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Myanmar's Paradox of Democracy in a Failed Transitional State

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Myanmar's Paradox of Democracy in a Failed Transitional State

Course: MAIR Global Conflict in the Modern Era

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1. Abbreviations

ARSA- Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army

NLD- National League for Democracy

EAOs- Ethnic Armed Organizations

USDP- Union Solidarity and Development Party

SAC- State Administration Council

NUG- National Unity Government

PDFs- People's Defense Forces

AA- Arakan Army

KIA- Kachin Independence Army

KNU- Karen National Union

ICJ- International Court of Justice

ICC- International Criminal Court

2. Introduction

For decades, Myanmar maintained a state of localized repression and discrimination that rarely breached the threshold of mass atrocity.¹ However, the democratic transitional period, namely from 2017 to 2021, presented a paradox. Instead of fostering human rights, this period witnessed a systematic escalation of violence against ethnic minorities, particularly the Rohingya community. As the quasi-civilian government initiated reforms, latent ethnic and religious tensions intensified. Democratization can spark nationalist violence when elites exploit ethnic divisions to build mass support coalitions in competitive political environments.² Myanmar during this period presents such an environment which crystallized in 2017 with the exodus of over 740,000 Rohingya to Bangladesh. This marked a shift from fragile democratization to the 2021 military coup and renewed authoritarianism.³

Internationally, the atrocities triggered legal proceedings at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court (ICC).⁴ Domestically, however, narratives of denial and silence persisted, reflecting an entrenched ethno-nationalist ideology. Throughout this period, the military remained a dominant political force. It dismantled the nascent democratic structures entirely, retained unilateral authority over ethnic affairs, and conducted operations against groups like Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA).⁵ From a conventional security perspective, the 2017 clearance operations appear strategically irrational. The military already possessed a sophisticated coercive apparatus capable of selective repression, making the choice of indiscriminate, high-profile brutality, a glaring strategic anomaly.⁶

The Myanmar case (2011–2021) is theoretically significant because it represents a paradox of genocidal democratization. This decade of celebrated liberal reform did not lead to peace, but to violent ethnic cleansing in the country's modern history.⁷ This case challenges

¹ Golnar Yazdanpanah Yoni, "Everyday Discrimination, Border Governance, and Ethnic Cleansing: An Analysis of Violence against the Rohingya," *Asian Ethnicity* 23, no. 4 (2022): 568.

² Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

³ Zoltan Barany, "The Rohingya Predicament," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 1 (2019): 9; Tun Khin, "Rohingya: A Preventable Genocide Allowed to Happen," *Insight Turkey* 19, no. 4 (2017): 123; Zoltan Barany, "Where Myanmar Went Wrong," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (2018): 142.

⁴ UNHRC, "Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar," 2018.

⁵ Barany, "The Rohingya Predicament," 9; Khin, "Rohingya: A Preventable Genocide," 123.

⁶ Benjamin A. Valentino, *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the 20th Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 95; Charles Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide: Explaining Campaigns of Annihilation (and Their Absence)," *Journal of Genocide Research* 21, no. 2 (2019): 180.

⁷ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 180.

the liberal assumption that democratization inherently reduces internal conflict.⁸ Instead, it reveals how transitions can be weaponized by military elites to resolve internal rivalries and reassert institutional supervision against civilian rivals.⁹

This paper addresses a central research puzzle: *What explains the violence of the military towards the end of the democratic transition in Myanmar?* To answer this, the analysis examines the ethnic crisis through theories of counterinsurgency, elite ideology, popular support & intra-military rivalry. By tracing the interaction between ideological exclusion, elite manipulation, and popular nationalism from 2011 to 2021, it aims to illuminate how processes of political liberalization can paradoxically enable mass atrocity rather than prevent it.

3. Literature Review

The crisis in Rakhine State emerged from the structural contradictions of a transition initiated by the military from a position of institutional strength.¹⁰ Under the 2008 constitutional arrangement, the military pursued political liberalization while retaining unilateral authority over security, border affairs, and its role as the ultimate arbiter of national stability.¹¹ However, the transition introduced a competitive political environment where elites utilized technically legal and institutional methods to handicap rivals and maintain dominance.¹² Within this contested space, the escalation of violence acted as a definitive assertion of military autonomy, testing the limits of the democratic framework and exposing the fragility of the quasi-civilian administration.¹³

To understand the 2017 crisis, this study evaluates four distinct theoretical frameworks often used to explain state-led violence, such in the case of Myanmar's military violence during the end of the democratic transition (2017-2021). Each explanation offers a distinct causal mechanism linking structural conditions, elite incentives, and strategic violence. These four explanations are not mutually exclusive; Myanmar's violence likely resulted from multiple

⁸ Eelco van der Maat and Arthur Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization: Military Rivalry and Atrocity in Myanmar," *Journal of Genocide Research* 25, no. 2 (2023): 172.

⁹ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 179.

¹⁰ Rachel Beatty Riedl et al., "Authoritarian Led Democratization," *Annual Review of Political Science* 23 (2020): 318.

¹¹ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 192.

¹² Nancy Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016): 13.

¹³ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 185; Riedl et al., "Authoritarian Led Democratization," 318.

causal mechanisms operating simultaneously. However, they make different empirical predictions that allow us to assess their relative importance through process tracing.

3.1. Counterinsurgency

The counterinsurgency theory posits that states facing armed insurgencies employ systematic violence to separate insurgents from civilian populations, deny resources to rebels, and establish territorial control.¹⁴ When states lack capacity to distinguish combatants from civilians, or when populations are perceived as inherently supportive of insurgents, counterinsurgency can escalate into mass violence against entire ethnic or political communities. The military identifies an insurgent threat embedded within the civilian population, to which they apply the counterinsurgency doctrine of ‘draining the sea’ by removing their civilian support base.¹⁵ When unable to distinguish combatants from civilians, the military can target entire communities with violence to depopulate areas, deny insurgents sanctuary and ultimately establish military dominance.

In the case of Myanmar's Tatmadaw, counterinsurgency warfare has a documented history against Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), namely the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, developing a garrison polity organized primarily for internal warfare.¹⁶ The formation of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) in 2013 and its attacks on border posts in October 2016 and August 2017 provided an ostensible insurgent threat.¹⁷ The military framed its 2017 clearance operations as a response to ARSA attacks, suggesting counterinsurgency logic guided operational planning.¹⁸

However, counterinsurgency theory struggles to explain several aspects of the Myanmar case. First, ARSA was a poorly equipped organization with minimal military capacity, hardly constituting an insurgent threat requiring genocidal response.¹⁹ Second, the violence extended far beyond areas of ARSA activity, targeting Rohingya communities with no connection to armed resistance.²⁰ Third, the operations displayed characteristics of ethnic

¹⁴ Valentino, *Final Solutions*, 89.

¹⁵ Benjamin A. Valentino, Paul Huth, and Dylan Balch-Lindsay, "'Draining the Sea': Systematic Attack on Civilians in Guerrilla Warfare," *International Organization* 58, no. 2 (2004): 375.

¹⁶ Martin Smith, *Myanmar: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 203.

¹⁷ Barany, "The Rohingya Predicament," 9; Khin, "Rohingya: A Preventable Genocide," 123.

¹⁸ Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Nationalism and the Anti-Muslim Critique* (London: Zed Books, 2017), 137–40.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ UNHRC, "Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission."

cleansing consisting of systematic destruction, sexual violence, and permanent displacement, that exceeds counterinsurgency objectives.²¹

Most importantly, it does not explain why violence escalated specifically during democratic transition, when the military faced no greater insurgent threat than in previous decades. This temporal puzzle suggests that while counterinsurgency provided operational templates and rhetorical justification, other factors drove the timing and scale of violence.

3.2. Elite Ideology: Buddhist Extremism

The elite ideology theory posits how leaders' belief systems shape threat perception and policy choices. Within this framework, religious nationalism serves as a primary driver, where sacred narratives are mobilized to justify violence as a necessary defence of the faith community.²² Elites internalize Buddhist extremist ideology viewing Islam as a threat: consequently, the Rohingyas are framed not merely as a political challenge but as a religious danger to Buddhist civilization.²³ Under these conditions, violence becomes moralized as religious protection rather than political expediency where elites use religious rhetoric to legitimize and mobilize support.²⁴

For Myanmar, Buddhist nationalism is rooted in post-colonial politics which intensified during the democratic transition, merging religious anxiety with ethnic nationalism, namely the Ma Ba Tha movement (Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion). The movement gained prominence after 2011, propagating narratives of Islam as an invasive force threatening Buddhist civilization.²⁵ Critically, this ideology is not exclusively confined to civilian extremists, military leaders could have potentially internalized or strategically adopted these narratives. If Senior General Min Aung Hlaing genuinely adhered the 2017 operations against the Rohingya would represent an act of ideological conviction, specifically the protection of the Buddhist Sasana, rather than an opportunistic military strategy.²⁶ This is further reinforced

²¹ Maung Zarni and Alice Cowley, "The Slow-Burning Genocide of Myanmar's Rohingya," *Pacific Rim Law & Policy Journal* 23, no. 3 (2014): 709; UNHRC, "Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar," 2018.

²² Julia Huang, "Religion and Political Violence in Contemporary Myanmar." *Pacific Affairs* 92, no. 1 (2019):151.

²³ Niklas Foxeus, "Buddhist Nationalism and the Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar," in *The Handbook of Contemporary Buddhism*, ed. Michael Jerryson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 424.

²⁴ Huang, "Religion and Political Violence," 151; Foxeus, "Buddhist Nationalism and the Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar," 424.

²⁵ Foxeus, "Buddhist Nationalism and the Rohingya Crisis," 423; Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within*, 102–104; Rafia Zakaria, "The Moral Panic over the Rohingya: Buddhism, Identity, and the Politics of Fear in Myanmar." *Critical Asian Studies* 51, no. 1 (2019):102–5.

