survive, they are often left stranded across the country after their ‘duty’ is over. Children who rely on begging or stealing for their own or their family’s survival are particularly vulnerable to this exploitation (personal conversation 54, Yangon):

57 This report is especially useful for an understanding of the culture within the Tatmadaw, and is the only source that has attempted to understand how young men are conscripted into the military – often unwillingly – and conditioned to believe in the worldview of the generals, justifying excessive human rights abuse as a means to ensuring the security of the state. Much of the information in the report came from soldiers who had defected (Apple 1998). See also Karen Human Rights Group (1996a).
58 For details of how militarisation of society contributes to widespread food scarcity, see a report by the Asian Human Rights Commission (1999).
September 2000). In addition, people throughout urban and rural areas of the country are regularly burdened by requirements to provide labour and materials for the building of infrastructure, which often interferes with their ability to maintain a livelihood.

In the face of international criticism, the use of civilian labour on infrastructure projects in central Myanmar has been reduced since 1996 (although urban residents are still utilised for beautification and ward maintenance projects) (Bureau of International Labor Affairs 1998). Forced labour is particularly prevalent in the border areas, where the population is at the most risk from abuse. Investigations by the International Labour Organisation have found that

the Myanmar authorities, including the local and regional administration, the military and various militias, forced the population of Myanmar to carry out a wide range of tasks. Labour was exacted from men, women and children, some of a very young age. Workers were not paid or compensated in any way for providing their labour, other than in exceptional circumstances, and were commonly subjected to various forms of verbal and physical abuse including rape, torture and killing (ILO 1998: point 274; also see Bureau of International Labor Affairs 1998).

Rural populations in conflict areas are also subject to forced portering, extortion, and theft by military units in the area, as well as the requirement to construct military camps and provide general workers (ibid.: points 275 to 283).

Other threats to human security arise from mass forced relocations, as mentioned above. In the Kayin state, it was reported that in November 1999 villagers were informed that any village not under the direct control of the military must move into secured areas, and that anyone remaining in the villages would be shot on sight (Karen Human Rights Group 2000a). Villages that are under Tatmadaw control, designated as ‘peace’ (nyein chan yay) villages, face constant demands for labour, money, food and building materials, as well as demands for intelligence on insurgent operations. The village heads face

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59 For a description of the regime’s restriction of political and civil rights, see Mya Maung (1998: 27-50).
60 Callahan notes that the expansion of the armed forces has increased military intrusion into daily life, as urban dwellers now encounter soldiers on a daily basis (Callahan 2000: 31).
beatings and torture if the local commanders are not satisfied (Karen Human Rights Group 2000b).

The abuse from military and state authorities has forced tens of thousands of people to flee as refugees into Thailand, where they face additional hardships from the unwelcoming Thai authorities (Human Rights Watch 1998; Lang 1999). In all, the militarisation of areas like the Chin state has ‘created untenable burdens for the people of the region’ (Images Asia, Karen Human Rights Group *et al.* 1998: 65).

**Daily Life under an Authoritarian State: fear, acquiescence and social distrust**

In such an oppressive context, few are politically active. To the majority of the people living under the Myanmar state, ‘politics’ is restricted to the goings-on of the SPDC and the NLD, which have only an indirect impact on their daily lives. The political repression following the 1988 demonstrations and the 1990 elections convinced many people that it is not worth being involved in political activities, as those who do so, who are not imprisoned, in exile or dead, face constant harassment.

Rather, people are generally preoccupied with maintaining their livelihood in face of the limitations that the state has imposed upon them. For many, this means merely getting enough food each day; for some of the better-off, it means negotiating the system to take advantage of legitimate business opportunities. For the small, urban middle class, it means trying to get their children educated, and qualified enough to work for the few foreign businesses in the country. Even some former political activists, having spent much of the last decade in jail, question whether their sacrifices were worth it (see Ma Thanegi 1998: 30).

