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# The Myanmar Conflict: A Role of Cyberspace in Counterinsurgency<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Cyberspace has played a major role in the prolonged Myanmar internal conflict. Especially hate speech on Facebook which is analysed here in the form of a case study and which has been carried out by Buddhist radicals and the Burmese military (Tatmadaw) since 2008. The paper focuses on both structuralist and actor-oriented prisms analysing the 2008 Constitution, that gives vast powers to the hands of Tatmadaw, as well as the online conduct of major relevant public figures. Furthermore, the Burmese counterinsurgency (COIN) military approach is compared to the Kilcullen's and Mills' theoretical concepts from the Hearts and Minds paradigm. The military campaign was conducted in an institutionalized way, against the position of the government, which was enabled by the 2008 Constitution. Moreover, the overall COIN approach conducted not only by the military but also by other public figures represents a unique combination of bottom-up and top-down dynamics. Finally, based on the comparison with the theoretical concepts, the paper concludes that the Myanmar COIN in cyberspace has failed as it has pursued rather the Iron Fist approach.*

Keywords: Hate Speech, Myanmar Counterinsurgency, Psyops, Propaganda, Cyberspace.

## Introduction

The Myanmar conflict is the longest ongoing civil war. Rather than one huge conflict, there are several smaller ones with a manifestation of armed violence, guerrilla warfare and even an insurgency of mainly ethnic minorities that oppose the rule of the government. It has started in the late 40s when the state previously called Burma gained her independence from the British Empire. The nature of the conflict is mostly ethnical, though other factors come into play too as will be discussed further. Due to occasional support of actors from abroad as well as refugee crises and mass displacements, the conflict can be deemed as transnational (Miliband, 2016). The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (2019) registers over 18 thousand deaths (of which approx. 11 thousand are victims of state-based violence)

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from 1989 (when the program started to work). Besides the number of deaths, many people became refugees and IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons), victims of serious cases of hate speech and violation of human rights. Recently, there has been an increase in hate speech mainly on the Facebook social platform from the official state and religious figures and other influential individuals which aims towards ethnic minorities such as Rohingya, which are Muslims in the country ruled mainly by Buddhists. Ashin Wirathu, a top-tier influential Buddhist monk who is eloquently called “The Burmese bin Laden” serves as an example of how a process of fuelling a hate speech done by this figure can cause consequences that can be described as genocidal (Barron, 2018).

This paper examines the Myanmar internal conflict within the scope of counterinsurgency (COIN) related frameworks with a focus on the role of cyberspace. The key assumption that allows applying these theoretical frameworks for cyberspace and social media such as Facebook is the decision of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) summit in Warsaw 2016 to include cyberspace as the 5<sup>th</sup> domain of warfare (Paganini, 2016). The general approach of this paper towards counterinsurgency is holistic and inspired by that of David Kilcullen’s (2010) who views COIN as a set of socio-economic, political, military and such tools and measures.

## 1. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The first goal is to establish whether the government uses the “Iron Fist” or the “Hearts and Minds” approach in cyberspace towards the insurgencies, respectively insurgent minorities. The second goal is to analyse the general role of the cyberspace and techniques used within it in the counterinsurgency in Myanmar. Furthermore, the goal here is to analyse a correlation<sup>4</sup> of the concrete online hate speech to subsequent real-world events. The third goal is to determine whether steps taken by the state’s officials (the government and the military) in cyberspace are an official or an unofficial governmental approach. In other words, do hate speech manifestations in cyberspace function in a top-down (elites inciting violence) or a bottom-up way (a general will of masses pushing the government to violent actions)? The fourth goal is to compare the findings of this paper to Mills’ (2011) concept of “Counterinsurgency in Cyberspace.” The minor, secondary goal<sup>5</sup> is in the form of a research question. Is only Rohingya minority targeted, or is the governmental approach in cyberspace similar against all the insurgent minorities?