²⁶ Foxeus, "Buddhist Nationalism and the Rohingya Crisis," 433.

by the state-level construction of identity, through the concept of Taingyintha, which defines authentic Myanmar identity as inherently Buddhist and explicitly excluding Muslims.²⁷ This meant widespread acceptance of anti-Muslim narratives, which ensured minimal domestic opposition.²⁸ The ideology provided legitimating discourse that mobilized popular support and framed ethnic cleansing as civilizational defence.²⁹

However, ideological explanations face several challenges. First, the Tatmadaw has historically been a secular institution focused on territorial integrity and border governance, rather than a specific religious mission.³⁰ Second, if ideology were primary, one would expect similar systematic violence against other Muslim minorities in Myanmar, yet the 2017 escalation was localized and specifically targeted the Rohingya.³¹ Third, the military has pragmatically allied with or suppressed Buddhist nationalist movements depending on political convenience, suggesting instrumentalization rather than ideological commitment.³² Most importantly, ideological explanations struggle with timing: Buddhist nationalist ideology existed before 2017 and persists after, yet extreme violence occurred in a specific window. This suggests ideology may have been a facilitating condition or legitimizing discourse rather than the primary driver of violence.³³

3.3. Popular Support through Civil-Military Rivalry

The popular support theory posits that, when there is elite competition in transitional regimes, incumbents facing potential loss of power use nationalist mobilization to generate popular support and delegitimize rivals.³⁴ This is often driven by military anxiety, where an institution accustomed to total dominance perceives democratization as an existential threat to its political and economic interests.³⁵ In hybrid regimes, military elites may instigate security crises to demonstrate their indispensability, effectively acting as the guardian of the nation to regain

²⁷ Yoni, "Everyday Discrimination," 569.

²⁸ Nick Cheesman, "How in Myanmar 'National Races' Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (2017): 461–463.

²⁹ Foxeus, "Buddhist Nationalism and the Rohingya Crisis," 424; Zakaria, "The Moral Panic over the Rohingya," 102–5; Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within*, 122–28.

³⁰ Yoni, "Everyday Discrimination," 569; Andrew Selth, "Myanmar's Armed Forces and the Rohingya Crisis," United States Institute of Peace, 2018; Huang, "Religion and Political Violence," 158; Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within*, 111.

³¹ Huang, "Religion and Political Violence," 158.

³² Huang, "Religion and Political Violence," 158; Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within*, 111.

³³ Foxeus, "Buddhist Nationalism and the Rohingya Crisis," 423.

³⁴ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 179; Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, "Democratic Transitions, Institutional Strength, and War," *International Organization* 56, no. 2 (2002): 11.

³⁵ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 179–180.

legitimacy lost to civilian rivals.³⁶ By scapegoating a widely hated and vulnerable minority, the military can build a mass support coalition that transcends political divides.³⁷ International condemnation would fall on the civilian government who would be forced to either defend the actions or stay silent. Ultimately, the domestic population would rally for the military under their image as the guardian of the nation while the civilian government appears weak or complicit.

For Myanmar, the 2008 Constitution ensured a hybrid regime, but the National League for Democracy's (NLD) landslide victories in 2015 and 2020 created acute institutional anxiety for the Tatmadaw.³⁸ While the military retained 25% of parliamentary seats, the rising popular legitimacy of the NLD threatened the military's self-appointed role as the sole protector of the state.³⁹ The Rohingya, long framed as an invasive force, became the ideal target to reassert military dominance.⁴⁰ The timing of the 2017 violence, occurring after the NLD had established domestic and international acclaim, suggests a strategic calculation to degrade the civilian government's moral authority.⁴¹ The operations created an impossible dilemma for PM Aung San Suu Kyi, where condemning the military would trigger a domestic backlash, while staying silent destroyed her international standing, effectively neutralizing the military's primary political rival.⁴² Civil-military rivalry provides substantial explanatory power for violence during the NLD government period.

However, the theory faces challenges regarding the scale of the violence. While creating a security crisis serves a political purpose, the genocidal character and extreme brutality, such as systematic mass killing and arson, exceed what is strictly necessary for political delegitimization.⁴³ Such extreme measures are a way for an anxious military to rapidly resolve its status threat, yet the long-term risk of international prosecution remains a significant liability for the institution.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the theory struggles to explain the 2012 communal violence,

³⁶ Yoni, "Everyday Discrimination," 569; Mansfield and Snyder, "Democratic Transitions," 297-337.

³⁷ Foxeus, "Buddhist Nationalism and the Rohingya Crisis," 423; Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 180-194.

³⁸ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 194; Yoni, "Everyday Discrimination," 602.

³⁹ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 194-195; Yoni, "Everyday Discrimination," 569; van der Maat & Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 183-184.

⁴⁰ Foxeus, "Buddhist Nationalism and the Rohingya Crisis," 423; Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 195; Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within*, 121-123.

⁴¹ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 195.

⁴² Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 195; Morten B. Pedersen, "The 2021 Military Coup in Myanmar: Preemptive Strike or Pure Power Grab?" *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 1 (2023): 54.

⁴³ Huang, "Religion and Political Violence," 158; Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 180.

⁴⁴ Huang, "Religion and Political Violence," 158; Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 180.

which occurred under a quasi-military government when the civilian threat was less acute.⁴⁵ Why would military elites threatened by civilian competition conduct operations before credible civilian competitors emerged? Finally, if the driver was purely rivalry with the NLD, it remains unclear why extreme violence persisted or evolved into different forms after the military successfully seized total power in the 2021 coup.⁴⁶ This suggests that while civil-military rivalry may have been one motive, it cannot fully account for the pattern of violence across the entire period.

3.4. Intra-Military Rivalry: Genocidal Consolidation

The intra-military rivalry theory posits that insecure authoritarian leaders facing internal elite rivals use mass atrocities strategically to eliminate opposition and consolidate power.⁴⁷ By forcing rival factions to participate in internationally condemned crimes, leaders create shared complicity that binds elites together and eliminates exit options.⁴⁸ Periods of political uncertainty create acute vulnerabilities for authoritarian elites, where the leader faces challenges from internal factions threatening their position. This vulnerability perception due to institutional constraints creates urgency, resulting in atrocity orchestration initiated by mass violence requiring participation across factional lines of the military, which forces rival elites to participate, making them complicit in the crime. This shared liability eliminates rival's ability to defect or attempt a coup, which enables a consolidation of power for the leader.

For Myanmar, the military underwent significant factional realignment during the democratic transition, namely the 2008 Constitution and 2011 transition created unprecedented uncertainty when Senior General Than Shwe forced top military leaders to resign and compete in elections, breaking traditional succession patterns.⁴⁹ This created intense rivalry between two main factions; the Western Command faction, associated with former Speaker Shwe Mann and Lt. Gen. Myint Aung, centered in Rakhine and Western regions and the Eastern Command faction, associated with President Thein Sein and Commander in Chief Min Aung Hlaing. Min Aung Hlaing's appointment as Commander-in-Chief in 2011 was controversial, breaking expected succession and creating resentment among Western Command officers. His position

⁴⁵ Yoni, "Everyday Discrimination," 602; Sarah Bouan, "Communal Violence in Myanmar: The Challenge of Democratic Transition and Peacebuilding," *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 41, no. 4 (2014): 478-479.

⁴⁶ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 195; Yoni, "Everyday Discrimination," 570.

⁴⁷ Eelco van der Maat, "Genocidal Consolidation," *American Journal of Political Science* 64, no. 4 (2020): 773–809.

⁴⁸ Eelco van der Maat and Brechtje van der Spijk, "Violent Consolidation: Explaining China's Mass Violence against Muslims in Xinjiang" (unpublished manuscript, 2026), Institute for History, Leiden University; van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 183-187.

⁴⁹ van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 183-187.

became increasingly vulnerable as he faced compulsory retirement in July 2021 per military regulations, and constitutional rules prevented him from becoming president.⁵⁰ Similarly, the 2017 operations occurred primarily in Rakhine State under the Western Command territory, requiring Western Command's participation and providing Min Aung Hlaing opportunity to reshape command structures. Following the violence, Min Aung Hlaing systematically purged Western Command officers and replaced them with loyalists.⁵¹

The theory of genocidal consolidation appears to provide the most comprehensive explanation spanning all temporal phases. First, it explains timing: violence escalated precisely when Min Aung Hlaing faced retirement and needed to consolidate power. Second, it explains scale: extreme violence creating international condemnation effectively trapped all participants in shared liability. Third, it explains post-violence outcomes: Min Aung Hlaing successfully removed retirement constraints and conducted the 2021 coup without internal military opposition. The theory also explains why violence continued against the Rohingya specifically; the 2017 operations had established this as a consolidating violence that bound the military together.⁵² Continuing or renewing such operations reinforces internal cohesion and reminds all officers of their shared complicity.⁵³ The main limitation is evidentiary: this mechanism operates largely through theoretical calculations and informal power dynamics that may not leave clear documentary trails. Additionally, the theory requires accepting that leaders would commit genocide primarily for personal power consolidation rather than ideology or security, which may seem implausibly cynical.⁵⁴

4. Research Design

To evaluate the relative explanatory power of the four theories and their competing causal mechanisms regarding the systematic military violence against the Rohingya community in Myanmar, this study employs a qualitative, single-case process tracing methodology. The systematic violence in Myanmar presents a critical puzzle: it escalated to a genocidal scale precisely during a period of fragile democratization, and its brutality often exceeded conventional security or counterinsurgency objectives.⁵⁵ Since the violence is likely

⁵⁰ Pedersen, "The 2021 Military Coup in Myanmar," 52-54.

⁵¹ van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 191-193.

⁵² van der Maat and van der Spijk, "Violent Consolidation."

⁵³ van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 183-187.

⁵⁴ van der Maat and van der Spijk, "Violent Consolidation."

⁵⁵ Valentino, *Final Solutions*.

overdetermined, resulting from the confluence of security, ideological, political, and elite factors, the primary analytical challenge is to determine which specific mechanism served as the primary driver for the violence's timing, scale, and strategic objective.⁵⁶

Process tracing moves beyond correlation to examine the intermediate steps in the causal chain.⁵⁷ Though the method is crucial for identifying plausible mechanisms and building theoretical frameworks, it cannot definitively prove causal relationships. Additionally, process tracing in non-democratic, high-conflict contexts inherently presents the problem of missing data, where archives are closed or actors intentionally obscure their tracks. To address this, three remedial instruments are applied to ensure that 'absence of evidence' is not prematurely treated as 'evidence of absence' in the high-conflict context of Myanmar.⁵⁸ Firstly, researchers must characterize how actors, in this case, the Tatmadaw, decide whether to leave traces of their motives. If the incentives to produce 'missingness' are compatible with the theory's micro-foundations, the absence of data is not necessarily disconfirmatory. Secondly, when direct evidence of elite motives is inaccessible, such as in this case, the observable implications are indirectly tested outside the immediate context of the 2017-2021 period to gauge the plausibility of the logic of action. Lastly, an argument may still stand, if a missing step is logically implied by a documented preceding step through sufficient claims.⁵⁹

To manage this inherent limitation, the analysis will systematically evaluate the strength of the evidence to determine confidence in the competing causal theories.⁶⁰ By setting clear predictions, i.e., observable implications, for each of the four competing theories, the analysis creates a structured empirical test to see which theory is best supported by the available evidence. This approach, by directly comparing the success of the observable implications across mechanisms, permits the assignment of relative explanatory weight to the competing explanations and the subsequent achievement of stronger causal inference regarding the operational cause.⁶¹

⁵⁶ James Mahoney, "Process Tracing and Historical Explanation." *Security Studies* 24, no. 2 (2015): 202.