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62 Fink (2001: 82) tells the story of a former NLD member, who, when the party was suppressed in 1990, concentrated on finishing his education and getting a career. After experience working in a foreign investment firm and associating with powerful businessmen and military officers, his views had changed to see economic development as a precursor to democracy. Such feelings were not unusual in the early 1990s during the initial economic boom (*ibid.*).
This is not to say that daily life is any easier than at the advent of SLORC rule, when the population was the most politically active it had been in decades, perhaps since the nationalist movements of the late colonial era. However, more common is a tendency for most individuals, and communities, to try to organise life to minimise contact with the state. As shown above, in the village the functions of the state are channelled through the elite, so for most villagers non-coercive state institutions do not have a lot of relevance in daily life. However, it is much more difficult to avoid the day-to-day intrusions of the state at the township level and in urban areas. Political organisation in urban areas has been greatly influenced by more modern state structures, and the power of military officers and businessmen has largely supplanted that of traditional authorities, such as the Buddhist clergy. Changes in power structures and avenues of advancement mean that local authority figures are less likely than before to owe their position to the community they come from than to alliances with superiors. Urban ward authorities, equivalent of the VPDC, seem to be notorious for petty power abuses (Skidmore 1998: 122-123). Moreover, the ‘traditional’ social organisations that remain influential in the village are being displaced by GONGOs (ibid.: 129). In this context, people construct ‘sanctuary spaces’, shaping their daily lives around avoiding potential ‘flash points of confrontation’ in the political geography of the city (ibid.: 197).

On a deeper level, it means that many people have ‘an active, intentional ignorance of social conditions and events. It is a refusal to think about the socio-political situation and to psychologize one’s feelings’ (ibid.: 194). Therefore, ‘forgetting becomes an active, ongoing process necessary for psychological coherence, sometimes conscious, and other times as a barely discerned mental habit’ (ibid.:196).

This attitude arises not merely from the practicalities of dealing with life in an authoritarian state, but from a dislike and distrust of the government by

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63 Skidmore (1998: 17-118) describes the city of Yangon as a city divided by militarised and politicised areas, and sanctuary spaces. The politicised areas include places with an overt military presence, such as the Ministry of Defence, barracks, jails, and areas associated with the government, such as USDA offices, the Tooth Relic Pagoda, and homes of military officers. Sanctuary spaces included pagodas, some parks, meditation centres and pilgrimage sites.
much of the population. Although the line where the state ends and society begins is indistinguishable, many people seem to clearly perceive themselves as outside of the state, even quite senior bureaucrats, and their efforts to maintain as little contact with the state as possible contribute to the lack of state capacity (along with the regime’s mismanagement). This attitude towards the state is not only a characteristic of contemporary culture, but originated during the monarchical rule before colonisation, and survived the greater intrusion in community life of modern state structures (Nash 1965: 7-8; Taylor 1987: 38). Then and now, government is defined as one of the ‘five evils’ of life (the others being fire, water, gambling and thieves). The various changes in state structure and economic ideology, which greatly expanded contact between the central government and local units, have contributed little to changing the prevailing attitude towards the state.

When avoidance is not possible, contact with the state consists of either attempting to gain some benefit from it, or offering as little resistance as possible to the demands it imposes. A psychiatrist explains:

[p]eople have regressed under military rule….They have had to endure so much hardship that they have become “immunized” to it. They can handle and cope with it (cited in Fink 2000: 40).

Paradoxically, acceptance that the state is going to remain the same means that people attempt to get the most they can out of it. Because the military and civil service remain the only careers that offer job security and access to subsidised food, parents encourage their children to join these state organisations (Fink 2000: 38). Callahan (2000: 31-33) goes as far as describing the institution of the military as ‘a shelter, a benefactor and a safety valve for sons, nephews, grandsons and rascals’, saying there are few families in central and southern Myanmar who would not have a relative in the military.64

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64 However, Callahan (2000: 31-33) also makes the point that this kind of connection, which might bring benefits in the form of access to better services, does not make the military as a whole – especially the SPDC – any more endearing. Indeed, Fink argues that a military career does not automatically imply support for the military regime. Rather, ‘[l]ike being a civil servant, being in the military (as an officer) is a job that gives Burmese citizens the best chance for social advancement and financial rewards’ (Fink 2001: 144).
As well as accepting the system, elaborate methods have been developed to get around the obstacles of the state. This is often noted in literature, where a piece of writing will often have two dimensions, first the story that will get passed by the censorship board, and secondly, a sub-text into which can be read political and social criticism (see Allott 1993; Khin Maung Win and Smith 1998).