The thorough analysis of the conflict and the fulfilment of above-mentioned goals cannot be done without the deeper understanding of the roots and history (background) of the very complex conflict; hence the paper examines this matter briefly in the very first chapter after the methodological part. The case study on hate speech in cyberspace (chapter 3) follows closely and it focuses on the current phase of the conflict (which started around 2008<sup>6</sup> with first online hate speech manifestations). The case study analyses the Tatmadaw (the Burmese military) covert psychological operations in cyberspace; public expressions of Ashin Wirathu, a representative of radical Buddhism (as there is a

<sup>4</sup> The length and research goals of this paper do not allow authors to prove a causal relationship here.

<sup>5</sup> The authors are aware that research question derive from goals, but they use the expression “a secondary goal” for simplification and clarity in the following text.

<sup>6</sup> Rather than time, the paper uses more accurate (for the cyberspace context) start of the hate speech manifestations and later campaigns in terms of delimitation of the analysed period.

substantial religious subtext to the conflict) and the government's position in order to address the first and the second goals. The data here is based mostly on the secondary sources due to primary sources being inaccessible. Facebook and other platforms have banned the accounts of some influential figures such as Ashin Wirathu for their very hate speech as it is against the companies' policies (for the limits of this paper see the first paragraph of the conclusion).

As regards the third goal (chapter 4), the paper uses an analysis of the structuralist approach.<sup>7</sup> Focus here is laid on structural factors influencing the conflict, its actors and their policies and procedures. As the previous analysis (for the first and second goals) is more agency-centred (actor-oriented), a structuralist prism adds to an overall understanding by examining factors that would not be otherwise included and that have a significant influence on the governmental COIN approach.

For addressing the fourth goal (chapter 5), Mills' (2011) concept of counterinsurgency in cyberspace and Kilcullen's (2010) general concept of COIN needs to be introduced here. Both concepts being normative, they provide an insight into whether the Burmese COIN is successful in the eyes of currently leading counterinsurgency paradigm of Hearts and Minds. There is a very limited academic attention devoted to the combination of counterinsurgency and cybersecurity. Mills' (2011) concept was chosen here because it combines these two phenomena. However, it is quite narrow as it suggests a mostly concrete approach towards COIN in cyberspace. Therefore, a Kilcullen's (2010) general concept is used in this paper as well.

Mills' (2011, p. 158) idea of successful counterinsurgency strategy is based on securing the local population and thus denying sanctuary to the insurgents and inciting them (several insurgent groups) to fight among each other. That is similar to Claire Metelits' (2011, p. 11) theory of so-called Active Rivalry, when "insurgents shape their strategies according to whether they face competition (active rivalry)". Taking this concept into cyberspace is, according to Mills (2011, p. 158), manifested for example by programmes such as "bug bounties". Rewards are offered (from government and private sector) for providing information of possession, usage or ownership of malware code. Unwanted elements (such as insurgencies) are simply turned against themselves in cyberspace similarly as in a real-world for the promise of financial or other benefits. An important technique here is "gamification". It is one of the tools for the recruitment process implemented by *jihadists* in which their young peers get points, rewards or status for desirable actions in cyberspace. The same thing can be done on the COIN part. Another important factor regarding the COIN in cyberspace is cross-agencies unification within the government itself. Mills (2011, p. 159) gives an example of the "U.S. Camelot" – Comprehensive National Cybersecurity Incentive (CNCI) which started in 2008 as an inter-federal-agency platform for dialogue and cooperation. Like the classical counterinsurgency, the one waged in cyberspace needs whole-governmental approach, not just the kinetic, violent one. The last factor Mills (2011, pp. 160-161) mentions is an establishment and maintenance of cyber hygiene which is an equivalent of a checkpoint in classical COIN operations. This can mean semi-autonomous measures like firewalls, anti-viruses and spyware for operational security. It is similar to Kilcullen's (2010, pp. 37-38) approach of starting COIN operation in secured areas (consolidation of governmental power there)

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<sup>7</sup> This approach stems from the paradigms of the Theory of Revolution and later the Theory of Modernity.

and then expanding outward. Cyber hygiene also functions as a secrecy enhancement for those who fight in the “first line” without fear of possible retribution from the insurgents’ side.