⁵⁷ David Collier, "Understanding Process Tracing," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 44, no. 4 (2011): 823; Mahoney, "Process Tracing and Historical Explanation," 200.

⁵⁸ Ezequiel Gonzalez-Ocantos and Jody LaPorte, "Process Tracing and the Problem of Missing Data," *Sociological Methods & Research* 50, no. 3 (2021): 1413.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 1410.

⁶⁰ Rasmus Brun Pedersen and Derek Beach, *Process-Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool*, 2nd ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 172.

⁶¹ Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pedersen, *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 18.

The four theories and their causal mechanisms outlined in the literature review: Counterinsurgency, Elite Ideology, Popular Support, and Intra-Military Rivalry, must first be operationalized to be tested. This involves formulating observable implications, which are specific predictions about how each mechanism would manifest in the real-world data, which would either strengthen or weaken a particular theory.⁶² This section will outline these specific causal mechanisms and their relevant observable implications, which will be used to analyse the case study of Myanmar. Lastly, this study relies on existing evidence, categorized as process evidence,⁶³ drawn from UN fact-finding missions, human rights reports, investigative journalism, and secondary academic literature. The final analysis assesses which mechanism provides the most comprehensive and consistent explanation for the entire timeline, accounting for the crucial puzzles of the violence's timing, scale, and post-coup continuation.

4.1. Counterinsurgency

The Counterinsurgency theory posits that systematic violence is purely an instrumental, tactical military response used to achieve security objectives.⁶⁴ The underlying causal mechanism implies that the military follows the doctrine of 'draining the sea' by removing the civilian support base for the insurgent group, thereby denying resources to rebels and establishing territorial control.⁶⁵ In the Myanmar context, this institutional history informs a border governance strategy where multi-scalar violence is used to manage and exclude perceived outsiders.⁶⁶ The Tatmadaw has strategic and legal incentives to document clearance operations while sanitizing tactical orders that violate international law. In this case, missingness is a functional byproduct of avoiding war crimes charges.⁶⁷ Under this theory, the atrocities are viewed as extreme, but rational, tactics employed by a state lacking the capacity to distinguish combatants from civilians effectively.

To test this theory, the analysis must determine if the scale, duration, and severity of the operations were commensurate with the objective threat posed by ARSA, meeting a proportionality test.⁶⁸ Operations must be strictly confined to villages and areas with documented recent ARSA activity, and the launch must be linked to an objective spike in

⁶² Pedersen and Beach, *Process-Tracing*, 11.

⁶³ Beach and Pedersen, *Process-Tracing Methods*, 28.

⁶⁴ Valentino, *Final Solutions*, 89

⁶⁵ Valentino, Huth, and Balch-Lindsay, "'Draining the Sea'," 375.

⁶⁶ Yoni, "Everyday Discrimination," 569-570.

⁶⁷ Gonzalez-Ocantos and LaPorte, "Process Tracing," 1410.

⁶⁸ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 194-195.

insurgent capacity rather than non-security political events like election.⁶⁹ If a security threat and a subsequent mass exodus are documented, the intervening tactical intent to target civilians is logically sufficient to substantiate the mechanism.⁷⁰

However, the explanation is significantly weakened if the evidence shows disproportionate and indiscriminate brutality against non-combatants in areas without recent fighting. Such patterns suggest that non-security motives, such as permanent ethnic cleansing or political consolidation, were the primary drivers.⁷¹ Furthermore, if the military genuinely viewed ARSA, a poorly equipped and small group, as an existential threat requiring genocidal force, it would contradict established military doctrines used against much stronger Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs).⁷²

4.2. Elite Ideology: Buddhist Extremism

The Elite Ideology theory posits that the violence is an act of moralized defence driven by the genuine, eliminationist conviction among the military elite that the Rohingya pose an existential religious threat. This conviction is reflected in the upsurge of extreme Buddhist nationalism and anti-Muslim hate speech that characterized the 2011 transitional period.⁷³ The causal mechanism implies that the military's actions are driven by sincere doctrinal adherence to protecting the Buddhist Sasana from perceived Islamic influence.⁷⁴ This theory suggests that the systematic violence is a true reflection of the elites' deep-seated ethno-nationalist and religious worldview,⁷⁵ which utilizes the defence of the sāsana as a justification for intolerance and violence against non-Buddhists.⁷⁶ By framing the violence as defending the core identity of the state, the atrocities become an end in themselves, a cleansing operation, rather than a mere tool for a non-ideological objective.⁷⁷

To test this theory, there needs to be direct evidence of an explicit religious mandate for the operations, such as references to defending the Sasana in official military operation orders or communications from Senior General Min Aung Hlaing.⁷⁸ However, given that elite

⁶⁹ Valentino, *Final Solutions*, 95; Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 179.

⁷⁰ Gonzalez-Ocantos and LaPorte, "Process Tracing," 1422.

⁷¹ Valentino, *Final Solutions*, 95; Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 179-180.

⁷² Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 194.

⁷³ Foxeus, "Buddhist Nationalism and the Rohingya Crisis," 423.

⁷⁴ Mahoney, "Process Tracing and Historical Explanation," 204.

⁷⁵ Collier, "Understanding Process Tracing," 828.

⁷⁶ Huang, "Religion and Political Violence," 151; Foxeus, "The Buddha Was a Devoted Nationalist: Buddhist Nationalism, Ressentiment, and Defending Buddhism in Myanmar,".

⁷⁷ Foxeus, "Buddhist Nationalism and the Rohingya Crisis," 424; Valentino, *Final Solutions*, 110.

⁷⁸ Pedersen and Beach, *Process-Tracing*, 11.

belief systems are inherently opaque and such cognitive processes rarely leave a paper trail, this theory can be indirectly tested by analysing the rhetoric and mobilization of non-state actors like the Ma Ba Tha movement and their influence on state-level bordering processes.⁷⁹ If the surge in exclusionary Buddhist nationalist rhetoric and a subsequent lack of domestic opposition to violence are documented, the intervening step of elite ideological conviction is logically sufficient in the context of Myanmar's political culture.⁸⁰ Furthermore, since the ideological threat applies broadly to Islam in Myanmar, systematic violence of the same scale should be simultaneously or subsequently directed against other Muslim minority groups in the country.⁸¹

However, the explanation is weakened if the evidence shows that the military's relationship with influential Buddhist nationalist groups is proven to be one of political opportunism. If the military treats religion as a flexible instrument to be deployed or discarded based on power-sharing needs, the ideological argument loses its primary causal force.⁸² Additionally, if the violence is narrowly focused only on the Rohingya population, it suggests that the drivers are more likely rooted in local territorial control and sub-national "everyday discrimination" rather than a national-level ideological mandate.⁸³

4.3. Popular Support through Civil-Military Rivalry

The Popular Support theory posits that violence is a strategic political tool used primarily to generate domestic popular support and politically delegitimize the civilian government.⁸⁴ The causal mechanism implies the military exploits the widespread anti-Rohingya sentiment to create and shape a defensive nationalism that favours the institution over democratic rivals.⁸⁵ Military elites in hybrid regimes often hide their intent to undermine civilian rivals to avoid triggering a premature coup or constitutional crisis that could invite international sanctions.⁸⁶ This theory predicts that the primary objective of the atrocity is to manufacture a crisis exposing the NLD's lack of control over the security apparatus.⁸⁷ By casting the military as the sole,

⁷⁹ Yoni, "Everyday Discrimination," 567.

⁸⁰ Foxeus, "Buddhist Nationalism and the Rohingya Crisis," 158; Gonzalez-Ocantos and LaPorte, "Process Tracing," 1429.

⁸¹ Huang, "Religion and Political Violence," 158; Mahoney, "Process Tracing and Historical Explanation," 206.

⁸² Huang, "Religion and Political Violence," 151.

⁸³ Yoni, "Everyday Discrimination," 570; Valentino, *Final Solutions*, 115.

⁸⁴ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 195.

⁸⁵ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 180; Foxeus, "Buddhist Nationalism and the Rohingya Crisis," 424.

⁸⁶ Gonzalez-Ocantos and LaPorte, "Process Tracing," 1411.

⁸⁷ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 195; van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 170

necessary defender of the nation against a foreign or existential threat and framing the NLD as a threat to the maintenance of Buddhism,⁸⁸ the violence serves to bolster the military's domestic image and political standing against its democratic rival.⁸⁹

To test this theory, the analysis must find evidence that the military's post-operation rhetoric focused on the political reaction of the NLD and the degradation of its international legitimacy.⁹⁰ A key observable implication is whether the level of brutality was calibrated to maximize the civilian government's political dilemma and force its leaders to support the military's actions.⁹¹ If the theory is true, the documentation should show that the military prioritized domestic messaging over international condemnation to consolidate its guardian status.⁹² Finally, the theory predicts that once the NLD was removed from power in 2021, the strategic need for this specific political tool should have ended, shifting the military's focus toward other forms of border governance or territorial control, meaning the violence against the Rohingya must significantly decline.⁹³

Critically, the explanation is contradicted if the documented brutality is so extreme that it risks international isolation without providing a proportional domestic political asset. Genocidal violence that results in universal condemnation represents a significant political liability rather than a calculated advantage for a military seeking to maintain a hybrid regime.⁹⁴ Furthermore, if historical parallelism shows that the military used similar security crises to delegitimize rivals during the 1990 transition, the logic of the mechanism is validated.⁹⁵

4.4. Intra-Military Rivalry: Genocidal Consolidation

The Intra-Military Rivalry theory posits that the violence was initiated by an insecure leader to eliminate internal rivals and consolidate personal power by forcing widespread shared complicity in mass atrocities.⁹⁶ The causal mechanism implies that mass atrocity is used as a tool of political control, binding officers together through shared international legal liability

⁸⁸ Andrea Malji, "A Coup Can't Destroy an Ideology: The Future of Buddhist Nationalism in Myanmar," Berkley Center, Georgetown University, 2021.