This sense of realism extends more generally into everyday life; as Fink (2000: 38) notes:

To protect their children from such a bleak future, many parents try to insulate them from political realities and urge them to conform with military rule. Families might dislike censorship, demands for forced labor and forced donations, and the authorities’ often rough treatment of civilians, but these problems are accepted as routine.

The measures and compromises made in order to survive in the system, and perhaps even prosper from it, have the consequence of perpetuating military rule, even though it has little actual support (ibid.: 40). This produces an ambivalent situation in which most people dislike the state, but exploit any benefits it may bring, and also have personal connections with it. It is not unusual for a family to have various members in the military, in the NLD, and in the bureaucracy.

In the Myanmar state system, if something works, it is because an exceptional individual makes it happen. Otherwise, bound by a psychology of fear, many bureaucrats and member of the intelligentsia are paralysed by a sense of futility in trying to work against the state. Although there is scope for the urban elite to challenge the status quo in small ways, many choose to opt out as much as possible, and the regime is able to maintain its hold over the state (although not always in the manner it would wish, as will be demonstrated in Chapter Four). As Skidmore (1998: 175) argues, ‘[a]t the most fundamental level, the Burmese priority is for survival, and often this involves complicity and opportunistic collaboration’.

What these coping strategies reflect is the huge psychological toll occasioned by many years of repression by those in control of the state. Visitors to Myanmar are often surprised by the appearance of normality. They do not take into account that long-term fear is manifested in a subtle manner. Based on research in Guatemala, Linda Green (1995: 108-109) describes how people
living in a state of emergency become socialised to fear, which becomes so matter-of-fact that people come to doubt their perception of reality. Instead, their sense of chaos tends to be manifested physically, in disturbing dreams and chronic illness. It is the ability of a dictatorship to turn fear into an everyday reality that maintains its power, because ‘[r]outinization allows people to live in a chronic state of fear with a façade of normalcy at the same time that terror permeates and shreds the social fabric’ (ibid.: 108; see also Skidmore 1998: 48-52).

Skidmore (1998: 138) points out that ‘political violence has become a self-perpetuating and enclosed domain that encompasses the Generals and their subjects alike….fear and terror has resulted in alienation, vulnerability and a flatness of affect’. It is this reaction to repression, rather than merely the repression itself, that has seriously damaged social trust and a sense of community.

Since the BSPP era, the requirement that every aspect of people’s lives be tied to the state has of necessity lessened to a small extent, at least for the small urban middle class and elite. But what remains is the atmosphere of fear, cultivated by the regime through a seemingly pervasive system of surveillance, inherent in any activity or contact beyond a very small circle of family and friends, and the whimful nature of the generals’ edicts. This ‘fear of the public sphere’ is based on ‘a deep-seated feeling of insecurity’ that can continue long after the regime that created it has been replaced (Spulbeck 1996: 70).

The loss of social trust predates not only the present regime, but also the advent of military rule in Burma. The research of anthropologist Melford E. Spiro (1992: 203), in central Burma during the late 1950s, revealed a near absence of true friendship among people in the village, which he attributed to ‘distrust of and suspiciousness concerning the aggressive intentions of others’. Since then the dangers of speaking openly, even among family, have been increased by the insidious extension of the regime’s surveillance network into every village and ward, and through coercing public servants and members of state-run social organisations to inform. Skidmore (1998: 150) emphasises the impact of alienation caused by this fear, in urban Myanmar, saying that real
friendships are not formed beyond the formative school years and that community organisations cannot be relied on as support networks. Not only are people forced into informing to protect themselves or to move ahead, such a situation creates a profitable outlet for malice, through gossip and poison pen letters (ibid.: 68, 96-96). In addition, those who do stand up against the authorities are pushed away by the community (Fink 2001: 130).