Kilcullen (2010) in his comprehensive book “Counterinsurgency” admits that there is no panacea for an insurgency, thus every operation must be tailored according to specific factors which require a thorough analysis of cultural, conflict socio-economic, political etc. spheres. There are only two fundamentals that can be applied to any COIN. The mentioned thorough analysis and that the well-being of the civilians must always come first. A rule number one of Hearts and Minds strategy (Kilcullen, 2010, pp. 1-4). Based on the lessons learnt in various insurgencies throughout the modern history, he also forms more concrete pieces of advice such as that all actions should be carried out with an international reaction in mind while seeking to persuade the global audience; or not attacking the enemy, but the enemy’s strategy (Kilcullen, 2010, pp. 39-45).

## 2. Historical Background

Origins of the conflict can be traced to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially during the WWII era. The British rule over Myanmar (then known as Burma) was generally not accepted by most of the domestic ethnic groups. Japan empire, expanding through the Pacific theatre of operations, tried to utilize this disloyalty momentum to gain control over Burma faster. In 1941, the Japanese invaded the country and captured it by the half of 1942 with the significant help of Burmese voluntary units. In turn, the Japanese gave Burma formal independence in August 1943, but in practice, it remained a puppet state, with important institutions and policies under Japanese control. This led Burmese establishment to incline to the Allies again and create League Against Fascism and for the People’s Peace (League) which started insurgent operations. A year later the Allies launched a counteroffensive and with the assistance of League managed to push the Japan forces out of Burma. The country became therefore again part of the British Empire (Bečka, 2007).

This however also meant that the Burmese got again to square one as the new British post-war colonial establishment did not want locals to participate in the governing process. The League, led by Aung San as well as several other independence groups, namely the Communist Party of Burma, and various ethnic groups, started negotiating with the government on the background of increasing anti-British and intra-ethnic hostilities. In 1947, the Panglong agreement was reached between the government, Aung San, and the Shan, Kachin and Chin ethnic groups, that should grant autonomy to the minorities’ frontier regions. However, San was assassinated shortly after this achievement and the new government established after Myanmar getting independent on 4 January 1948 (as the Burmese Union) refused to comply with the agreement (ibidem). The communists and the ethnic minorities were dissatisfied with the situation as they were convinced that they were being excluded by the League from governing the country. For example, it was noted that many Christian Karen military officials, appointed by the British during the dependence period, were quickly replaced with Buddhist Barmars. Three months after independence, the communists began an armed insurgency against the government. Similarly, Karen insurgent groups began to fight for independence. This marks the beginning of the first significant part of the war – the Post-independence period (Callahan, 2003).



After the initial phase of the most intense fighting, the conflict moved from the centre of the country to the peripheral regions of the ethnic minorities. The Karen nationalists formed into Karen National Union (KNU) favoured an independent state, administered solely by the Karen people. The proposed state would have been created by connecting of Karen and Karenni State which were situated in Lower Burma (Outer Myanmar). Though the civil war continued, the League managed to retain popularity among the Burmese for several election periods. This was, however, for a price of internal tensions as well as escalating arguments with the military. Afraid of the country's instability, the army (Tatmadaw) took control over the country in 1958 and under the leadership of General Ne Win attempted to lead the country to create a new government. Although the 1960 election was successful (the winner party was one of the successors of the League), in 1962 the Tatmadaw enacted another coup d'état which replaced the new government with military junta with Ne Win as the leader (Bečka, 2007). This milestone indicates the beginning of the second phase – the post-coup conflict.

