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Policy Regime Analysis of Border Security Governance in Myanmar: A Preliminary Case Study of Myawaddy (2020–2021)

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This study is a case-study research that explores the anatomy of Myanmar's border security governance using the Myawaddy Township as an exploratory case study. To explore how the Burmese borderlands, represented by Myawaddy, have been governed, the policy–regime approach is adopted as a conceptual framework to illustrate the idiosyncrasies, including relevant parties and their interactions. It was found that the following actors are involved in the security governance of borderlands: ethnic armed organisation, local bureaucratic agencies, Border Guard Forces (BGFs) and foreign interest groups. *Prima facie*, civil government agencies have performed their duties of overseeing border activities; however, they appear to have only *de jure* authority, serving as soft infrastructures for the lawful border economy. Contrarily, Karen BGF leaders, appointed by the Tatmadaw (i.e. Myanmar armed forces), have held *de facto* authority, controlling and benefiting from the border's shadow economy—which is marked by gambling businesses—as well as from running protection rackets. Still, the BGF units in Myawaddy have retained a considerable degree of autonomy without necessarily following the Tatmadaw's order. In a nutshell, border security governance in Myanmar's Myawaddy consists of several governing modes existing in parallel and, hence, it is prismatic in nature .

Keywords: Border Guard Force, border security governance, Myanmar, Myawaddy

In Myanmar, a multitude of underlying problems—notably, ethnic exclusion from state power, unresolved ethnic group grievances, competition over scarce resources, fractured leadership in state administration and growing foreign influences—have provided fault lines for violent conflict. There are approximately 135 ethnic groups in Myanmar, most of which have played a role in armed hostilities at one point in time (International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS], 2021). In its report, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) identified 20 ethnic-armed organisations (EAOs) as key conflict parties in Myanmar besides the Tatmadaw or Myanmar armed forces (IISS, 2020). Characteristically, EAOs have controlled vast areas of land, especially along borderlands, and run parallel administration

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systems with their own militias (Bashar & Wai, 2016). Such complications have become more difficult to manage because in Myanmar, modernisation (i.e. the installation of modern political structures such as government internal security controls) has remained incomplete, flawed and fragile. Given the complex situations, learning what has transpired in such border security settings is indeed a difficult but still necessary task.

The ongoing armed conflicts in Myanmar, fuelled by the Tatmadaw coup in Naypyidaw in February 2021, followed by the brutal crackdowns on anti-coup protests across the country (Ardeth, 2021), have complicated the picture of the country's border security actors as well as that of their governing patterns. The border security actors include inter alia, EAOs, Border Guard Force (BGF) battalions and other semi-private militias (see Ong, 2021). Yet, little is known about how borderlands have been governed, and thus, border security governance has become an urgent issue for exploratory policy research.

This study sheds light on Myanmar's border security governance by using Myawaddy as an exploratory case study. The Myawaddy Township was selected as a case study for exploration due to its significance and dynamism. For example, politico-economically, two border checkpoints between Myanmar and Thailand are located in the township. Additionally, the township has recently made headlines worldwide due to grey activities growing in such area, which may thereby reflect how border security was governed.

Being an exploratory case-study research, our research questions are straightforward, namely:

- What parties are involved in border security governance in Myawaddy?
- What does Myawaddy's border security governance look like?

Since the goal is 'exploratory,' both case and approach are selectively used based on situations examined. To explore the border security governance in the non-Western context, political sociology is deliberately applied, owing to its interdisciplinary nature (see Hicks et al., 2003). Specifically, Wilson's (2000) policy–regime approach is used as a conceptual framework to map the institutional essence of Myanmar's border security governance using the case of the Myawaddy Township.