Nevertheless, while genuine trust is difficult, and political opinions cannot safely be expressed, informal and kinship networks remain vital for economic survival. For example, many ministries and departments have established staff welfare funds (Thet Tun 1999a: 12). These are usually informal arrangements, and consist of groups that collect monthly fees from the members to organise sporting and cultural activities and relief for members (Saw Gibson and Thein Htay 1992: 16), or might take the form of a small business, such as renting part of the ministry grounds for a restaurant (interview 38, Yangon, June 2000; interview 59, Yangon: September 2000).

**Support without Legitimacy?**

The institutionalisation of the military and the tendency of many people to avoid challenging the state, indicates how the military regime maintains its rule. It has been argued that the military is the SPDC’s ‘sole power base’ (Selth 1998a: 97). Certainly, as a relatively cohesive and powerful institution the military is the core power base of the regime, providing its coercive power. But as argued in the previous chapter, support from the regime has also been cultivated among groups, such as the new business elite, who have been patronised by and personally benefited from the military state. In addition, a significant part of the population is connected to the military institution. Matthews estimates that about two million people (consisting of soldiers and their families) receive ‘immediate profit and security from SPDC rule’.
Assuming military privileges are shared with relatives, this number could be doubled (Matthews 1998: 14).65

More broadly, the ambivalence of the population’s attitudes towards different parts of the military and state authorities, as noted by Callahan (2000: 25) and Thawnghmung (2001), means that judging levels of popular support is not clear-cut. Although the military state has faced regular protests from certain sections of the population, Thawnghmung puts forth a convincing argument that people only contest the system when it threatens their personal interests. Notwithstanding the fact that the current system disadvantages many people, many may not automatically attribute their poverty or crop failure to the government.66 However, she argues, definitions of legitimacy such as Alagappa’s and Beetham’s are not applicable to Myanmar; rather, instead of classifying the regime as completely illegitimate, it is more useful to use a less rigorous definition and look at ‘degrees’ of legitimacy (ibid.: 41). As a result, Thawnghmung defines passive compliance, and passive resistance in the place of violence and protest, as legitimacy for the state. As I have discussed in Chapter One, compliance arises from negative as well as positive factors. So recognising that the 1990 elections demonstrated that the majority of the population want a government that meets the more rigorous definitions of legitimacy, but have come to accept that a military government is what they have, I emphasis that the regime has both active and passive support from more than just the military, but that it could not be defined as legitimate. Indeed, if the greatest tests of legitimacy are both the degree to which a regime relies on coercion, and whether it can put more effort into implementing its policy goals rather than keeping in power, then as the following chapters show, the military

65 However, this estimation of loyalty to the military does not account for the low living standards and brutality experienced by the rank-and-file, and soldiers who are forcibly conscripted.
66 The support for military rule is marginally higher in rural areas. James F. Guyot (1994: 135-137) discusses the pertinence in Myanmar of Samuel P. Huntington’s theory that, without the support of the urban elite, a military government must be allied with the rural masses. He shows that in the 1990 election, although the NLD had greater support in the urban areas than in rural areas, the difference was not great, ranging from 2 to 12 percentage points. Of course, this was an unusual period. The attitudes of the rural population have been further explored by Thawnghmung (2001).
regime is not legitimate. The support it enjoys is enough to maintain its rule, but not enough for it to effectively control all the functions of the state, mostly because the methods used to cultivate support and maintain social control detract from the ‘political capacity’ of the regime, a concept that will be explored in the next chapter.

To some extent, the passive acceptance of military rule can be attributed to the cultural basis of authoritarianism, as examined in Chapter Two (pp. 58-61). But serious challenges to the state remain. As the next chapter demonstrates, passive resistance can be just as damaging as active resistance, while a construct support in the form of institutions such as the USDA is reliant on incentives and sanctions, meaning that the support gained is limited and conditional.

Essentially, the military is the only support base that the regime can count on. Without popular legitimacy, the support of people whose interests are not strongly vested in the maintenance of military rule is unsustainable. Jalal Alamgir (1997: 343) argues that ‘it is important to note that the regime’s support base in the civil society has not been constant, partly because it could not perform economically, and hence could not create a group of economic beneficiaries independent of the military’. Beyond that, bases of support are fluid, and the regime relies on a general acquiescence in key sectors of the population.