After the junta came into power, the constitution was abolished and the parliament, as well as the government, dissolved and the Revolutionary Council, composed of military commanders, took over all legislative and executive power. The government and political leaders of ethnic minorities were arrested without trial. Meanwhile, other ethnic minority groups which were not inflicted by the coup began forming rebel factions, such as the Kachin Independence Army, in response to the establishment refusal to adopt a federal government structure. Censorship has been introduced across the country. The Council announced a program called Burmese Way to Socialism, abolished the existing administrative division of the country and changed the whole state administration system, including now a rather large number of military personnel, consolidating a centralized government and strengthening its control over ethnic minority areas. Eventually, the Council established its own Burmese Socialist Party, which, following a ban on all political parties, became the only permitted political party in the country<sup>8</sup> (Lintner, 1999).

Open criticism of the military government has been increasingly frequent. The Revolutionary Council responded with extensive arrests of students, opposition politicians, journalists and writers. On 8 August 1988, students' demonstrations broke out in Rangoon against General Ne Win's rule and the failing socialist system as such. The protests quickly spread across the country, culminating on 18 September 1988, after yet another military coup was enacted by the State Law and Order Restoration Council and Ne Win's junta was overthrown (*ibidem*).

Opening the third stage of the conflict (the Post-cold war one), the new The Junta pledged to hold elections in 1990 to the Legislative Assembly and allowed the creation of new political parties. Aung San Suu Kyi, along with other opposition leaders, founded the National League for Democracy and became the election's clear winner. However, the junta refused to recognize the election results and hand over the government to elected representatives. Kyi was then interned in house arrest. In 2006, the Tatmadaw conducted a large offensive against the Karen National Union (KNU) in Kayin State, displacing hundreds of thousands of civilians in the process. In 2007, people's protests broke out in Burma, the direct cause of which was a jump in fuel prices. People went out into the streets and Buddhist monks also joined the protests. After the harsh intervention of

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<sup>8</sup> This was confirmed in the new constitution which was enacted in 1974.

Burmese police and army units, the so-called Saffron<sup>9</sup> revolution was suppressed (Pagnucco & Peters, 2015). In 2011, Tatmadaw launched operations against insurgents in Shan State. During the offensive, the army captured territory from the National Democratic Alliance Army and the Shan State Army-North, officially in a response to the groups' rejections of the junta's policy of central national army, although military's interest in flourishing jade trade has been proposed as the real cause by some of the conflict researchers (Christensen, Nguyen & Sexton, 2019).

As for the most recent conflict events, the Tatmadaw attacked the Kachin Independence Army's command near the city of Laiza in November 2014. Another series of operations were launched between February and May 2015 in northern Shan State, after the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) attempted to retake territory it had lost in 2009. In October 2016, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked Myanmar border posts and crossings along the border with Bangladesh. On 25 August 2017, the ARSA launched a second large-scale attack against dozens of police checkpoints as well as the Tatmadaw base in northern Rakhine State (BBC News, 2016).

### 3. Contemporary Phase Case Study: Online Hate Speech

Facebook has been recently targeted with a lot of criticism in the West, namely the European Union and the USA (e.g. the Cambridge Analytica affair) for the company's handling of customers' data. However, these misuses are still far away from the incitement of the ethnic-motivated violence on a large scale that has happened in Myanmar. Before proceeding to concrete examples, basic facts must be understood. Over 55 million people live in the country out of which 9 % are ethnical Shan, 7 % Karen and 4 % Rakhine. As regards religion, almost 88 % are Buddhists and 4.3 % Muslim. Myanmar's GDP per capita is low and places her onto 163<sup>rd</sup> spot of all countries (CIA World Factbook, 2019). In this relatively poor state approx. 18 mil. people are users of the internet and Facebook which is nearly 38 % of the population. The decisive factor here is that the Silicon Valley social network is for free in terms of the data usage and it is even often mistaken for the internet itself, thus taken as a primary source of information (Mozur, 2018). The one, that can be efficiently used for manipulation. A UN special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar Yanghee Lee put it eloquently this way: "I am afraid that Facebook has now turned into a beast, and not what it originally intended" (Subedar, 2018).

