How the Myanmar Military Recruits its Soldiers

Yay Khal
Sergeant
High-Tech Communications and
Electronics Production and Research Command

Abstract

The Myanmar military has rotten foundations. It cannot improve itself to better serve the people and the nation without changing the way that it recruits its members. This article lists some of the features of the military's recruitment, including propaganda, incentives, scams and kidnappings. At the time of writing in 2022 there had been no improvement since the 2021 coup, with military authorities forcing family members of currently serving soldiers to undertake weapons training to counter reduced recruitment and increased defection numbers.

~

Every country wants autonomy. Most countries regard their militaries as integral and the bulwark of the nation state. Since ancient times, kingdoms have strengthened their militaries by accumulating people and weaponry and then defended their territories. If you ask why kingdoms do such things, it is merely because they are made up of human beings—individuals full of anger and ignorance—never content and filled with greed and biases.

Our country is also like this. We have invaded other countries in the past and been invaded and colonized ourselves. After colonization, we began the process of building a modernized, skilled, and combat-capable military that could help achieve independence. It was alongside independence that the Myanmar military was born. At its birth, the military was actually beneficial for our country.

However, over time, the disguise that the military wore has washed off and its real face has emerged. This is primarily due to the military's leadership. Authorities have used the institution for their own benefit and have 'helped' the country and its people for that same benefit. They have relentlessly deployed the military's power against perceived internal rather than external threats. These military leaders have continuously sought to gather manpower, weaponry, and money, which they use to fulfill their own quotas and requirements.

In the early days, the military would selectively recruit only those who genuinely loved the military institution and had a patriotic mindset. However, this process has gradually devolved into desperately trying to persuade people to join, and now even paying for recruits—a far cry from carefully selecting individuals.[1] However, there are a few places where recruits are still carefully selected—namely, the Defense Services Academy (DSA), the Defense Services Technology Academy (DSTA), the Defense Services Medical Academy (DSMA), military nurses, and so on—places from which individuals go on to become officers after graduation. Without pretense, the military endeavors to recruit anyone it can get its hands to fill all levels of its academies and basic military training centers. The only exceptions are those individuals deemed either 'unfit' or physically deformed.

There are many people who want to join the military through its officer-level schools, but no one wants to join as a basic soldier, because the gap between officers and the lower ranks is vast. Lower ranks are discriminated against in essentially all areas: clothing/uniforms, accommodation access and facilities, benefits, and the like. The military is purely focused on numbers because the military structure itself is a tool for military authorities to use for their own benefit. Base commanders use base funds to further their own interests, order lower-

[1] This article was written before the partial activation of the 2010 People's Military Service Law in 2024 that subjects most men under 35 years of age to two years of military service. At the time of publication, men over 35 are being forcibly recruited into neighborhood pro-military paramilitaries.

ranked soldiers to do errands for them and then grab everything for their own pockets by abusing their position and power. For example, base commanders take all benefits for granted and then create a monopoly on all shops and farming (agriculture and animals) within their respective base areas. Some soldiers notice this and feel aggrieved—they then rarely want their own children to join the military as lower-ranked soldiers. Military parents instead want their offspring to become officers.

Because of such situations, the military is now facing a scarcity of lower-ranked soldiers; nobody wants to join the military, and resignations are high. To combat this, the military has put out orders pressuring bases to recruit at least twelve soldiers every year. Of course, the military authorities need more people to help them line their pockets and enrich the generals; hence, any random person, regardless of their personal attitude, may be recruited so long as they can carry out tasks and resemble a human being. In the military's eyes, soldiers are people working for them—subordinates who can be ordered around to do anything for them—and can be utilized to make money.

The military recruits individuals only to work towards the benefit of the military organization itself, rather than for the purpose of protecting their own country. If what the army was doing was right, everyone in the country would want to join the military. Everyone would join to serve the country and its people. But the military leaders are using soldiers to pursue their own personal benefits, so no one wants to sign up.

Consequently, the military uses incentives—financial and otherwise—to persuade people to enlist. The military also threatens people who have committed crimes to get them into the institution. Even if an individual has not committed any crime, recruiters concoct scenarios in order to trap the targeted person into joining the military. New recruits have also been 'bought' or paid to join. The following sections are some of the features of recruitment in the Myanmar military.