Policy–Regime Approach

Conducting research on the political sociology of border governance in general, and on border security in particular, in developing countries is challenging. This is partially due to the fact that for non-democratic or hybrid regimes, borderland management is highly securitised and is therefore considered one element of territorial security (Can & Çağla, 2016). This is partly because of the politico-economic dynamics within and surrounding the border areas (Ackleson, 2011). Entering and exploring borderlands in Myanmar, a long-closed country, has become even more difficult since the short-lived elected government was recently toppled by the military (Dussud, 2021). Despite this however, as Ackleson (2011) suggested, border politics and security can be understood in terms of policy regimes. In doing so, Wilson's (2000) policy–regime approach seems to work well in explaining multi-dimensional issues such as border security governance (see Ackleson, 2011). Therefore, his approach is applied as a conceptual lens in this study, and is summarised below.

Borrowing the tenets of regime theory and widely used in the study of international relations (Kratochwil & Ruggie, 1986), Wilson's (2000) policy–regime lens approaches the unit of analysis differently than do prevailing policy analysis tools. For instance, rather than

beginning with one particular policy that is treated analytically as a study object, policy–regime perspectives—including Wilson's (2000)—start with a specific set of public problems—technically referred to as an issue area—that includes cybercrime, unlawful immigration and viral epidemics. The perspectives then identify and describe a constellation of attributes that make up the specified issue area (May & Jochim, 2013). Regarding the definition of policy regimes, the present study relied heavily—albeit not exclusively—on the paper by Wilson (2000) in which policy regimes are concisely defined as institutional governing arrangements that 'are organised around specific issue areas' (p. 257).

According to Wilson (2000), policy regimes have four dimensions: (1) arrangement of power; (2) policy paradigm; (3) government organisation; and (4) policy goals, rules and routines. These dimensions are detailed as follows.

Arrangement of power

This involves actors playing roles in a given area of issues. The arrangement of power can exist in a variety of patterns. For instance, there may be one private sector or a few interest groups, while the state limits its role to rule-making and adjudication. In some circumstances however, the state may do the opposite. Specifically, it can serve as a power broker or a key player, directly managing the affairs of particular public issues along with one or several allied interest groups.

Policy paradigm

This dimension is the presiding paradigm whereby many problems are defined and certain strands of public policy are considered preferable in resolving problematic issues. The policy paradigm is also referred to as interpretive structures. In foreign policy research, for example, the structures of interpretation have been particularly highlighted (e.g. Norris, 1997). Policy paradigms are shaped and disseminated by several kinds of actors ranging from practitioners to media to scholarly observers.

Government organisation

This dimension is responsible for policymaking arrangements and their implementation structure. The former includes inter alia, a group of decision- and policymakers (from national executives to technocrats) and a variety of institutions (from parliamentary committees to government bureaus). Meanwhile, implementation structure includes policy-implementing agencies at multiple levels.

Policy goals, rules and routines

The final dimension is a policy by itself, and specifically, it embodies the policy–regime goals. Further, this dimension incorporates the rules and routines administered by the policy-implementing agencies. All of these factors functionally reinforce the policy's legitimation.

All dimensions of the policy regime tend to bring about long-term stability, making a substantive change in the policy regime less likely. Nevertheless, the policy regime change might take place under some conditions such as a legitimacy crisis or power shift. This change might be triggered by precipitating factors such as major international turning points, which are best exemplified by the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

Method

This study employed an exploratory case study method (Gerring, 2006), and the case was interpreted through a conceptual lens to explore its idiosyncrasies (see Stake, 1978). That said, applying the policy–regime model enabled us to frame our description of Myawaddy's border security governance using a set of hypothetical guidelines. Notwithstanding this, an in-situ description of interactions among actors noted during fieldwork was weighted equally in our assessment.