#### 3.1. *Tatmadaw's Psyops in Cyberspace*

In circumstances such as the above-mentioned, the spread of fake news, disinformation and propaganda flourish. Especially when it comes from the state's officials. The first analysed example the paper focuses on is Myanmar's armed forces, Tatmadaw. Mozur<sup>10</sup> (2018) claims<sup>11</sup> that Myanmar military personnel, under false identities published Facebook posts against Muslims (e.g. labelling Islam as a global threat to Buddhism). Disinformation has occurred as well. A false story about the rape of a Buddhist woman by a Muslim man was shared. Rohingya were also portrayed as terrorists. Though very slow, Facebook's reaction came in the form of taking down the official accounts of senior Myanmar military

<sup>9</sup> The name refers to colour of the Buddhist monks' traditional clothes.

<sup>10</sup> A journalist from well-respected New York Times.

<sup>11</sup> Based on statements of former military officials, researchers and civilian officials.

leaders in August 2018.<sup>12</sup> Mozur (2018) furthermore states that this was a full-scale campaign with hundreds of Tatmadaw personnel (up to 700 soldiers) participating via troll accounts and fake news and celebrity pages on Facebook. Other tasks for this institutionalized military approach were collecting intelligence; criticizing posts that were antagonistic towards the armed forces and generally shutting down the online dissent and making inflammatory comments in online discussions. Facebook's top cybersecurity officer confirmed that there was a direct link between anti-minorities propaganda and the Myanmar military. Digital footprint in the analysed data leading to the military bases has raised the level of suspicion beyond reasonable doubts. Other channels were exploited as well, e.g. the popular blog *Opposite Eyes* (began roughly in 2008) which was also tied to the military and later tightly cooperated with the Facebook military operation (Mozur, 2018).

Although the Rohingya minority was the most frequent target by posts such as these, also Myanmar Muslim community as a whole was under attack. Another victim of smearing through disinformation was Aung San Suu Kyi, *de facto* a civilian leader of Myanmar's people. As for the correlation between hate speech with disinformation and the real-world events, there is a great example of 2017 military intelligence arm's campaign. It misused the 9/11 anniversary and pushed a false intel to both sides (Buddhists and Muslims) that they are preparing attacks on each other. That led to massive civil unrest mainly in the form of Buddhist protests. The goal was to create a sense of vulnerability and a need for Tatmadaw's protection (Mozur, 2018).

### **3.2. Buddhist Radicalism**

Ashin Wirathu, an ultranationalist influential Buddhist monk and one of the loudest anti-Muslim voices in Myanmar, is also an owner of one of the accounts deleted by Facebook. According to his rather radical view, Muslims are enemies of Buddhism, thus to the state. His hateful sermons and online posts had underlined the rise of extremism aimed at Muslims and the subsequent emergence of lynch mobs that killed over two hundred and forced roughly 150 thousand Muslims to flee. It would be considerably simplistic to argue that just Wirathu is to blame here. There are other factors such as demographic pressure from the neighbouring Bangladesh (which is predominantly Muslim). But the number of Wirathu's followers goes up to hundreds of thousands (even up to millions), thus he has a great mobilizing potential. Muslims are persecuted by radical Buddhists, who are represented by the movement called 969,<sup>13</sup> also in a non-violent way, e.g. by boycotting Muslim-made goods. Some of Wirathu's comments are openly approving towards genocide and mass murder as he labelled the 2013 massacre of Muslims (incl. children) in the city of Meiktila a show of strength<sup>14</sup> (Fuller, 2013). Wirathu's messages and preaching has not spread only via Facebook, but via other communication channels such as YouTube as well. There they spread more organically – mostly in the form of recorded speeches and interviews done by various media (Hodal, 2013).

Positions of the military, radical monks and key governmental figures are not the same. One example has already been mentioned – the Tatmadaw's covert smearing attacks against Aung San Suu Kyi. Wirathu, who holds a similar position to that of Tatmadaw,

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<sup>12</sup> That is why this paper needs to rely on secondary sources as the original posts are not accessible.

<sup>13</sup> To which Wirathu is a spiritual father.