Recruiting New Soldiers from Higher Education Institutions

The main recruitment pools for the military are military academies. There are many military academies where one can apply after finishing high school. These include the DSA (for combat operations), DSTA (for example, to be a military engineer), the DSMA (to be a military doctor etc.), the military nurses training school, the sergeant clerk training school, the midwives training school—and so on. These institutions recruit thousands of people every year and provide over 60 percent of new military recruits.

We must ask ourselves: How can they recruit so many people? Why do so many people enter these schools? The main reasons are because the military is very good at systematically spreading propaganda and self-promotion. Myanmar does not have a good education system—if you want to study at university, you will need to invest a lot of money, there is no guaranteed job after you graduate, and most likely all you will end up with is an expensive graduation photograph hanging in your house. The military knows this, and so it persuades young people to enlist by offering not only a degree, but also a salary while in school, and after graduation, a position within the military, and so on. Parallel to this, the military also creates and broadcasts movies showcasing military-related subject matter designed to persuade viewers that soldiers are grand and respectable, further persuading them to join these schools.

Recruitment Without Proper Due Diligence

Some people join the military because they can no longer live as civilians for various reasons, for example, because they were being charged with committing a crime. Others joined because they did not want to work, always drinking and poorly behaved, and ended up with few alternatives. These types of people get treated very nicely in the beginning. The military provides them

with everything they need. It does this because it wants to use these individuals—it sees them as an investment. However, in reality, these recruits' lives echo the saying, "They started boxing because they had no food to eat, but then they ended up losing all their teeth for chewing food," because the military's kindness only lasts up until the military oath is taken. After that, the true nature of the military emerges. After the oath is taken, military actors will say things like, "Now that you have taken the oath, if you leave, you will be known as a deserter," because they know that they can now do whatever they want with these new recruits. From this point onwards, the military starts behaving as it normally would.

Recruits get portions of their salaries deducted instead of receiving full financial support from the military. They end up asking for money from their families, some go into debt, others continuously do unrelated work for their superiors, and still these superiors act as if they are personally providing these recruits with their salaries rather than the money coming from state revenues. If individuals refuse to do things for them, military superiors physically abuse them, on top of punishing them in accordance with the military rules.

The training schools are the absolute worst, no matter which training school you attend; everybody is constantly eyeing the salaries and benefits. As I mentioned above, military superiors recruit new people for their own sakes. They basically get money simply for presenting newly enlisted individuals (or "showing someone a monkey in exchange for rice"). If you want more money, then you need to present more people; thus, the military tries to recruit anyone it can find.

How does this work, you might ask? Well, whenever there is a new recruit, funds are provided to support that soldier. Military seniors exploit these windfalls. There are official pay deductions from every soldier, the first of which is a portion of the soldier's salary going into Myanma Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL) for investment. The military tells these soldiers that "MEHL has plans for (you) and our leaders will make sure the plans are followed through." The profits from MEHL are only

paid out once a year, and soldiers are not allowed to withdraw their funds. Lower-ranked soldiers, to their disadvantage, are not aware that they are being used—they actually spend their lives thanking their superiors for this unjust treatment.

The second official pay deduction is the life insurance fee that soldiers pay. These funds go to the Aung Myint Mo company, which is owned by the military leader's son. This life insurance is just for soldiers from support bases, and not for those from infantry bases. Infantry soldiers have to go to war, but support troops do not; therefore, the military only asks for life insurance premiums from those at support bases. Surely infantry soldiers should realize what is going on. They risk their lives fighting at the frontline—even perhaps sacrificing their lives—but they do not receive any benefits and instead are discriminated against. If they wanted to be resentful, they most definitely could and should be.

Finally, there are the savings pay deductions. The military states that the forced savings are for the soldiers themselves, for when emergency situations arise. It is actually worse in the training schools, speaking from my own personal experience. There were thousands of trainees when I was undergoing training. We were all made to deposit 20,000 Myanmar Kyat into our savings accounts. We were told that the savings were for us to spend when we went home on leave; that we could actually take the money out when we were about to go off base. However, military superiors ensure that they personally benefit from these savings even when handing out this money to the trainees going on leave. The way these seniors achieve this is by depositing all of the trainees' money into their own personal bank accounts. By holding this money themselves, they are the ones accruing interest on it.