Conclusion

The concerns of security and social control shape the institutional and power structures of the state, as the administrative structure of the state is

\[67\] It has been suggested that the resilience of military rule is sustained by a political culture that lacks strong democratic values. For example, Stefan Collignon (2001: 70) argues that ‘the root of Burma’s problems may not just be the SLORC-SPDC – it may be Burma itself….The idea that the collective may have an obligation towards an individual and that, therefore, citizens may be entitled to make claims against the state simply has no meaning in a hierarchical society where status, authority and dignity have primacy over interest, wealth and rights’. A non-democratic political culture is not unique to Myanmar, but has proved a challenge to democratisers all through Southeast Asia. Kessler (1998: 52) points out ‘If this history has left any salient political legacy, it is a legacy of a strong state, and of statist thinking; of a weakly developed civil society and an even weaker tradition of active, participatory citizenship politics’.

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organised to ensure the SPDC has the maximum amount of control possible over the institutions of the state. By using the military hierarchy to administer the state and ensuring a high military presence in every township, the state leadership seeks to have at its disposal a regimental and rank-conscious organisation, committed to the values of the regime, to impose its will in every part of the country. The durability of military rule in Myanmar is in a large part due to extensive militarisation of administration, the economy and the society.

But the regime’s control over the institutions of the state is precarious, even within the ranks of the military. As a military regime, the SPDC is dependent on the active support of the military institution to shore up its power, and to assert its will throughout the country. As an institution, the military is concerned only with its security agenda, and its corporate interests. The regime has a much wider agenda, but without political legitimacy, its support beyond the military is highly unreliable, contingent on its domination of the state’s resources and the psychological impact of fear. As a result, the goals of the regime are limited by its lack of autonomy from the military.

This conflict of agendas results in a constant struggle for autonomy between the senior members of the regime and other parts of the military, and with the bureaucracy. On one side, the SPDC strives to achieve a high degree of centralisation of state power by pursuing various methods of control and appeasement. For the military, this involves experimentation with the best way to keep the powerful regional commanders under control through regular reorganisations of the top leadership. Another way the regime asserts it authority is the periodic crackdowns on corruption by its officials; at the same time it has no choice but to turn a blind eye to extortion and profiteering by its officers in the border areas. The bureaucracy, which provides a more passive form of resistance, is kept in check through coercive methods of control.

However, these strategies are undermined by the dominance of personal authority within the Myanmar state. Neither the SPDC, nor any of its predecessors, have managed to institutionalise power, so its attempt to centralise all power within itself is undermined by centrifugal tendencies in the state that produce alternative power bases rested in economic and political
patronage. These challenges to the regime’s power also take the form of chronic corruption and bureaucratic resistance that contribute just as much to undermining its agenda.

Attitudes to authority at the societal level are another challenge to the SPDC’s centralising tendencies. The state is a great source of insecurity to its citizens, who take great efforts to reduce the impact of the state upon their lives. People employ a myriad of economic, social and psychological survival strategies to distance themselves from the more intrusive elements of the state, and to compensate for the functions of the state that successive military governments cannot provide. So, although opportunism within the system is rife, the societal tendency to dissociation from state institutions and authority wherever possible is a powerful attempt to make the hated state, to some degree, irrelevant. The methods by which the Myanmar people make life bearable in a repressive state, ignoring rather than resisting, also contribute significantly to the staying power of the military regime.

These dynamics of power play out in a constant struggle between the regime, with its attempts to exert central power, and other forces that seek to undermine it. This struggle for autonomy perpetuates the institutional weakness of the state, and prevents the regime from gaining legitimacy. The administrative structure is shaped not only to ensure social control over society, but to prevent challenges to its power from within. As a result, the regime has in its control a state that is oriented to maintaining military power rather than implementing government policies. As Chapter Four will show, without legitimacy and autonomy the SPDC is unable to effectively pursue its nation-building and development strategies.