⁸⁹ Collier, "Understanding Process Tracing," 830.

⁹⁰ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 195; Pedersen and Beach, *Process-Tracing*, 14.

⁹¹ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 180.

⁹² *Ibid*, 195.

⁹³ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 195; Yoni, "Everyday Discrimination," 570; van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 182.

⁹⁴ Valentino, *Final Solutions*, 95.

⁹⁵ Gonzalez-Ocantos and LaPorte, "Process Tracing," 1423.

⁹⁶ van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 165; van der Maat and van der Spijk, "Violent Consolidation."

and facilitating a purge of potential rivals who fail to demonstrate loyalty.⁹⁷ Information regarding factional competition between Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and internal rivals is highly classified; missingness is a requirement of military cohesion and unsavoury internal politics of authoritarian rule.⁹⁸ While private deliberations are hidden, proxies such as patterns of military promotions, demotions, or budget reallocations can be used to test for internal power struggles.⁹⁹ If a leadership transition and the subsequent escalation of violence are documented, the signalling of strength to internal rivals is logically sufficient, such may be the case for Myanmar.¹⁰⁰

To test this theory, the execution of the 2017 operations must coincide temporally with acute personal threats to Min Aung Hlaing's power, specifically his approaching retirement.¹⁰¹ Following the atrocities, evidence must show that Hlaing systematically conducted a purge and reshuffle of rival officers and replaced them with known loyalists.¹⁰² The theory is further supported if the violence was of an extreme, genocidal scale, specifically designed to generate maximum international legal exposure, thereby trapping all key officers in shared liability. Finally, the leader must successfully conduct the 2021 coup without internal military opposition and immediately remove the institutional constraints that triggered the violence.¹⁰³

Conversely, the theory is weakened if command structures remained stable or if the violence failed to result in a consolidation of power around the central leadership. Furthermore, if the military leadership remains open to international investigation or fails to create a complicity trap, the logic of shared liability falls apart, suggesting the violence may have been a tactical counterinsurgency failure rather than a calculated consolidation strategy.

By establishing clear observable implications for each of the four competing mechanisms, this paper creates a structured empirical framework to evaluate the available process evidence against the specific drivers of the 2017 crisis. This systematic approach allows for the assessment of relative explanatory weight to security, ideological, and institutional factors by directly comparing which predictions hold true across the temporal phases of the transition. **Table 1** summarizes these metrics, outlining the specific observations and their subsequent consequences for the validation or falsification of each theory. These

⁹⁷ van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 186-189.

⁹⁸ Gonzalez-Ocantos and LaPorte, "Process Tracing," 1412.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 1421.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 1430.

¹⁰¹ van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 191-193.

¹⁰² Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 193.

¹⁰³ van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 193.

implications serve as the analytical lens through which the following case study will trace the causal chain of military violence from the early liberalization period to the 2021 consolidation of power.

Table 1. Observable implications.

Observation	Mechanism	Consequences for the theory
Scale/duration are commensurate with threat	Counterinsurgency (CI): Instrumental tactical response to security threats.	Falsification if brutality is indiscriminate against non-combatants
Operations confined to areas with documented insurgent activity	CI: Strategic effort to deny resources and sanctuary to insurgent group (ARSA)	Weakened if violence extends to communities with no connection to armed resistance
Violence linked to a spike in insurgent capacity	CI: Rational use of force driven solely by military necessity.	Falsification if the launch coincides with non-security political events
Explicit religious mandate in official orders	Elite Ideology (EI): Moralized defence driven by eliminationist convictions.	Significant support if present; absence is not disconfirmatory due to opacity.
Violence against all Muslim groups.	EI: Sincere belief that Islam poses a broad existential religious threat.	Weakened if violence is narrowly focused only on the Rohingya.
Rhetoric focused on NLD's legitimacy	Popular Support (PS): Strategic tool used to delegitimize democratic rivals	Support if observed; weakened if brutality is a net political liability
Violence against Rohingya declines after 2021.	PS: Strategic need for the tool ends once rivals are neutralized	Falsification if violence persists or evolves into different forms after military seizes power
Violence connected to leader's personal retirement threat	Genocidal Consolidation (GC): Atrocities used to resolve acute internal rivalry	Falsification if absent; significant support if present
Systematic reshuffle of rival officers post-violence	GC: Shared complicity trap enabling purges of potential internal rivals.	Falsification if command structures remain stable. Significant support if rivals are replaced
Coup success without internal opposition	GC: Removal of institutional barriers through forced elite cohesion.	Falsification if violence fails to result in power consolidation

5. Case Study: Myanmar's Democratic Transition 2011-2021

To examine the systematic violence against the Rohingya during Myanmar's democratic transition, the timeframe is divided into three critical phases. Each phase will be introduced with an overview of major political and military developments, followed by systematic evaluation of the observable implications as outlined in **Table 1**. The first phase from 2011-2017 captures the initial democratic opening and the structural transformation that created conditions for elite rivalry. The second phase from 2017-2021 encompasses the peak of

genocidal violence and intensified civil-military competition under the hybrid regime. The final phase examines the 2021 post-coup landscape and the military's consolidation of power through continued violence. This temporal structure allows for rigorous testing of whether counterinsurgency logic, elite ideology, popular support seeking, or intra-military rivalry best explains the timing, scale, and strategic objectives of the atrocities.

5.1. 2011-2017: Transitional Rivalry & Power Vacuum

The period from 2011 to 2017 represents Myanmar's transition from direct military rule to a carefully engineered hybrid regime. Following the promulgation of the 2008 Constitution, which established the legal architecture guaranteeing the military 25% of parliamentary seats, control over key ministries, and unilateral authority over all matters deemed threats to national security, the 2010 general elections formalized the shift to quasi-civilian governance.¹⁰⁴ The military junta, led by Senior General Than Shwe, initiated this transformation not through external pressure but as a calculated strategy to preserve institutional interests while managing generational succession.¹⁰⁵ The new government was formed under the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), comprised largely of former military officers. The transition created unprecedented internal disruption within the Tatmadaw's command structure. Senior General Than Shwe's decision to force the entire military leadership to resign and compete in civilian elections broke decades of succession norms and created a dangerous power vacuum.¹⁰⁶ The military's traditional factional divisions between the Western Command and the Eastern Command, intensified into deadly rivalry during this period.¹⁰⁷

The 2012 communal violence in Rakhine State marked the first major test of this unstable arrangement. Intercommunal clashes between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims erupted, resulting in at least 200 deaths and the displacement of over 140,000 people, predominantly Rohingya.¹⁰⁸ A second wave of violence occurred in October 2012, extending beyond Rakhine State to central Myanmar.¹⁰⁹ The military in response often participated in or facilitated attacks against Rohingya.¹¹⁰ Throughout 2013-2015, lower-intensity persecution

¹⁰⁴ Darin Christensen, Mai Nguyen, and Renard Sexton, "Strategic Violence during Democratization: Evidence from Myanmar," *World Politics* 71, no. 2 (2019): 339–340.

¹⁰⁵ van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 183-184.

¹⁰⁶ van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 183-187; Darin S. Self, "Bounded Democratization: How Military-Party Relations Shape Military-Led Democratization," *Comparative Political Studies* 56, no. 6 (2023): 863.

¹⁰⁷ van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 186-187.

¹⁰⁸ Bouan, "Communal Violence in Myanmar," 478-479; Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within*, 121–123.

¹⁰⁹ Bouan, "Communal Violence in Myanmar," 478-479.

¹¹⁰ Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within*, 121–123; UNHRC, "Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar," 2018.

continued through bureaucratic restrictions, forced labour, and localized violence that maintained a persistent state of insecurity in Rakhine State.¹¹¹ Simultaneously, Buddhist nationalist movements, particularly Ma Ba Tha (Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion), gained unprecedented public prominence after 2011. Ma Ba Tha successfully lobbied for the passage of four "Race and Religion Protection Laws" between 2013-2015, including restrictions on interfaith marriage and religious conversion that disproportionately targeted Muslims.¹¹²

Although, the 2015 general elections delivered a landslide victory to Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), the constitutional framework altered this to a hybrid regime.¹¹³ By late 2016, the formation of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) provided a critical catalytic event. ARSA conducted coordinated attacks on border guard posts in October 2016, killing security personnel.¹¹⁴ The military's response was immediate and disproportionate, launching "clearance operations" that displaced nearly 87,000 Rohingya.¹¹⁵ The 2016 operations served as a precursor for the far more systematic violence that followed in August 2017.

Counterinsurgency

The counterinsurgency theory struggles significantly to explain this foundational period. While ARSA's October 2016 attacks provided a proximate trigger, the scale and nature of communal violence from 2012 onwards preceded any documented insurgent threat.¹¹⁶ The 2012 riots were intercommunal rather than counterinsurgent operations, yet security forces consistently targeted Rohingya civilians rather than separating combatants from non-combatants.¹¹⁷ The observable implication that operations should be confined to areas with documented ARSA activity is falsified by the geographic spread of violence across Rakhine State and into central Myanmar during 2012-2015, when ARSA did not yet exist as an organization.¹¹⁸

¹¹¹ Yoni, "Everyday Discrimination," 568; Zarni & Cowley, "The Slow-Burning Genocide of Myanmar's Rohingya," 692.

¹¹² Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within*, 102-104; Yoni, "Everyday Discrimination," 569.

¹¹³ Pedersen, "The 2021 Military Coup," 52-54; Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 194; Ardeth Maung Thawngmung and Saw Eh Htoo, "The Fractured Centre: 'Two-Headed Government' and Threats to the Peace Process in Myanmar," *Modern Asian Studies* 56, no. 2 (2022): 1-2.

¹¹⁴ Barany, "The Rohingya Predicament," 9.

¹¹⁵ UNHRC, "Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar." 2018.