<sup>14</sup> "If we are weak, our land will become Muslim" (Fuller, 2013).

made defamatory comments about the state counsellor (*de facto* the head of the government). Accusing her and her government of failing to secure the Buddhist state against the “Muslim onslaught” and the state counsellor of “sleeping with a foreigner”. Such conduct is criminal in Myanmar under the legal code; hence an arresting warrant was issued against him by the police. If sentenced, Wirathu would not go to jail for the first time. He spent time in prison during the junta’s reign as he was openly in dissent (Ellis-Petersen, 2019 cf. Beech & Nang, 2019).

### ***3.3. A Disunited Government***

By analysing Tatmadaw’s approach towards insurgencies (mainly the Rohingya one) and Wirathu’s approach towards Muslims, there is a pattern rising. No country’s (except maybe the toughest dictatorships) leadership and governmental assets are completely united across various policies and specific issues. Especially within the democratic states which is reflected by various models of policy analysis such as the group model (a struggle among interest groups that leads to a compromise) or the institutional model (which emphasises a crucial role of institutions). But serious discrepancies can be found within the Myanmar case. They are well manifested by the discussed personal attacks against Aung San Suu Kyi.

In a 2013 interview, the current state counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi mentioned an essential obstacle that makes this disunification possible. That is the undemocratic Constitution of 2008, a legacy of the junta period (BBC News, 2013). Based on this supreme legal document a top of an executive and legislative branch is formed. Not entirely by the election results. There is a president who is *de jure* a head of government; the state counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi who is *de facto* a prime minister; and two vice presidents. Huge powers are also given to the Commander-in-Chief of Tatmadaw who can appoint 25 % of members in the legislative assembly and, moreover, ministers of the Ministry of Defence. In some cases, the authority of the Commander-in-Chief even overrides that of the President. The Constitution also allows the military to take over and exercise State sovereign power in the state of emergency. Thus, Myanmar cannot be seen as a consolidated democracy, but an authoritarian regime in which the military is not under the government’s control (Tarabay, 2017).

The Aung San Suu Kyi’s position (that can be viewed as the one of the governments) is very moderate. She stands up against the violence of any kind and for a peaceful solution to the prolonged war. Though she denies it an ethnic-cleansing character. The state counsellor also labels Myanmar as a country on her way to democracy with restrictions such as a huge amount of power given to the military by the 2008 Constitution (BBC News, 2013).

## **4. An Official Approach? Bottom-up or Top-down?**

### ***4.1. A Structuralist Insight***

Let us now have a further look into the legislation (a major factor influencing the function of the establishment’s bodies) to address the third research goal. This chapter uses a more structuralist prism (how structure influences the conflict, the actors and their policies and procedures) than the previous chapter that focused more on the conduct of the actors.

The official website of the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (2019) states that three main duties of Tatmadaw are to “defend the State, to train and to carry out activities serving the interests of the people”. The Constitution of The Republic of The Union of Myanmar (2008: 2; Preamble) articulates that the National people “steadfastly adhere to the objectives of non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of National solidarity”. The third duty of Tatmadaw in combination with the quote from The Constitution *de facto* as well as *de jure* entitles Myanmar’s military to operate against inter-state insurgencies. As it is constitutionally anchored, the government forces are on the national level legitimated to conduct military operations against the insurgencies.

As no country can operate in a vacuum in today's globalized world, Myanmar is a subject to international law. In this case, it would be mainly the International Humanitarian Law (IHL; from the *jus in bello* branch) which regulates means that adversary sides can use against each other and generally sets rules of the game, so the damage inflicted to not-involved parties is kept to a minimum. Rule 1 of the Customary IHL, for example, says that all parties to the conflict must distinguish between civilians (non-targetable) and combatants (targetable). The second rule bans act or threat of violence with the primary purpose of spreading terror amongst civilians. These rules stem from the general principles of the IHL - the distinction between civilians and combatants and respective objects; indiscriminability, proportionality, precautions and precaution against the effects of an attack. (Customary IHL, 2019). Another important source of the International Law is the International Human Rights Law which, besides guaranteeing basic human laws to every human being on the planet, serves as a “prevention and punishment of atrocity crimes” such as genocide (United Nations, 2019a). As there are several accusations, such as in the Mozur’s (2018) article and those made by the UN officials, that the hate speech on Facebook in Myanmar led to genocide, it is appropriate to define this type of crime against humanity. The relevant document here is the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948; entry into force in 1951), Article II delineating genocide as “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group”, namely killing, causing serious bodily or mental harm, inflicting conditions of life calculated to physically destroying the target group, imposing prevention of births or forcibly transferring children to another group (United Nations, 2019b).