The data collection was carried out during two visits to the Myawaddy–Mae Sot border and nearby communities in May 2021. This fieldwork was conducted by the first and fourth authors, who are fluent in Burmese and familiar with field research along the Myanmar–Thailand border areas. During the field visits, unstructured interviews were held with 10 stakeholders, the minimum sample size for policy-related research, as recommended by Dunn (2008). The stakeholders included border officials, army officers, local politicians and local business people. Due to the sensitivity of the relevant issues such as illicit border activities, all informants participated in the interviews anonymously. Given the fast-growing severity of the situations in Myawaddy and wider Myanmar during the time of writing (i.e., from June 2021 to January 2022), interviews cited in this paper are deliberately brief so as to ensure the safety and confidentiality of the informants. In addition, secondary types of data, including media outlet reports and scholarly publications, were used as supplementary sources.

The present study is limited to the period from 2020 to mid-2021. Given the limitations of data collection (especially border-crossing difficulties) and in citing the data (due to escalating armed clashes in Myawaddy Township and wider regions), the account that follows should be regarded as tentative.

Ethical Approval

The ethical approval for this study was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Thammasat University (approval number: 044/2564), while the need for informed consent was waived by the Committee at the request of the authors.

Study Area

The study area was the township of Myawaddy, the only township in Myawaddy District in the Kayin State of southeast Myanmar. To the north, Myawaddy Township borders Hlaingbwe, a township of Hpa-an District, and to the south, it shares a border with Kyainseikgyi, a township of Kawkareik District. The township borders Kawkareik, another township of the same district, on the west and Thailand's Mae Sot on the east (General Administration Department, 2019). Myawaddy consists of three towns, 10 wards, 17 village-tracts and 57 villages. Its administrative seat is the town of Myawaddy, which is tiny and covers about 3 km^2. Myawaddy Township is approximately 3,136 km^2 in area, and the total town area is 1,285 km^2 (Myanmar Investment Commission, 2017).

According to the 2019 census, the total population of Myawaddy Township is 139,510; around 40% reside in town, whereas 60% live outside town. In 2019, nearly 90% of the population practised Buddhism, around 8% were Christians and 2% were Muslims (General Administration Department, 2019).

Results

This section presents the findings, partially based on field visits, and our interpretation framed by Wilson's (2000) policy–regime approach, thereby outlining the tentative components of border security governance in Myawaddy. To simplify the understanding of the findings, the policy–regime dimensions of the case study presented below are ordered differently from Wilson's (2000) series. We begin by summarising the policy regime and its paradigm, then we follow this with a description of the power and policymaking arrangements as well as the implementation structure.

Policy Regime and Its Paradigm

Border security governance in Myanmar drew attention when the junta began promoting the formation of new militias—an initiative to transform the ceasefire factions of EAOs into Tatmadaw militia and paramilitary groups—in April 2009. There were two schemes under the initiative: (1) the BGF; and (2) the People's Militia Force (PMF). The former was organisationally more stringent, wherein it required the integration of Tatmadaw soldiers. More precisely, around 3% of the new battalion's composition—approximately 30 regulars—were sent from Myanmar's armed forces (Maung, 2014). The requirement did not apply to the PMFs (Buchanan, 2016).

Although no official documents delineating the BGF scheme were released (Myanmar Peace Monitor, n.d.), the Tatmadaw made a vague reference to Chapter VII of Myanmar's Constitution—particularly Article 338 which reads, '[a]ll the armed forces in the Union shall be under the command of the Defence Services' ('Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar,' 2008)—as a rationale of the scheme (Caballero-Anthony et al., 2013). Officially, both the BGFs and PMFs have fallen under the de jure chain of command of the Tatmadaw. In reality, however, they have retained a degree of autonomy in their activities and have preserved the de facto power to lead (Beehner, 2018; Maung, 2014). Moreover, PMFs have enjoyed even greater autonomy because no Tatmadaw officers were appointed within their forces (Jolliffe et al., 2017).