¹¹⁶ Bouan, "Communal Violence in Myanmar," 478-479; Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within*, 121-123.

¹¹⁷ Bouan, "Communal Violence in Myanmar," 478-479; Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within*, 121-123; UNHRC, "Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar.", 2018.

¹¹⁸ Bouan, "Communal Violence in Myanmar," 478-479.

Furthermore, the military's response to ARSA's limited attacks was grossly disproportionate to the actual threat posed. ARSA was estimated to have fewer than 500 members with rudimentary weapons, compared to the Tatmadaw's sophisticated counterinsurgency apparatus developed through decades of conflict with well-armed Ethnic Armed Organizations like the Kachin Independence Army and Karen National Union.¹¹⁹ The predicted proportionality between threat level and response intensity is absent. The 2016 operations displaced 87,000 civilians in response to attacks by a group the military itself acknowledged was poorly equipped,¹²⁰ suggesting objectives beyond tactical counterinsurgency.¹²¹

Elite Ideology

The elite ideology theory finds substantial support during this period, though primarily as an enabling condition rather than a primary driver. The post-2011 flourishing of Ma Ba Tha demonstrates that exclusionary Buddhist nationalism became a legitimate, mainstream political force during democratization. Senior military officers, including Min Aung Hlaing, publicly associated with Ma Ba Tha events and rhetoric, suggesting either genuine ideological alignment or calculated political opportunism.¹²² The movement's successful legislative advocacy resulted in the 2015 Race and Religion Protection Laws, indicating state-level institutionalization of exclusionary nationalism.¹²³

However, the observable implication that violence should extend to all Muslim minorities is not supported by the evidence. While anti-Muslim rhetoric was broad, systematic violence during 2012-2016 remained focused on the Rohingya specifically, with other Muslim communities like the Panthay or Kaman facing discrimination but not organized mass atrocities.¹²⁴ This geographic and demographic specificity suggests that local territorial factors in Rakhine State, rather than national ideological imperatives, shaped targeting decisions.¹²⁵

Additionally, the military's relationship with Ma Ba Tha shifted instrumentally based on political convenience. By 2017, when Ma Ba Tha's political influence began threatening

¹¹⁹ Selth, "Myanmar's Armed Forces and the Rohingya Crisis,"; Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, 203.

¹²⁰ Barany, "The Rohingya Predicament," 9; UNHRC, "Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar."

¹²¹ Valentino, *Final Solutions*, 95.

¹²² Foxeus, "Buddhist Nationalism and the Rohingya Crisis," 423-424; Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within*, 102-104.

¹²³ Yoni, "Everyday Discrimination," 569-570.

¹²⁴ Huang, "Religion and Political Violence," 158.

¹²⁵ Yoni, "Everyday Discrimination," 570.

military prerogatives, the State Sangha Committee officially disbanded the organization, suggesting the military treated Buddhist nationalism as a tool to be controlled rather than an ideology to be served.¹²⁶ This pattern weakens the claim that eliminationist religious conviction drove military decision-making, as sincere ideological commitment would predict consistent support for Ma Ba Tha rather than suppression when politically expedient.

Popular Support

The popular support theory gains support specifically after the 2015 NLD victory. Prior to this, when the military-backed USDP governed, the strategic logic of generating anti-civilian sentiment through atrocity is absent.¹²⁷ The 2012 violence occurred under President Thein Sein's quasi-military government, when the primary political threat was not a democratic rival but internal military factionalism between Thein Sein and Speaker Shwe Mann.¹²⁸ This timing problem significantly weakens the theory's explanatory power for the 2012-2015 period.

However, from 2015-2017, the military faced a genuinely popular civilian government with electoral legitimacy that the Tatmadaw had never possessed.¹²⁹ The observable implication that the military would seek to demonstrate the NLD's incompetence and reassert its indispensability finds preliminary support. The 2016 operations occurred after the NLD had taken office but before it had consolidated administrative control, creating conditions where a security crisis could expose civilian weakness.¹³⁰ Yet the violence during this period remained insufficient in scale to constitute the "textbook ethnic cleansing" that would come in 2017,¹³¹ suggesting that civil-military rivalry may have been an escalating rather than determinative factor.¹³²

Intra-Military Rivalry

The intra-military rivalry theory provides the most comprehensive account for this period's dynamics. The 2008-2011 transition created acute factional instability within the Tatmadaw by disrupting established succession patterns and forcing senior generals into competitive civilian roles.¹³³ Min Aung Hlaing's appointment as Commander-in-Chief was controversial precisely because it broke seniority norms, passing over Western Command officers associated with

¹²⁶ Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within*, 111.

¹²⁷ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 194.

¹²⁸ van der Maat & Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 186-187.

¹²⁹ Pedersen, "The 2021 Military Coup," 52-54.

¹³⁰ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 195; Yoni, "Everyday Discrimination," 602.

¹³¹ UNHRC, "Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar."

¹³² Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 180.

¹³³ van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 183-187; Self, "Bounded Democratization," 863; Riedl et al., "Authoritarian-Led Democratization," 316.

Speaker Shwe Mann.¹³⁴ This created a structural vulnerability where Hlaing's position depended on either eliminating rivals or binding them in shared complicity.¹³⁵

The observable implication that violence should occur in areas controlled by rival factions is strongly supported by geographic evidence. The 2012 and 2016 operations occurred specifically in Rakhine State, the traditional base of the Western Command faction and Speaker Shwe Mann's political stronghold.¹³⁶ This geographic specificity is difficult to explain through counterinsurgency or ideology alone but becomes coherent under a consolidation logic where the violence forces Western Command officers to participate in internationally condemned operations.¹³⁷

However, direct evidence of Min Aung Hlaing orchestrating violence specifically to resolve internal rivalries remains circumstantial during this period. The systematic purge of Western Command officers that would confirm consolidation had not yet occurred by 2017, meaning the mechanism's predictions are partially fulfilled but not yet definitive.¹³⁸

5.2. 2017-2021: Elite Rivalry & Genocidal Escalation

The period from 2017 to 2021 represents the climax of Myanmar's paradox of genocidal democratization, marked by systematic mass atrocities followed by the definitive collapse of the transitional regime. On August 25, 2017, ARSA launched coordinated attacks on approximately 30 police posts and an army base in northern Rakhine State, killing twelve security personnel.¹³⁹ The military's response, termed "clearance operations," constituted what the United Nations Independent International Fact-Finding Mission later characterized as "genocidal intent" and a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing".¹⁴⁰ Over the following months, security forces and allied militias systematically destroyed over 350 Rohingya villages through mass killings, sexual violence, and deliberate burning of entire settlements.¹⁴¹ By March 2018,

¹³⁴ van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 186-187.

¹³⁵ van der Maat, "Genocidal Consolidation," 773-809; van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 189-191.

¹³⁶ van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 186-187.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 189-191.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 191-193.

¹³⁹ Khin, "Rohingya: A Preventable Genocide," 47-48.

¹⁴⁰ UNHRC, "Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar"; Barany, "Where Myanmar Went Wrong," 141-152.

¹⁴¹ Zarni and Cowley, "The Slow-Burning Genocide," 709.

over 740,000 Rohingya had fled to Bangladesh, creating one of the world's largest refugee populations.¹⁴²

Domestically, the operations achieved their most critical objective: forcing the NLD government into an impossible political position. State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, who had received the Nobel Peace Prize for her decades of pro-democracy advocacy, chose to defend the military's actions rather than condemn them.¹⁴³ This stance destroyed her international moral authority while failing to gain genuine domestic political capital, as Buddhist nationalist groups continued to view the NLD as insufficiently committed to the military's vision of national security.¹⁴⁴

The civil-military dynamics during this period were characterized by strategic asymmetry. The 2008 Constitution ensured that the military retained exclusive control over security operations in ethnic minority regions, meaning the NLD government possessed neither the legal authority nor institutional capacity to countermand military operations in Rakhine State.¹⁴⁵ The military's constitutional veto over amendments that would reduce its political role created a structural trap where any NLD attempt to meaningfully constrain military autonomy could trigger a constitutional crisis or coup.¹⁴⁶ The civilian government's complicity thus stemmed not from ideological alignment with genocidal policies but from institutional powerlessness combined with political calculation that openly challenging the military would precipitate regime collapse.¹⁴⁷

Crucially, the 2017 operations occurred at a moment of acute personal vulnerability for Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. Under military regulations, he faced mandatory retirement upon reaching age 65 in July 2021, which would remove him from institutional protection and potentially expose him to international prosecution for the atrocities.¹⁴⁸ Unlike previous commanders who had transitioned to civilian political roles, the 2008 Constitution barred active military officers from the presidency, and Min Aung Hlaing lacked the popular legitimacy to win civilian elections.¹⁴⁹ This created a temporal deadline where consolidating

¹⁴² Barany, "The Rohingya Predicament," 9; UNHRC, "Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar."

¹⁴³ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 195; Pedersen, "The 2021 Military Coup," 54.

¹⁴⁴ Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within*, 121-123.

¹⁴⁵ Thawngmung and Htoo, "The Fractured Centre," 1-2; Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 192.

¹⁴⁶ Riedl et al., "Authoritarian-Led Democratization," 318.

¹⁴⁷ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 195.

¹⁴⁸ van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 191-193; Pedersen, "The 2021 Military Coup," 52-54.

¹⁴⁹ Pedersen, "The 2021 Military Coup," 52-54.

unassailable power within the military became existentially necessary before retirement forced him into political vulnerability.¹⁵⁰

Between 2018 and 2020, Min Aung Hlaing conducted a systematic restructuring of the military command, where he purged or reassigned at least two regional commanders from the Western Command and reshuffled key Northwestern command positions.¹⁵¹ This reshuffling accelerated significantly after the NLD's landslide victory in the November 2020 general elections, which secured an even larger parliamentary majority than in 2015.¹⁵² The NLD's success meant that without constitutional amendment, the democratic transition would continue indefinitely, leaving Min Aung Hlaing to face retirement without securing a political position or immunity from prosecution.