Also, when I spoke to one of the more switched-on lower-ranked soldiers, he told me that his base commander's wife was loaning out soldiers' enforced savings deposits to other people at even higher interest rates. The original owners of the money were aware that she was doing so, but they were too afraid to confront her. Lower-ranked soldiers face issues like this all the

time. I really want them to understand how they are mistreated and to resent these injustices. These are just some of the incidents I experienced at training school.

Regarding our savings, when we finish school and reach our respective bases, the savings are then moved to Myawaddy Bank. Here, soldiers no longer receive their due accrued interest and, in order to withdraw their own money, they now need signatures from the clerk, the base warrant officer, the base adjutant, the company commander, the department head, and all other levels of commanders. You need to present yourself as pitiful and obedient in order to be allowed to withdraw your own money. Even then, military superiors will only let you withdraw the money if they feel like it. Occasionally, soldiers might have to sit through long speeches from their superiors, but still end up not receiving permission to withdraw their funds. When you are actually allowed to take your money out, you are then required to give these higher-ups some 'tea money' or 'betel-chewing money' for the trouble.

Those in the military are becoming more aware of such incidents, and that their own money is being used against them ("being stabbed with their own bone"). All of you readers who are in the military are much more knowledgeable about the unfairness and the exploitation that goes on within the organization. You should resent everything if you think about it all in depth. I want to encourage and recommend that you try to see the underlying truths and prepare as quickly as you can to change these unjust practices.

Inventing Fake Cases and Recruiting by Force

This issue is quite infuriating. There are officers and lower-ranked soldiers assigned exclusively to recruitment activities in every base. This is because, as I mentioned above, recruitment personnel are under pressure to meet quotas for new recruits each year. If base commanders do it themselves and do not meet the quota, they will be summoned and punished. Therefore, base commanders assign these recruitment duties to other officers

and lower-ranked soldiers at the base so that they avoid such punishments and look good in front of their superiors.

There is pressure placed on those assigned to handle recruitment. If recruiters are not meeting their quotas, they conjure up deceptive schemes. They threaten drunks sleeping at train stations and coerce them into enlisting in the military and create other fake scenarios and cases to frighten people into joining.

One example of a scam is when villagers from nearby areas come to steal military property. The military ignores the act of stealing itself, when the villagers are committing the crime. However, the following day, soldiers threaten these thieves with the laws they have broken, saying things like, "You will go to prison for what you did. If you don't want to go to prison, do you want to join the military instead?" This is just an example; however, these incidents are happening on the ground. When I was assigned to my base right after graduation, I was ordered to join martial arts training. While I was there, I talked to other soldiers at the training, and I asked each of them how they ended up in the military. The first person I asked was called Moe Dee. His response shocked me.

Moe Dee was recruited by force. On his last day as a civilian, he was sleeping at the train station because he had lost his wallet and was not able to buy a ticket to where he wanted to go. Some people from the military recruitment team took him away by force—essentially, kidnapped him. From there, he was forced to join the military at the recruitment center in Tangyingone, Yangon. He refused to join in the beginning, and they detained him instead of letting him go back to his house because they were worried that he would expose the scam. He and others who refused to join the military were then indirectly tortured. When they were fed, they would receive rice that was full of stones and shells; for meals, they would receive rotten and dried fish. The area where they slept was made up of floppy bamboo beds full of bed bugs. It was barely better than being in a prison. Stuck in such conditions, they were eventually coerced into joining the military.