The Tatmadaw's formation of new militias and paramilitary groups should not be misconstrued as a synergy necessarily bringing about peace or ending violence. Arguably, one consensus reached among Myanmar specialists has been that BGFs and PMFs were behind a variety of violent acts ranging from serious crimes to severe human rights violations, including extortion, forced labour and rape (Chaturvedi, 2012; Priamarizki, 2020; van der Maat & Holmes, 2021; Yoni, 2021). Further, majority of scholars have shared the common view that the Tatmadaw could not effectively command some BGF units, and BGFs—especially those under powerful ethnic elites—reportedly resisted the orders of the Tatmadaw from time to time (Buchanan, 2016; Jolliffe et al., 2017; Maung, 2014). Hence, the Tatmadaw's initiative of forming new militias should be deemed as a mode of governing distant areas that the top-down power of Myanmar's armed forces has been unable to reach (Jolliffe et al., 2017).

Ethnic minority leaders who aligned their armed groups with the Tatmadaw received economic benefits and business opportunities in return. The case of Colonel Saw Chit Thu, who led Karen BGF units in the Myawaddy borderland, was cited in that regard (Ong, 2021).

Arrangement of Power

From 2020 to mid-2021, there were at least six key parties involved directly and indirectly in activities surrounding the border polity in Myawaddy. They were: (1) the Karen

National Union (KNU); (2) the Karen National Liberation Army–Peace Council (KNLA-PC); (3) the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA-5); (4) local bureaucratic agencies, excluding regiments and units of the Tatmadaw; (5) BGFs; and (6) foreign interest groups. While the first three were EAOs, the next two were part of the Burmese state. However, it must be noted that BGFs were not under the control of the civilian government, unlike bureaucratic agencies including police forces, in Myawaddy Township. The last group was composed of foreign nationals running businesses in Myawaddy, and their brief details are described below.

Ethnic armed organisations: At least three EAOs were key parties involved in border activities in Myawaddy: (1) the KNU, (2) the KNLA-PC and (3) the DKBA–5. These EAOs were under the umbrella group of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement–Signatory (NCA–S), and as of early 2021, all were allies against the Tatmadaw (IISS, 2020). In terms of armed strength, the KNU, KNLA-PC and DKBA–5 had approximately 5,000, 200 and 1,500 fighters, respectively (IISS, 2020). Furthermore, their capabilities included small field arms, AK-47 machineguns, M16 rifles, rocket-propelled grenades and landmines (IISS, 2021). A large proportion of armed supplies, including older hand grenades, were illicitly imported with assistance from sub-state actors in nearby countries (Anon. 1, personal communication, May 10, 2021).

The EAOs have controlled the areas surrounding Myawaddy Township where BGF units were posted, and have engaged in guerrilla warfare against Myanmar's armed forces. Economically, the EAOs reportedly relied heavily—though not exclusively—on the shadow economy, including illicit drug trafficking and sales (Su-Ann Oh, 2013). Also, protection rackets such as illegal taxation along KNU-controlled logistic routes to central Myanmar have been prevalent (Mekong Economics & ADRA Myanmar, 2015; Su-Ann Oh, 2013). Allegedly, illegal taxation notably collecting protection money was arranged and conducted in a sort of informal collaboration with the BGF units (Anon. 1, personal communication, May 10, 2021).

Apart from this, the EAOs in Myawaddy have had close ties with foreign interest groups, especially those running businesses in the black market, and as a result, the movement of the EAOs has not been limited to Myanmar's territory. On the contrary, they have enjoyed a degree of cross-border mobility (Anon. 2, personal communication, May 11, 2021). More precisely, EAO fighters reportedly infiltrated and resided in refugee camps in nearby countries (Murshid, 2012). Such ability to cross the border, in turn, has given them leverage in the guerrilla war by using hide-and-seek tactics (Beehner, 2018).

In spite of their warfare strength and rich resources, EAOs were neither monolithic nor firmly unified. Rather, institutionalisation inside the EAOs has remained inherently vulnerable, flawed and fragmented (see Brenner, 2019). This probably explains why EAOs in Myanmar have been easily split into several separate, smaller cells (Bashar & Kyaw San Wai, 2016), as well as partitioned into separate units that have been rebranded as Tatmadaw-appointed BGFs (Buchanan, 2016).

