

## Burmese Military Rebrands, But Never Reforms

April 2026

### Commentary by Burma Campaign UK

General Min Aung Hlaing, who ran the military regime in Burma yesterday, is running the military regime in Burma today.

The new title of President could be viewed as a story about General Min Aung Hlaing's personal ambitions. He does like his titles. Military-controlled media have recently been calling him: "Chairman of the State Security and Peace Commission Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Thadoe Maha Thray Sithu Thadoe Thiri Thudhamma Min Aung Hlaing."

In fact, while General Min Aung Hlaing's personal ambitions obviously play a key role in his decisions, this latest rebranding is all about preserving the rule of the military as an institution. (Note: Min Aung Hlaing retains the title of General even though he has retired as commander in chief).

The Burmese military have ruled Burma for 59 years (from 1962, not including five years of a government led by the National League for Democracy). They have survived this long in part because they are flexible, employing many different forms and systems of military rule.

This includes political party fronts such as the Burmese Socialist Program Party and Union Solidarity and Development Party, and numerous front administrations including the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), front regimes such as that led

by General Thein Sein, the State Administration Council (SAC), and the State Security and Peace Commission (SSPC).

It does not matter who happens to be head of the Burmese military at any given time, or what name they use for their proxy administration, it is the military as an institution which has ruled Burma for almost 60 years. They will always prioritise their own power and control and pursue their own racist Bamar Buddhist nationalist extremist vision of Burma.

At the same time, the leadership of the Burmese military are always corrupt and nepotistic, enriching themselves and the business cronies they depend on. It is not just a brutal military dictatorship, it is a massive criminal enterprise which has for decades stolen the natural resources of Burma, has been involved in the drugs trade and scam centres, illegal international arms trading, and which has distorted the entire economy of Burma for its own benefit.

The Burmese military will never reform. The only thing that changes are the forms of political system it uses to ensure its survival, and the tactics it uses to try to relieve pressure from the domestic population and international community.

In a great many ways, the military appear to be trying to replicate some of the success they achieved with the sham reform process of 2010-2021.

We detailed this in our briefing paper, The Burmese Military's 'Elections': New Date, New Danger, Same Sham, warning of tactics the military is likely to employ. Sure enough, the military is already using some of these tactics, including the mass release of political prisoners.

That briefing paper is available here:  
[https://burmacampaign.org.uk/burma\\_briefing/the-burmese-militarys-elections-new-date-new-danger-same-sham/](https://burmacampaign.org.uk/burma_briefing/the-burmese-militarys-elections-new-date-new-danger-same-sham/)

Too many times in the past the international community has been unable to distinguish between rebranding and reform. Or if they do, they take a 'something is better than nothing' approach even though it's a something they would never dream of accepting in their own country.

The lack of institutional memory in foreign ministries around the world also benefits the Burmese military. They recycle the same tricks over and over again and diplomats, mostly in post covering Burma for only 2-4 years at a time, think something new is happening.

We tell them it's groundhog day, old wine in an old bottle, or history repeating itself, but they don't listen. They deploy the phrases that democracy and human rights activists have been hearing for decades: "We have to wait and see", "We have to look for any opening and encourage it."

Burmese activists have compared the Burmese military to a carnivorous plant found in Burma, the pitcher plant (often called the water jug plant in Burma), which has a liquid which smells sweet to insects but digests them when they get too close. In this analogy, United Nations and other envoys are the insects being devoured.

A predication that the Burmese military cannot be defeated and therefore have to be accommodated has underpinned international policy making towards Burma for years.

Instead of seeing their role as assisting the people of Burma to remove a corrupt oppressive criminal institution which has undermined the country for decades, they tell the people of Burma they have to have dialogue

and compromise with their oppressor, even though their oppressor never compromises themselves.

This is what General Min Aung Hlaing and his fellow generals will be counting on now. That diplomats will accept the superficial rebranding and public relations gestures and wipe the slate clean.

There is a significant change in the playbook though compared to post 2010 efforts. At that time a lot more effort was made to try to persuade the international community that there was significant change coming. More effort with the elections and political party participation, and more effort with international media. And of course, Than Shwe stepping down and being replaced by General Thein Sein, who has a brutal history of human rights abuses and sexual violations by soldiers under his command, but also experience in sweet-talking diplomats.

This time round the same general is in charge. It's much harder to present yourself as a reforming regime when yesterday's dictator is today's dictator.

What does the limited effort in presenting elections as credible, and the continued role of Min Aung Hlaing mean?

Part is of course his ambition, but part must be that the military have calculated they can get away with it. They have the strong backing of China, Russia and India, three regional allies that are much more assertive internationally than they were 16 years ago. The military may feel they don't need to make as many concessions as they did last time round, as they don't need western countries.

They may also be calculating that the way in which western countries are no longer prioritising human rights and democracy in Burma means they don't need to make concessions, western countries will go along with their sham and start normalising relations.

The Burmese military have watched how implementation of sanctions slowed to a dribble and then stopped altogether. They are watching

European countries close embassies, and how mentions of Burma have fallen off joint statements at international venues like the G7.

It might be that the USA, UK and EU are willing to give the genocide general, as Rohingya activists call Min Aung Hlaing, another chance, but most people in Burma will not. They will keep fighting, keep protesting and keep building new local administrations and institutions in areas freed from Burmese military rule. They will keep building a bottom-up federal democracy.

The Burmese military, with all its different forms, titles and leaders over almost sixty years, and with all the backing from China, Russia, India and others, has never been able to defeat the people of Burma, and it never will.



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