#### **4.2. Bottom-up or Top-down?**

Another missing piece in this equation is the disunification of the government and the military (see chapter 4.1.3). Myanmar’s approach towards counterinsurgency cannot be unified because the government, the military and radical religious figures such as Wirathu are not unified. Combining this argument with the influence of international law and community, the approach of hate spreading, and violence incitement cannot be rationally official.

Based on the analysis done in the last two paragraphs, the national constitutional level is so general that it would also allow rather an extreme interpretation of waging a war with propaganda inciting violence against a group that challenges the *status quo* given by the Constitution. But being subject to international law as well, Myanmar cannot, at least officially without a manoeuvring space for plausible deniability, openly support genocide against its minorities. Assuming governmental and military actors are rational, the



international reaction towards Myanmar officially inciting war crimes against its citizens would not be worth the benefits of such conduct. That would suggest a bottom-up process, i.e. incited by masses. However, that creates an impediment that cannot be solved in a dichotomic prism of the bottom-up or top-down process being just two poles with nothing in between. This impediment is a serious discrepancy between the premature conclusion that it is a bottom-up process and the reality represented by e.g. Mozur's (2018) article stating that hate speech was conducted by the Tatmadaw officials. We suggest viewing it as a number of possibilities that range between those two poles which reflects reality better as there is nothing in this world that is just black, or just white.

Then there is a question whether the online incitement of violence has been done in a bottom-up or top-down way. The disunification of the government plays a major role here as well. We argue that it was generally more of a top-down process with a portion of bottom-up support for several reasons. First, Tatmadaw was beyond reasonable doubt running a covert psychological operation in cyberspace to incite violence between Buddhists and Muslims. The government, respectively its civilian branch, officially holds an opposite position of non-violence, but it could not restrain the military due to its vast powers given by the constitutional order. Influential figures such as Ashin Wirathu also produced a top-down hate speech. However, strategies and manipulative tactics in cyberspace and in general public discourse of these radical actors could not have been so successful if there was not an exploitable sentiment of the masses, e.g. the feeling of a demographic pressure from neighbouring Muslim Bangladesh mentioned by Fuller (2018).

## 5. Applying Kilcullen and Mills: The “Good” Counterinsurgency

Specific examples and both official and unofficial approaches in countering the Myanmar insurgencies were discussed in the previous chapters providing data, on which Kilcullen's (2010) and Mills' (2011) concepts can be applied in order to provide a theoretical insight into the researched topic as well. Both concepts are rather normative as they describe how a successful COIN should be done within the Hearts and Minds paradigm.

For the purpose of a well-arranged text, let us operationalize both concepts into indicators comparable to the above-collected data. Regarding the Mills' (2011) the indicators would be securing the local population, inciting insurgents to fight among themselves, the unification of agencies (actors) on the side of counterinsurgents and establishment and “bug bounties” programmes. Kilcullen's (2010: 1-45) indicators would be securing the well-being of the population, keeping the international audience in mind, conduct in such a way that would not antagonize it and not attacking the enemy, but the enemy's strategy.