Local bureaucratic agencies: Prima facie, Myawaddy Township has formal administrative structures through which modern bureaucratic organisations have been functioning. For instance, public services (e.g. hospitals and schools) are provided by the government, and local branches of the bureaucracy such as customs offices are in place—superficially at least—and perform their duties. All these have functioned as soft

infrastructures for a border gate, serving the country's open-door policy. That said, the raison d'être of local administrative bodies is to serve the formal border economy (e.g. cross-border trade and border industrial zones) with the flows of foreign direct investments from overseas (Kudo, 2013).

Still, the formal administrative structures (i.e. local bureaucratic agencies) have had limited authority in enforcing the law to regulate cross-border activities in daily life; as such, illegal flows of money, goods and people have been prevalent. The reality of cross-border interactions has been in the hands of actors other than civil government agencies (Lee, 2015), and ostensibly, such actors with de facto authority include, above all, Tatmadaw's BGFs and PMFs (Jolliffe et al., 2017).

Border Guard Forces: By and large, EAOs in Myanmar have been fragmental and fluid, organisationally (Brenner, 2019). Some armed groups within the EAOs operating in Myawaddy accepted the Tatmadaw's proposal, joining the state military as Karen BGF units.

Five BGF battalions have been stationed around civilian settlements in Myawaddy Township; they include battalions 1017, 1018, 1019, 1020 and 1022. The former four units were run under Colonel Saw Chit Thu, while the last was under Major Saw Mote Thon. The dividing line between the zones of control of the former and the latter units in Myawaddy is Asian Highway 1 (AH1), a land route connecting a border town of Myawaddy and the former capital, Yangon. BGF battalions commanded by Colonel Chit Thu have controlled the northern areas, whereas the battalion commanded by Major Saw Mote Thon has controlled the southern ones (Anon. 1, personal communication, May 10, 2021).

In return for becoming Tatmadaw militias, Karen BGF leaders were given access to economic resources and to business opportunities in border areas, thereby granting them de facto authority to control illegal cross-border flows of cash, goods, services and people (Chambers, 2021; Woods, 2011). For instance, they ran protection rackets for gambling businesses and casinos along the Myawaddy–Mae Sot border owned by foreign businessmen, many of whom were khaki-clad giants and cronies in neighbouring countries (Anon. 3, personal communication, May 11, 2021). Furthermore, BGF commanders assumed the role of middlemen, illegally taxing the import of prohibited goods that were transported through natural border channels from Thailand. Banned products included, for example, seasoning powder (monosodium glutamate), liquor and second-hand automobiles (Anon. 3, personal communication, May 11, 2021).

In sum, Karen BGF commanders were awarded economic resource concessions from land grabbing to illegal-business running, which have allowed them to enjoy economic privileges over others. This Tatmadaw–BGF symbiosis was aptly described by Woods (2011) as 'ceasefire capitalism.'

Foreign interest groups: The Tatmadaw, ethnic minority leaders and foreign interest groups have ostensibly had complex interdependent ties, feeding what might be called Khaki capitalism both at the national and border levels (Chambers, 2021). Like borderlands elsewhere in Myanmar, owing to Naypyidaw's legalisation of gambling for foreign tourists in special border regions (Nitta, 2018), cross-border casino tourism has been prevailing in Myawaddy (Neef, 2021).

The sources of capital flows into the gambling sector in Myawaddy have been diversified in recent years. Unlike the past when casinos were largely linked to a khaki-clad capital network in Thailand, recently, a Chinese investor group's project of building a new casino megaresort—that is, Shwe Kokko New City—in the north of Myawaddy Township has made headlines globally (Ong, 2020). Yatai International Holding Group, a Hong Kong-registered investment company headquartered in Bangkok, made an initial investment of US$500 million and reportedly signed an agreement with Colonel Saw Chit Thu, the key leader of the Karen BGF units, in September 2017 (Neef, 2021). In early 2020, the investment company falsely claimed that the project was part of China's Belt and Road Initiative's economic corridor projects, resulting in investigations by both Burmese and Chinese authorities (Nyein Nyein, 2019).

