

Comments on Launch of Special Issue of IJBS on Military Deserters for RCSD 26 January 2023
Mike Charney

Thanks for inviting me to speak.

When I was asked to add an additional chapter to provide context for the special issue, I was left with a very broad remit.

For some context means one thing, for others something else.

What has been missing in the discourse on the current situation in Myanmar or rather for a very long time, has been a context that includes the perspective of the perpetrator as well as the victim, the military as well as the civilian population.

The scholarship has been bifurcated into work that identifies military transgressions and tries to understand how civilians respond to and deal with their plight, on the one hand, and scholarship that tried to understand why the military does what it does, often at least unconsciously adopting the perspective of the military as well, and at best delivers lip service to the negative impact on the population but otherwise touches them only with calloused fingers.

This is a mistake for several reasons.

First it does nothing to help us understand why we have arrived at the situation we are in (answering both why the military has done what it has done and why this has hurt the civilian population).

Second, as a result of the first, it makes it much more difficult to resolve the impasse we have been in since February 2021.

Third, and most importantly, in the most hyper-unpoliticised terms possible, there is no military side and civilian side.

We have, following longterm Burmese history, one part of the population, which controls the military institutionally and one part of the population that does not and within each set are a wide range of overlaps, fissures, and subgroupings.

It is better perhaps to see two competing constellations of families, networks, and interests.

What we call the transition government was no road to Democracy but rather a compromise that brought both of these constellations together.

What brought the compromise to an end in February 2021 is often determined by one's affiliation with or support either group NOT with an attempt to understand both sides.

AND please note as some did not the first time I raised this necessity nearly two years ago, as a historian, understanding does NOT mean sympathizing with both sides, it simply means judging, as a barrister might do, as accurately as possible motive.

It also means trying to discern why generals, who act in self-serving ways can at the same time believe that they are doing their duty, according to their imaginary of the country and its security, can still command the loyalty of so many within the military and a significant portion of the civilian population.

And the latter element, the pro-military element among the civilian population has been there for a very long time, as Dr. Bo Bo has shown.

And why this perspective is at odds with that of so many Burmese and the NLD and other Democratic groups, and their imaginaries of the country and its security and well-being.

And it raises the issue of vertical depth. As mentioned, we can see in the current civil war, or revolution, two constellations of interests set horizontally against each other.

But if we crawl to the edge of each and peer down, it is difficult to see whether there is cohesion between the upper echelons and low echelons, on both sides, within the military and the NLD, in how they perceive the country.

And this is why the current volume is so important. We have here the accounts of numerous members of the military who left it for different reasons, but amongst them was their belief that the leadership at the top of the military was acting in ways not in consonance with their own imaginary of the military in the country.

We probably have to have a look at those the military has been able to draw back into its political constellation, not just for balance but for a reality check.

And the military may not have success in rebuilding its credentials as we have seen with ASEAN's responses and Prof. Tun Myint's observation that many Burmese have pushed the military outside of their thinking altogether (in the sense of being beyond the pale).

So my piece in the volume tries to deal with this context, the larger context of perspective and the imaginary of the generals rather than some sort of crude apologia.

On the other hand, it encourages a look at the military looking not so much at the strength of its constellation but at its fragility and if we can understand the degree to which the dissonance between its imaginary and its operations in practice is perceived by its own members, amongst the lower echelons, we can better predict the timing of its impending collapse.