Both authors emphasise the importance of the local (civilian) population and its well-being and not targeting. That is in a direct contradiction to the conduct of Tatmadaw and its covert operation that has targeted the Muslim community as a whole, not just the combatants. That also goes against the Hearts and Minds paradigm which would rather deescalate the conflict situation rather than just the opposite. Moreover, the fact that the operation was done in cyberspace is not relevant here as it had direct real-world consequences. The same applies to Ashin Wirathu his radical Buddhist rhetoric. Inciting insurgents to fight among themselves is very hard to measure here as, given by its nature, this paper cannot prove a causal relationship between anti-Muslim propaganda upon which would non-Muslim insurgents attack Muslim insurgents. Nevertheless, as the

Kachin or the Shan people are predominantly Buddhist societies, it is very likely that the hate speech had some effects meaning that this “good” COIN practice cannot be considered as a failure. Unlike the unification of COIN actors (which is widely discussed in chapter 3.3). Due to the structural factors such as the legacy of long junta reign or the 2008 Constitution which both give the military a very special and powerful status, COIN Burmese actors (namely the government, the military and influential religious figures) are anything but unified in countering the insurgency. An eloquent proof is smearing the state counsellor done by the military that would, in a consolidated democracy, fall under government’s control. This disunity also affects the way the international community views Myanmar. As much as the civilian and voted government would want to change the COIN approach in order to look good again in the eyes of the global community, the constitutional order and the uncontrollable military it produces would not allow it. Tatmadaw’s interests and mission is to protect Burmese people against the insurgents and there is no control mechanism that would restrict means to do so. The “bug bounties” programmes function basically as a reward for desirable conduct. It can be applied to the military by which a reward can in the wider sense mean not being punished for noncompliance with the orders. Mozur (2018) writes about soldiers who felt under a huge amount of pressure as they stood between their superiors and their orders to smear Aung San and their loyalty to the democratically elected government.

## **Conclusion**

Given the nature of this paper, there are limits to its conclusions. For more telling results a content analysis would be better but there is an obstacle in retrieving the primary sources, e.g. posts on the Ashin Wirathu’s Facebook page that has been blocked and rendered inaccessible. Reliance on secondary sources is amplified by the Burmese language which is very complex and hard-to-translate even with the use of modern technologies.

One of the key factors that underline all answers to this paper’s research questions is the disunity of the examined actors (the democratically elected government, the military and the radical Buddhists). The main discrepancy is between the government and the military. The government holds a moderate approach towards the insurgencies. But they are not servile, which means the government is not in direct opposition to the military, rather somewhere in the middle adhering to Hearts and Minds (condemning violence against civilians) while holding quite a firm attitude towards the insurgent combatants. Tatmadaw’s unspoken, but the undisputed strategy in cyberspace is the Iron Fist one. Calling upon the indiscriminate attacks (in extreme cases even genocide) on the adversary population in the form of hate speech, mostly on Facebook as it is the primary source of information for around 18 million Burmese internet users. Hand in hand goes this approach with radical Buddhists attitude such as the Ashin Wirathu’s one, which is very popular (from hundreds of thousands up to millions of followers and supporters). The online (virtual) activities have also serious impact in the form of real-world events which makes hate speech and incitement to violence very dangerous.

The military’s power is not very restricted on the national legal level, but it is affected by international law (concretely the IHL). This factor combined with the government being against the indiscriminate use of violence set some limits for the Tatmadaw’s conduct. Steps were taken to obscure an institutionalized form of hate speech spreading in order to carry out covert and false-flag (they hid their identity and posed as entertainment figures) operations inciting the very indiscriminate violence against Burmese citizens

(Muslims in general, not just Rohingya) that the government and the global audience is condemning. Based on this, the whole hate speech phenomenon was a result of a top-down process with exploiting sentiment of the Buddhist masses that they are under Muslim onslaught which brings a bottom-up factor into the equation as well.

If compared to the normative theoretical counterinsurgency concepts such as Mills' (2011) and Kilcullen's (2010), the Burmese insurgency has failed. It will keep failing, until not just the root causes of the conflict in the peace process are addressed, but also the structural factors (mainly the constitutional order) that make possible an application of Iron Fist strategy that is not possible in the modern globalized world due to the prospective international reaction.

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