Regardless of the company's advertisements and the BGF's claims, the Shwe Kokko New City turned out to be a hub of online Chinese gambling platforms (Ong, 2020), and it was accused of being linked to transnational Chinese criminal networks involved in virtual gambling, money laundering and violent crime. Therefore, these networks reportedly fled from Cambodia's Sihanoukville, their former operation centre, where the Chinese mafia committed a series of brutal crimes (see Tower & Clapp, 2020), including human smuggling (Benar News, 2021).

Given the huge amount of capital flows into Myawaddy, the expanding role and growing influence of Chinese interest groups should not be overlooked. The Shwe Kokko New City exemplifies the deep shadow economies in the Myanmar borderlands. More importantly, it illustrates the impotence of the government in Naypyidaw and of the Tatmadaw in governing the country's peripheral regions (Ong, 2020). This includes their inability to enforce law and order to prevent the Kayin State from becoming the Chinatown of illicit digital-casino enclaves and to promote sustainable development.

Policymaking Arrangements and the Implementation Structure

From 2010 onwards, BGF units were established in Myawaddy as a consequence of the Naypyidaw's effort to break up existing EAOs throughout the country (Buchanan, 2016). In Myawaddy, several armed factions recruited from Karen insurgents took the Naypyidaw side and have become Karen BGF battalions. Those joining the Tatmadaw BGF included inter alia, the members and soldiers of the DKBA Battalion 999, led by Colonel Saw Chit Thu, a highly influential military commander who used to be under the DKBA's wing (Than, 2010). He was then appointed as senior advisor and general secretary of the Karen State BGF central command located in Hpa-an District (Karen Human Rights Group, 2018).

Organisationally, as already mentioned, Karen BGF units are under the loose control of the Tatmadaw. Nonetheless, they have occasionally tended to act like semi-private militias, and have not strictly followed the orders issued by Myanmar's military (Bashar & Kyaw San Wai, 2016). That is, the BGF battalions have retained a degree of autonomy in their choices of action. In late February 2021, for example, those in charge of the Karen BGF units turned a blind eye to, and simply enabled, a battalion of armed Karen soldiers that moved to protect and guard anti-coup protesters in the border town of Myawaddy (South, 2021). However, to those involved in the Myawaddy–Mae Sot borderlands, this kind of situation was not unexpected (Anon. 2, personal communication, May 11, 2021).

It is noteworthy that armed leaders joining the Tatmadaw BGF, such as Colonel Chit Thu, have shown a considerable degree of latitude when it comes to matters of their personal

relations with the leading enemy commanders. Recently, for example, Colonel Chit Thu reportedly attended the funeral of General Saw Jaw Phu, the late commander of the KNLA Brigade 7, in June 2021 (@4newskarenstate, 2021). Apparently, regardless of any officially assigned mission, ethnic oligarchs and warlords in the Kayin State have retained their personal ties, shared ethnicism and mutual benefits. Therefore, Karen BGF battalions seem to share some characteristics of private militias rather than having professional features of modern military entities. Arguably, they are very fluid in terms of their political alignment (Anon. 1, personal communication, May 10, 2021).