On February 1st 2021, the military executed a coup d'état, preventing the newly elected parliament from convening and immediately annulled the 2020 election results to declare a state of emergency.¹⁵³ Critically, one of the State Administration Council's (SAC) first legislative acts was removing age limits for the senior general position, ensuring Min Aung Hlaing could remain Commander-in-Chief indefinitely.¹⁵⁴ This sequence from 2017 atrocities, to consolidation, to coup, to removal of retirement constraints reveals a coherent strategic arc centred on eliminating threats to Hlaing's personal power.¹⁵⁵

Counterinsurgency

The counterinsurgency theory fails to decisively explain this period across multiple observable implications. The first test, whether violence was proportionate to the insurgent threat is comprehensively falsified. This represents a casualty ratio and response scale that vastly exceeds counterinsurgency proportionality doctrine, even under permissive interpretations that allow for collateral damage.¹⁵⁶ The second test, whether operations were geographically confined to areas with documented insurgent activity is similarly falsified. ARSA's attacks

¹⁵⁰ van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 191-193; van der Maat, "Genocidal Consolidation," 773-809.

¹⁵¹ van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 191-193; Selth, "Myanmar's Armed Forces."

¹⁵² Pedersen, "The 2021 Military Coup," 52-54.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 42-43.

¹⁵⁴ van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 193.

¹⁵⁵ van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 172-194; van der Maat, "Genocidal Consolidation," 773-809.

¹⁵⁶ Valentino, *Final Solutions*, 95; Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 194.

occurred in specific townships along the Bangladesh border, yet military operations systematically targeted Rohingya villages across the entirety of northern Rakhine State.¹⁵⁷

Most critically, the operational patterns directly contradict counterinsurgency doctrine. The systematic burning of villages, mining of escape routes, and prevention of humanitarian access are designed to maximize permanent displacement rather than establish control and win civilian support.¹⁵⁸ These tactics align with ethnic cleansing objectives rather than the population-centric counterinsurgency approaches that emphasize protecting civilians from insurgents.¹⁵⁹ Additionally, if the military genuinely perceived ARSA as a severe threat requiring maximum force, this would contradict decades of Tatmadaw counterinsurgency experience against far more skilled EAOs like the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), where such genocidal tactics were not employed.¹⁶⁰

Elite Ideology

The elite ideology theory encounters significant challenges in explaining this period despite the initial plausibility. While Min Aung Hlaing made public statements defending Buddhism and characterizing the Rohingya as Bengalis, no documented operation orders explicitly invoke the protection of the *sāsana* as operational justification.¹⁶¹ This absence is not necessarily disconfirmatory given the opacity of military decision-making, but it prevents strong confirmation of ideological determinism.¹⁶² More challengingly, the predicted extension of violence to other Muslim minorities did not occur. If the military's primary motivation was defending Buddhism from Islamic threats, equivalent systematic violence should have targeted Myanmar's other significant Muslim populations, including the Panthay and Kaman.¹⁶³ This geographic and demographic specificity contradicts the logic of ideologically driven eliminationist violence, which should not discriminate between Muslim populations if the existential threat is Islam itself.¹⁶⁴

Furthermore, the military's relationship with Ma Ba Tha during this period reveals instrumental opportunism rather than ideological commitment. In 2017, when Ma Ba Tha's growing political influence began to threaten military control over Buddhist nationalism, the

¹⁵⁷ UNHRC, "Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar"; Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within*, 137-140.

¹⁵⁸ Zarni & Cowley, "The Slow-Burning Genocide," 709.

¹⁵⁹ Valentino et al, "Draining the Sea," 375.

¹⁶⁰ Selth, "Myanmar's Armed Forces"; Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, 203.

¹⁶¹ Foxeus, "Buddhist Nationalism and the Rohingya Crisis," 424-433.

¹⁶² Huang, "Religion and Political Violence," 151.

¹⁶³ Yoni, "Everyday Discrimination," 570.

¹⁶⁴ Huang, "Religion and Political Violence," 158; Valentino, *Final Solutions*, 110.

State Sangha Committee officially dissolved the organization.¹⁶⁵ Simultaneously, military officials attended Ma Ba Tha rallies and appropriated their rhetoric when politically convenient.¹⁶⁶ This pattern suggests the military manipulated Buddhist nationalist sentiment as a legitimizing tool rather than operating from sincere religious conviction.¹⁶⁷ If elite ideology were determinative, we would expect consistent alliance with Ma Ba Tha rather than suppression when the movement's independence threatened military prerogatives.

The theory does, however, explain one critical aspect: the absence of significant domestic opposition to the genocide. The decades-long construction of Rohingya as existential others ensured that neither the NLD government, Buddhist clergy, nor general population mobilized against the atrocities.¹⁶⁸ This ideological consensus created permissive conditions enabling violence but cannot explain why violence escalated to genocidal scale specifically in 2017 rather than earlier or later periods when the same ideological framework existed.¹⁶⁹

Popular Support

The popular support theory finds substantial support during the 2017-2020 period, though its explanatory power weakens in specific areas. The timing of the operations, occurring after the NLD had governed for 18 months and established both domestic and international legitimacy aligns with predictions that the military would engineer a crisis to reassert its indispensability.¹⁷⁰ The observable implication that military rhetoric should focus on delegitimizing the civilian government is partially confirmed by post-operation military communications emphasizing the NLD's inability to manage security threats and protect Buddhism.¹⁷¹

Most critically, the operations achieved their predicted effect of trapping the NLD in an impossible political dilemma. Buddhist nationalist groups continued to portray the NLD as insufficiently committed to national security, while international human rights advocates condemned Suu Kyi's complicity in genocide.¹⁷² This dual delegitimization weakened the

¹⁶⁵ Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within*, 111.

¹⁶⁶ Foxeus, "Buddhist Nationalism and the Rohingya Crisis," 424.

¹⁶⁷ Huang, "Religion and Political Violence," 151.

¹⁶⁸ Zakaria, "The Moral Panic over the Rohingya," 102-105; Foxeus, "Buddhist Nationalism and the Rohingya Crisis," 423-424; Cheesman, "How in Myanmar 'National Races' Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya," 461-463.

¹⁶⁹ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 180.

¹⁷⁰ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 195; Yoni, "Everyday Discrimination," 602.

¹⁷¹ Foxeus, "Buddhist Nationalism and the Rohingya Crisis," 424.

¹⁷² Pedersen, "The 2021 Military Coup," 54; Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 195; Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within*, 121-123.

NLD's position both internationally and domestically, confirming the military's objective of demonstrating that civilian governance posed dangers to national unity and Buddhist civilization.¹⁷³

However, the theory faces a significant challenge regarding the scale of violence. While creating a security crisis serves the political purpose of demonstrating NLD incompetence, the genocidal character of the operations exceeds what would be strictly necessary for political delegitimization.¹⁷⁴ This suggests that popular support seeking, while an important objective, cannot fully explain the extreme brutality and permanence of the displacement. Additionally, the theory's most critical prediction, that violence against the Rohingya would significantly decline after the military seized total power in 2021, is contradicted by subsequent events. Violence in Rakhine State intensified rather than diminished after the coup, with both the military and the Arakan Army (AA) perpetrating new atrocities against Rohingya civilians.¹⁷⁵ This persistence of violence after the elimination of the NLD rival suggests that civil-military competition was one among multiple drivers rather than the exclusive or primary cause.¹⁷⁶

Intra-Military Rivalry

The intra-military rivalry theory provides the most comprehensive explanation for the 2017-2021 period, satisfying nearly all observable implications. The temporal connection between the operations and Min Aung Hlaing's retirement crisis is explicit and documented. The violence occurred precisely when Hlaing faced July 2021 mandatory retirement, which would remove him from institutional protection and potentially expose him to international prosecution.¹⁷⁷ This created acute urgency to consolidate unassailable power before the retirement deadline, providing clear motive for risk-taking that might otherwise seem strategically irrational.

The geographic concentration of operations in Rakhine State aligns with factional rivalry predictions. Rakhine was traditionally the stronghold of the Western Command faction associated with rivals like former Speaker Shwe Mann and Lt. Gen. Myint Aung.¹⁷⁸ By

¹⁷³ Foxeus, "Buddhist Nationalism and the Rohingya Crisis," 424.

¹⁷⁴ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 180; Valentino, *Final Solutions*, 95.

¹⁷⁵ United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHRC), "Situation of Human Rights of Rohingya Muslims and Other Minorities in Myanmar," A/HRC/60/20, United Nations, August 29, 2025; International Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM), "The Destruction and Dispossession of Rohingya Land and Property during the 2017 Clearance Operations: Public Summary," United Nations, September 29, 2025.

¹⁷⁶ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 195; Yoni, "Everyday Discrimination," 570.

¹⁷⁷ Pedersen, "The 2021 Military Coup," 52-54.

¹⁷⁸ van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 186-187.

conducting massive operations in Western Command territory, Hlaing forced these rival officers to directly participate in internationally condemned atrocities. This forced participation created shared complicity that bound officers together in mutual legal vulnerability, eliminating their ability to defect or attempt coups without risking their own prosecution.¹⁷⁹ The observable implication regarding post-violence reshuffling is strongly confirmed. Between 2018 and 2020, Min Aung Hlaing systematically purged and reshuffled various officers from rival factions.¹⁸⁰ These personnel changes occurred specifically in regions where the 2017 operations had taken place, confirming the pattern predicted by consolidation theory. Officers who participated in the genocide now shared liability with Hlaing, creating incentive structures where protecting the commander-in-chief became synonymous with protecting themselves from accountability.

The theory's most powerful confirmation comes from the 2021 coup sequence and its immediate aftermath. The coup prevented parliament from convening, detained all potential political rivals, and established the State Administration Council with Hlaing as chairman.¹⁸¹ The only observable implication not fully satisfied is direct documentary evidence of Hlaing explicitly orchestrating violence to resolve factional rivalry, which remains circumstantial due to the intentional opacity of military decision-making. However, applying the remedial instruments for missing data, the absence is explicable through the Tatmadaw's strong institutional incentives to obscure elite power struggles and avoid documenting genocidal intent.¹⁸² The preceding step (retirement crisis) and the subsequent step (purge and coup) are both documented, making the intervening consolidation logic logically sufficient even without direct evidence of elite deliberations.¹⁸³

5.3. Post 2021 Aftermath: State Failure & Continued Violence

The February 1st 2021 military coup marked the definitive end of Myanmar's democratic transition, transforming the country from a failing hybrid regime into a landscape of comprehensive state collapse and multi-front civil war. The coup sparked immediate mass protests, with millions of citizens demanding the military's withdrawal from politics and the restoration of the elected NLD government.¹⁸⁴ The military's response to these peaceful demonstrations was swift and lethal. Security forces employed live ammunition against

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 183-187.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 191-193.