Recruiting People by Paying Them

These kinds of cases normally happen in bases with more revenue streams. To clarify: bases able to earn money on the side. These are normally navy, air force, and support bases, as well as army corps engineer groups, the military police, ordnance bases, and so on. They often pay people to enlist. For example, I have witnessed them paying fees of 1 million Myanmar Kyat for individuals who have finished high school. When I attended military training, soldiers proudly boasted about how much they were paid when they joined up and what kind of benefits they were going to get from joining the military. It was very disappointing. In addition to that, recruitment bases keep these new recruits like pigs to eventually "sell off." At the No. 2 Htee Taw Moe recruitment base, the military would keep new recruits separate from the other soldiers. Bases that needed soldiers and could spare the money would go to a recruitment base such as Htee Taw Moe and buy recruits like they were shopping for everyday goods. The military uses these methods, basically official and legal human trafficking, to recruit trainees.

Military Recruitment in 2022

It has been more than a year since the 2021 coup and national crisis. We, the people who do not like nor want military rule, are still rebelling against the military with everything that we have. The military is suffering from this massive backlash because it has ignored what the people want and has instead done whatever it wanted. The backlash is causing losses of personnel within the military and hence, a weakening of the institution itself. There are more and more soldiers defecting from the Myanmar military, which is estimated to have approximately 280,000 to 350,000 soldiers. However, these numbers are only on paper; in reality, the numbers are actually much lower than that. The increasing number of people defecting has had a great impact on the military and created internal dilemmas for those military personnel who have remained behind. The military cannot

support their current in-service soldiers adequately; it is also struggling internally and is therefore using multiple methods to find new recruits. The military faces immense hatred from the public and is encountering even greater challenges in recruiting new people. Previously, although it was challenging to recruit privates, there were plenty of people applying for all the military schools, including the DSA. Now, even these famous schools have almost no new applicants.

The Myanmar DSA, which is as old as the U.S.A. West Point Military Academy, is experiencing a year with its lowest ever number of new recruits in the institution's entire history. There are fewer people joining the military and it has also become increasingly difficult for the military to find new recruits due to the horrible post-coup situation which, of course, includes all the atrocities and killing actioned by this regime.

Because the military has run out of ideas and has no new recruits, it is now eyeing military family members from every base as possible recruits. These days, soldiers' wives and children are instructed to carry out base-related work because the military does not have enough people to do these tasks. The wives and children of soldiers are forced to work even on the weekend. The military foresaw what was coming, and so it started providing military training to the family members at the bases about two months after the coup. Even worse, these women and children are also provided with guns and can be seen acting as guards at some security checkpoints. The military is providing dependents with military training including using firearms.

Previously, the military would only allow such non-soldiers to use blank shells instead of real bullets, and those being trained would have to make the shooting sounds with their mouths (I.e., saying "bang, bang, bang!"). Now, the military is officially letting soldiers' family members (who are not military personnel) handle firearms and training them how to do so. Basically, the military is not only making the father sacrifice his life but also using the wife and children for the institution's benefit (like "buying one slave and getting the others for free"). The military flatters family members by saying things like, "think of the base as your

home and protect it, you're important people, it's all in your hands," and so on, trying to persuade them.

It is clear that the military is going all-out. The numbers of soldiers are getting lower and lower because there are only service members leaving the military, nobody new is joining, and many soldiers are dying in battles. Therefore, the military is using the wives and children as its reserve force. It is also using fathers against their non-willing dependents who are not so easily coerced, and are arming them forcefully. As such, the military is committing crimes in plain sight.

Retired veterans thought they would be able to rest after many years of service, but under this military leader, they are also forced to work. The military threatens and forces retired soldiers to serve again by telling them that if they do not come back, they will lose their pensions, or that they will be charged with treason. Retired soldiers are thereby forced back onto the path to death. Retired veterans are experiencing double the consequences.

To all the dependent children who are living in the barracks, try not to limit your thinking by only listening to what the military is telling you and believing wrong is right—you must think critically and listen carefully to what is going on in the outside world. The military machine is not only using your father, but it is also using you—it is sending all of you off to die.

Why is the military working against the country instead of working towards its benefit? Why is it killing civilians? Why are soldiers incompetent and without the skills they need? Why are soldiers dying en masse whenever and wherever there is conflict?

The answer to all of these questions is: because the military's fundamental infrastructure is rotten. A building needs to be of good quality, strong and sturdy, from its very foundations. If we want our country's military to be a good one, then we must change the fundamentals of how it recruits its members.