Although Karen BGF units under the leadership of Colonel Chit Thu continued fighting alongside Myanmar's armed forces against EAOs, especially KNU fighters, after the coup in February 2021 (Karen Information Centre, 2021b), his battalions reportedly did not completely follow the order issued by the Tatmadaw, as stated earlier. In June 2021, besides attending the late General Jaw Phu's funeral, it was reported that Colonel Chit Thu and senior leaders of the KNU, KNLA-PC and DKBA–5 attended the meeting held at KNU headquarters in Hpa-an District to discuss a cessation of hostilities among Karen armed forces (Karen Information Centre, 2021a; Mon News Agency, 2021). At the meeting, Colonel Chit Thu said,

> …the rate of death toll amongst our forces is getting high because of being attacked seriously, and this situation leads to the negative potential. I want all of you know that our [BGF] is a strong armed-group, having lots of forces. Now, I am not threatening you. It is true that KNU leaders are also my teachers and parents. Since BGF is the one whose main responsibility is to protect and maintain the security of border areas, I urge the responsible persons to restrict sniping to our troops who are on service (as cited in Mon News Agency, 2021).

More recently, there have been unconfirmed reports that armed operations of the Karen BGF units in Myawaddy were broken up. According to one source, the reason was that Karen BGF leaders, especially Colonel Saw Chit Thu, intended to take revenge on the Tatmadaw because he, along with other commanders, had been pressured and demanded to resign following their involvement in the Shwe Kokko New City project (Finney, 2021; The Nation, 2021). Still, the Tatmadaw's demands were later abandoned since the junta needed Karen BGF militias to secure order and stability during the coup and after the topple of the civilian government (Anon. 3, personal communication, May 11, 2021).

Discussion and Conclusion

The preceding section has already answered the two research questions with regard to the key parties involved in and the anatomy of border security governance, thus fulfilling the overall objective that is exploratory. This section discusses our findings, that is, we address how the situation in Myawaddy's borderlands—particularly its border governance—should be understood.

First and foremost, it is clear that neither the government (before the coup) nor the Tatmadaw have had the governance capacity to effectively govern activities in the Myawaddy borderlands. For instance, they were even unable to fully control Karen BGF units, which were supposed to function as part of the state apparatus. The information obtained during the fieldwork corresponds to that from the literature in that BGFs (and PMFs) had characteristics of (semi-) private militias rather than modern military corps, especially in terms of their formal structure and rules (Bashar & Kyaw, 2016; Brenner, 2019; Buchanan, 2016).

While local bureaucratic agencies have been present in Myawaddy Township, they seem to have only de jure authority, regulating legal activities and overseeing the lawful economy. That said, such agencies were unable to enforce law and order over the actors (i.e. Karen BGFs) with the de facto authority granted by the Tatmadaw, who were involved in illegal cross-border activities and who controlled the shadow economy in the border area. In other words, both the lawful and unlawful modes of governing have coexisted in parallel, and the latter appears to be much more powerful than the former. Apparently, this is not peculiar to administration in Myanmar's borderlands. To some extent, such a condition is similar to what happened in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, albeit differing in context (see Ullah, 2019).

Administratively speaking, border security governance in Myanmar, as the Myawaddy case demonstrates, is arguably similar to what is known as a 'prismatic polity' in that Western forms of governance—including the organisation of modern armed forces—have camouflaged traditional social contracts (see Basu, 2021). Therefore, the modern mode of administration (e.g. bureaucracy and a modernised military) has become entangled in the concealed, older institutions of the bygone age. This has resulted in formalism—that is, substantial decoupling between form and reality, and notably, authority and control, law and enforcement as well as policy and practice—in other words, a divorce between structure and effective function (Riggs, 1964).

Through our policy–regime analysis of Myawaddy border security governance, the main conclusion reached is that border administration in Myanmar is primarily of a prismatic nature: a modern governance system has displaced but not replaced or fully eliminated the old political establishment. Consequently, to understand border security governance and the ongoing violent conflicts along Myanmar's borderlands after the 2021 coup, it is essential to explore the history of the event. Thus, in future research on border politics and policy in Myanmar, the prismatic condition should be regarded as a basic premise for making sense of Burmese border dynamics. The same shall be considered in any policy recommendations for policymakers in foreign capitals.

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