¹⁸¹ Pedersen, "The 2021 Military Coup," 42-43.

¹⁸² Gonzalez-Ocantos & LaPorte, "Process Tracing," 1412.

¹⁸³ Ibid, 1422.

¹⁸⁴ Pedersen, "The 2021 Military Coup," 46-47.

crowds, conducted nighttime raids on residential areas, arbitrarily detained thousands of protesters, and systematically tortured detainees to suppress dissent.¹⁸⁵

The brutality of the military's response radicalized the opposition movement far beyond the NLD's original demands for democratic restoration. By mid-2021, armed resistance crystallized around two overlapping structures. First, the National Unity Government (NUG), formed by ousted parliamentarians and ethnic representatives, declared the formation of People's Defense Forces (PDFs), locally organized militias comprising predominantly young urban activists with no prior military training.¹⁸⁶ Second, established EAOs which had maintained territorial control in Myanmar's borderlands for decades, dramatically expanded their operations.¹⁸⁷ The Arakan Army (AA) in Rakhine State, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in the north, and the Karen National Union (KNU) in the east all escalated military activities against the Tatmadaw.¹⁸⁸

The coup's strategic context in Rakhine State proved particularly consequential. From 2019 to 2020, the AA had fought an intense campaign against the military, gaining control over significant territory in northern Rakhine and establishing parallel governance structures.¹⁸⁹ The AA's territorial gains between late 2023 and mid-2024 fundamentally altered Rakhine's power dynamics. This territorial expansion placed the Rohingya in an untenable position, caught between the Tatmadaw's increasingly desperate attempts to maintain control and the AA's consolidation of an ethnically Rakhine dominated state.¹⁹⁰ The violence against Rohingya communities intensified dramatically during this period, perpetrated by both the military and the Arakan Army.

The military's nationwide strategic position deteriorated catastrophically during this period. By January 2025, the Tatmadaw controlled an estimated 21% of Myanmar's territory, down from approximately 80% at the time of the coup.¹⁹¹ The military faced active combat on at least 14 fronts simultaneously, stretched between resistance forces in central Myanmar, the AA in Rakhine State, the KIA in Kachin State, and coordinated PDF-EAO operations in

¹⁸⁵ Human Rights Watch, "Myanmar: Year of Brutality in Coup's Wake," January 28, 2022.

¹⁸⁶ Pedersen, "The 2021 Military Coup," 48-50; Ye Myo Hein, "Myanmar's Escalating Crisis: A Year in Review and the Road Ahead," United States Institute of Peace, January 15, 2025.

¹⁸⁷ Michael Michaels, "Myanmar's War to Nowhere," International Institute for Strategic Studies, August 2025.

¹⁸⁸ Zsombor Peter, "Myanmar's Rebels Closing in around Junta into Fifth Year of Civil War," *Voice of America*, January 31, 2025.

¹⁸⁹ UNHRC, "Situation of Human Rights of Rohingya Muslims"; Michaels, "Myanmar's War to Nowhere."

¹⁹⁰ Human Rights Watch, "Myanmar: Armies Target Ethnic Rohingya, Rakhine," August 12, 2024.

¹⁹¹ Peter, "Myanmar's Rebels Closing in"; Michaels, "Myanmar's War to Nowhere."

Sagaing and Karen regions.¹⁹² The institutional degradation extended beyond territorial losses to fundamental capability collapse. To compensate for territorial losses and manpower shortages, the military adopted increasingly indiscriminate violence tactics. This scorched-earth approach represents a strategic adaptation to military weakness, where the Tatmadaw, unable to hold territory through ground forces, seeks to deny its usefulness to opponents through comprehensive destruction.¹⁹³

The violence in Rakhine State during this period serves a dual strategic function for the collapsing regime. First, by creating extreme instability and exacerbating ethnic tensions between Rakhine Buddhists, represented by the AA and Rohingya Muslims, the military ensures that the AA remains preoccupied with local governance challenges rather than committing forces to the broader federal resistance coordinated by the NUG.¹⁹⁴ The systematic displacement of Rohingya populations creates humanitarian crises that drain AA resources and political capital, making alliance with other EAOs more difficult.¹⁹⁵ Second, the continued persecution of the Rohingya serves to maintain cohesion within the Tatmadaw itself by reinforcing the shared liability created in 2017.¹⁹⁶ Officers who participated in previous atrocities remain bound to the regime's survival, as its collapse would expose them to international prosecution.¹⁹⁷

Counterinsurgency

The counterinsurgency theory faces a significant explanatory divergence during this period, where the military now confronts genuine, large-scale armed resistance across the country, creating conditions where counterinsurgency logic should theoretically become more applicable. However, the evidence demonstrates that the Tatmadaw abandoned discriminate counterinsurgency in favour of mass indiscriminate violence, thereby violating the mechanism's core predictions even when facing legitimate insurgent threats.¹⁹⁸

The operations in Rakhine State specifically contradict counterinsurgency doctrine despite the presence of the AA, a highly capable EAO with artillery, armoured vehicles, and

¹⁹² Michaels, "Myanmar's War to Nowhere"; Ye Myo Hein, "Myanmar's Escalating Crisis"; Peter, "Myanmar's Rebels Closing in."

¹⁹³ Michaels, "Myanmar's War to Nowhere"; Ye Myo Hein, "Myanmar's Escalating Crisis."

¹⁹⁴ Pedersen, "The 2021 Military Coup," 62-63.

¹⁹⁵ Michaels, "Myanmar's War to Nowhere"; UNHRC, "Situation of Human Rights of Rohingya Muslims."

¹⁹⁶ van der Maat, "Genocidal Consolidation," 806; Selth, "Myanmar's Armed Forces."

¹⁹⁷ Pedersen, "The 2021 Military Coup," 52-54.

¹⁹⁸ IIMM, "The Destruction and Dispossession of Rohingya Land"; UNHRC, "Situation of Human Rights of Rohingya Muslims"; Michaels, "Myanmar's War to Nowhere."

an estimated 30,000 trained fighters.¹⁹⁹ If the military were following counterinsurgency logic, operations should concentrate on separating the AA from civilian populations, protecting non-combatants, and establishing governance in cleared areas.²⁰⁰ Instead, the military's 554 airstrikes between November 2023 and August 2024 predominantly targeted civilian infrastructure, regardless of AA presence.²⁰¹ This indiscriminate destruction suggests objectives of denying territory through depopulation rather than establishing control through population-centric counterinsurgency.

Most critically, the violence against Rohingya populations cannot be explained through counterinsurgency logic during this period because the Rohingya were not aligned with the AA and often faced persecution by the ethnic Rakhine armed group.²⁰² The military's response to actual insurgent threats has been mass indiscriminate violence, deliberate targeting of civilian infrastructure, and systematic displacement rather than the population protection and discriminate targeting that counterinsurgency theory predicts.²⁰³ This demonstrates that even when security threats are genuine and severe, the military's operational logic prioritizes ethnic control and territorial denial over counterinsurgency principles.²⁰⁴

Elite Ideology

The elite ideology theory encounters significant challenges in explaining the post-coup period, as the patterns of violence contradict predictions of religiously motivated eliminationism. The most critical falsification comes from the Arakan Army's perpetration of atrocities against the Rohingya. The AA is an ethnic Rakhine Buddhist organization that shares the same religious identity and many of the same anti-Muslim ideological frameworks as the Tatmadaw.²⁰⁵ If Buddhist extremism were the primary driver of anti-Rohingya violence, we would expect the AA to either protect Rohingya civilians as part of a broader opposition to military dictatorship or at minimum, not perpetrate equivalent atrocities. The AA's behaviour indicates that both the military and the ethnic armed opposition share objectives of eliminating Rohingya presence

¹⁹⁹ Michaels, "Myanmar's War to Nowhere"; Peter, "Myanmar's Rebels Closing in."

²⁰⁰ Valentino, Huth, and Balch-Lindsay, "'Draining the Sea,'" 375.

²⁰¹ IIMM, "The Destruction and Dispossession of Rohingya Land"; UNHRC, "Situation of Human Rights of Rohingya Muslims"; Human Rights Watch, "Myanmar: Armies Target Ethnic Rohingya."

²⁰² UNHRC, "Situation of Human Rights of Rohingya Muslims"; Human Rights Watch, "Myanmar: Armies Target Ethnic Rohingya."

²⁰³ Valentino, Huth, and Balch-Lindsay, "'Draining the Sea,'" 375.

²⁰⁴ Michaels, "Myanmar's War to Nowhere"; Ye Myo Hein, "Myanmar's Escalating Crisis."

²⁰⁵ Foxeus, "Buddhist Nationalism and the Rohingya Crisis," 424; UNHRC, "Situation of Human Rights of Rohingya Muslims."

regardless of their opposed stances on democracy and military dictatorship.²⁰⁶ This pattern suggests that anti-Rohingya violence transcends ideological Buddhism and instead reflects territorial control objectives and ethnic demographic engineering in Rakhine State.²⁰⁷

Additionally, if elite ideology were determinative, the military's violence patterns should remain focused on Muslim minorities even as it faces existential threats from predominantly Buddhist EAOs and PDF forces. However, the military's indiscriminate violence has expanded to include mass atrocities against Buddhist civilian populations in Sagaing, Kachin, and Karenni states, areas with no significant Muslim populations.²⁰⁸ The theory does retain some explanatory power regarding why the Rohingya remain uniquely vulnerable despite the changing conflict dynamics. The decades-long ideological construction of Rohingya as non-citizens and foreign invaders ensures that neither the military, the AA, nor the broader resistance movement prioritizes their protection.²⁰⁹

Popular Support

The popular support theory faces its most decisive falsification during this period through the predicted cessation of anti-Rohingya violence after the military seized total power. The core logic of the popular support mechanism posited that violence served to delegitimize the NLD and demonstrate military indispensability, suggesting that once the civilian rival was eliminated, the strategic rationale for atrocities would disappear.²¹⁰ The post-coup evidence comprehensively contradicts this prediction. Not only has violence against the Rohingya persisted after February 2021, but it has also intensified to levels approaching the 2017 genocide. This escalation occurred when no civilian government existed to delegitimize, falsifying the theory's primary causal mechanism.

Furthermore, the military's violence has expanded dramatically beyond the Rohingya to include mass atrocities against predominantly Buddhist populations across central and northern Myanmar. If the primary objective were generating popular support through nationalist scapegoating, the military would concentrate violence on the historically excluded Rohingya minority while protecting or at minimum not targeting Buddhist civilian populations.

²⁰⁶ NHRC, "Situation of Human Rights of Rohingya Muslims"; Human Rights Watch, "Myanmar: Armies Target Ethnic Rohingya."

²⁰⁷ Yoni, "Everyday Discrimination," 570.

²⁰⁸ IIMM, "The Destruction and Dispossession of Rohingya Land"; UNHRC, "Situation of Human Rights of Rohingya Muslims"; Ye Myo Hein, "Myanmar's Escalating Crisis."

²⁰⁹ Zakaria, "The Moral Panic over the Rohingya," 102-105; Cheesman, "How in Myanmar 'National Races' Came to Surpass Citizenship," 461-463.

²¹⁰ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 195.

Instead, the military has conducted indiscriminate bombardment of Buddhist-majority areas of Sagaing, Kachin, and Karenni states, as mentioned earlier.²¹¹ This pattern indicates that violence serves military control objectives rather than popular legitimacy seeking.

The theory's failure is particularly evident when examining the military's domestic political standing. Rather than generating popular support, the coup and subsequent violence have provoked the most significant popular opposition in Myanmar's modern history, with millions participating in protests and armed resistance.²¹² Opinion polling is unavailable due to conflict conditions, but proxy indicators such as mass defections, recruitment difficulties, territory controlled by opposition, all suggest the military has catastrophically failed to build popular legitimacy. One partial validation comes from the military's apparent strategy in Rakhine State of exacerbating ethnic tensions between the AA and Rohingya populations. This represents a form of strategic manipulation of ethnic divisions, though focused on dividing opposition forces rather than building popular support for the regime. However, this limited strategic logic cannot explain the scale, systematicity, or operational patterns of post-2021 violence.

Intra-Military Rivalry

The intra-military rivalry theory maintains substantial explanatory power during this period, though the mechanism's operation shifts from consolidation toward institutional survival under existential threat. The coup's successful execution without internal military opposition strongly confirms the theory's prediction that the 2017-2021 period achieved comprehensive elite cohesion through shared complicity.²¹³ No documented coup attempts, mutinies, or factional resistance occurred during the February 2021 seizure of power, indicating that Min Aung Hlaing had successfully eliminated rival power centers within the Tatmadaw.²¹⁴

The immediate post-coup removal of age limits for the senior general position directly fulfills the theory's prediction that institutional constraints triggering the original violence would be eliminated once total power was secured.²¹⁵ This legislative act confirms that avoiding retirement and the associated vulnerability to international prosecution was indeed a

²¹¹ IIMM, "The Destruction and Dispossession of Rohingya Land"; UNHRC, "Situation of Human Rights of Rohingya Muslims."

²¹² Pedersen, "The 2021 Military Coup," 46-47.

²¹³ van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 193; Pedersen, "The 2021 Military Coup," 42-43; van der Maat, "Genocidal Consolidation," 773-809.

²¹⁴ Selth, "Myanmar's Armed Forces."; van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 193.

²¹⁵ Pedersen, "The 2021 Military Coup," 42; van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 193.

primary objective driving the 2017 consolidation strategy.²¹⁶ The continued violence in Rakhine State serves a critical function within this framework: maintaining the shared complicity that binds the military elite together.²¹⁷ As the regime faces comprehensive territorial losses, defections, and international isolation, the cohesion created through participation in the 2017 genocide becomes even more critical for regime survival.²¹⁸

Additionally, the extreme violence against civilian populations across Myanmar serves to prevent elite defection through escalating commitment mechanisms. As the military perpetrates increasingly severe atrocities, the costs of regime collapse for senior officers increase proportionally.²¹⁹ This creates perverse incentives where continued violence, even when strategically counterproductive from a conflict-winning perspective, becomes rational from an elite survival perspective because it deepens the complicity trap.²²⁰

However, the theory faces challenges explaining the Arakan Army's independent perpetration of atrocities against the Rohingya. The AA is not part of the Tatmadaw's command structure, operates independently, and faces different institutional dynamics.²²¹ This suggests that although intra-military consolidation appears to be a primary driver of the violence, it cannot sufficiently explain the scope of the crisis on its own. Rather, the evidence points toward territorial control objectives and ethnic demographic engineering in Rakhine State as critical, parallel drivers that sustain anti-Rohingya violence across various actor types.²²²

6. Conclusion

This study addressed a central research puzzle: What explains the violence of the military towards the end of the democratic transition in Myanmar? The research has demonstrated that the sudden transition from localized repression to systematic mass atrocity in Myanmar was primarily catalysed by internal power struggles and structural consolidation within the

²¹⁶ Pedersen, "The 2021 Military Coup," 52-54; van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 191-193; van der Maat, "Genocidal Consolidation," 773-809.

²¹⁷ van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 183-187.

²¹⁸ Pedersen, "The 2021 Military Coup," 52-54; van der Maat, "Genocidal Consolidation," 806; Michaels, "Myanmar's War to Nowhere."

²¹⁹ van der Maat, "Genocidal Consolidation," 773-809.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 806.

²²¹ UNHRC, "Situation of Human Rights of Rohingya Muslims"; Human Rights Watch, "Myanmar: Armies Target Ethnic Rohingya"; Pedersen, "The 2021 Military Coup," 62-63.

²²² Yoni, "Everyday Discrimination," 570.

Tatmadaw.²²³ Through systematic process tracing of four theories and their competing causal mechanisms across three distinct temporal phases, the analysis reveals that Myanmar's genocidal violence during democratic transition was primarily driven by intra-military elite consolidation, with other factors serving as enabling conditions rather than primary drivers.

While established frameworks such as counterinsurgency logic²²⁴ and Buddhist nationalist ideology²²⁵ provide necessary context, they are unable to interpret the strategic choice of extreme, indiscriminate violence at a time when the military possessed the capacity for more targeted operations.²²⁶ Furthermore, the persistence of this brutality following the 2021 coup suggests that the violence serves an internal function beyond immediate competition with civilian rivals like the NLD, especially as such actions have become strategically and diplomatically costly for the regime.²²⁷

The findings of this study suggest that the "genocidal personalization" framework²²⁸ offers a more robust explanation for this strategic anomaly. The evidence indicates that Senior General Min Aung Hlaing faced an acute personal crisis due to his impending mandatory retirement and the lack of a clear institutional path to maintain his authority in a reforming state. General Min Aung Hlaing used the violence to consolidate power and eliminate rival factions within the military, to create shared complicity traps that bound potential opponents through mutual legal vulnerability.²²⁹ The evidence claims that there is possible a correlation between Hlaing's consolidation of power and the violence in Rakhine State.²³⁰

The structural outcomes of the 2017 operations provide strong empirical support for this consolidation thesis. The subsequent purging of the Western Command and the systematic reshuffling of senior leadership allowed Hlaing to replace potential challengers with loyalists, effectively personalizing the security apparatus.²³¹ The successful execution of the 2021 coup without significant internal resistance stands as the ultimate proof of this successful personalization.²³² While the inherent secrecy of the Tatmadaw's decision-making processes

²²³ van der Maat and van der Spijk, "Violent Consolidation."; van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization."

²²⁴ Valentino, Huth, and Balch-Lindsay, "Draining the Sea."

²²⁵ Foxeus, "Buddhist Nationalism and the Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar."

²²⁶ van der Maat and van der Spijk, "Violent Consolidation."

²²⁷ Pedersen, "The 2021 Military Coup in Myanmar."

²²⁸ van der Maat and van der Spijk, "Violent Consolidation."

²²⁹ van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 193.

²³⁰ van der Maat and van der Spijk, "Violent Consolidation."

²³¹ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide."

²³² van der Maat and van der Spijk, "Violent Consolidation."

limits access to direct documentation of intent, the close alignment between the timing of the atrocities and Hlaing's subsequent removal of retirement age limits creates a compelling case for the role of elite consolidation.

This study faces several limitations. First, intentional opacity of military decision-making means direct evidence of elite deliberations regarding consolidation strategy remains circumstantial. Future research with access to internal military communications could further validate findings. Second, the analysis focused primarily on Tatmadaw violence, with less systematic attention to Arakan Army's independent atrocity perpetration. Future research should examine how sub-national territorial competition and local ethnic dynamics interact with national-level elite struggles. Third, while demonstrating genocide served Hlaing's consolidation objectives, the study does not fully explain why this specific tool was chosen over alternative strategies. Comparative analysis of authoritarian consolidation strategies could illuminate why some insecure leaders employ genocide while others pursue lesser extreme measures. Finally, Myanmar's post-2021 period remains ongoing. The ultimate outcome will provide crucial evidence for evaluating long-term efficacy of genocide as consolidation strategy.

By analyzing these strategic underpinnings, this research offers broader implications for the research on Myanmar, democratic transitions, and mass atrocities. It frames the 2017 Rohingya genocide not as a security failure, but as a calculated mechanism for elite survival and institutional restructuring.²³³ These findings challenge conventional transition theories by illustrating how military elites in hybrid regimes can weaponize violence against marginalized outgroups to facilitate authoritarian consolidation rather than peace.²³⁴ While exclusionary ideologies like Buddhist nationalism create the permissive environment for such atrocities,²³⁵ this analysis demonstrates that they are often instrumentalized to serve the private power interests of the military hierarchy.²³⁶ Recognizing these internal drivers is essential for improving international policy and the prediction of atrocities in states undergoing democratic transitions.²³⁷

²³³ van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 180; Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 180.

²³⁴ van der Maat and Holmes, "The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization," 172.

²³⁵ Foxeus, "Buddhist Nationalism and the Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar."

²³⁶ van der Maat and van der Spijk, "Violent Consolidation," 36.

²³⁷ Ibid.

Ultimately, this paper emphasizes how internal elite rivalries and "military anxiety" can act as primary drivers of mass atrocities.²³⁸ By illustrating how violence against marginalized minorities can be weaponized to secure a leader's grip on power, this research challenges the notion that state-led violence is always a rational response to external security threats.

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²³⁸ Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide," 180.

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