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Maat, E. van der; Holmes, A.

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The Puzzle of Genocidal Democratization: Military Rivalry and Atrocity in Myanmar

Eelco van der Maat ⬤ and Arthur Holmes

Institute for History, Leiden University, Leiden, the Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Why did the Myanmar military initiate mass atrocities in Rakhine state alongside radical democratic reforms? We argue that the atrocities in Rakhine were driven by intra-military rivalry. The transition to democracy was a generational transition of the military leadership that brought pre-existing rivalries within the military to the fore. As is common to military regimes, Myanmar military elites rely on regional support bases. The democratic transition coincided with a transition of power from generals with a Western support base – e.g. Shwe Mann – to generals with an Eastern support base – e.g. Thein Sein and Min Aung Hlaing. We argue that atrocities can strengthen control over security services by raising militias, locking rival units in the execution of the violence, and restructuring units under a new command. We demonstrate how atrocities in the Western Rakhine province served to consolidate power over the western faction of the military and allowed General Hlaing to consolidate.

A landslide electoral victory of the National League for Democracy promised an end to ethnic and civil conflict in Myanmar. Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi was to initiate reforms, complete Myanmar's democratic transition, and open the country to the international community. Only two years later, however, Myanmar embarked on an unprecedented mass atrocity[1] campaign to expel Rohingya Muslims from the north-western state of Rakhine (i.e. Arakan). Through systematic razing of villages, rape, and killing, Myanmar's military junta – the Tatmadaw – displaced over 800,000 Rohingya.[2] Myanmar's apparent democratic transition thus coincided with unprecedented atrocity. Why did Myanmar embark on a mass atrocity campaign? And why did it do so at a time of seeming democratization?

The military claims that it was conducting counter-insurgency operations.[3] At its surface, this seems plausible. Myanmar has a history of insurgency and mass atrocity

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[1] The breadth of crimes included apartheid, enslavement, mass rape, mass sexual violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide captured under the term "mass atrocities." United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar*, Thirty-ninth session, 10–28 September 2018, A/HRC/39/64.

[2] UNHRC, *Fact-Finding Mission*. The 2017 violence was the latest episode in a sustained period of anti-Rohingya atrocities that began in 2012. Penny Green, Thomas MacManus, and Alicia de la Cour Venning, *Countdown to Annihilation: Genocide in Myanmar* (London, 2015).

[3] UNHRC, *Fact-Finding Mission*.

can be part of counter-insurgency operations to "drain the sea' in which rebels swim."[4] However, no meaningful Rohingya insurgency existed when atrocities began in 2012.[5] Indeed, atrocities seem to only have emboldened Rohingya resistance.[6]

Scholarship that rejects the military's explanation posits anti-Rohingya atrocities as a direct consequence of government driven stigmatization.[7] However, stigmatization of Rohingya has been a constant in Burmese politics[8] and therefore cannot explain the start of a sustained atrocity campaign in 2012. Moreover, as noted above, the timing of the violence seems peculiar, as Myanmar sought to re-join the international community.[9] Not only had Myanmar's military rulers adopted a new constitution that culminated in landmark elections but the generals themselves had transitioned to civilian rule.[10] Given that the military had held de facto control of Myanmar from 1962 to 2010, why then did they embark on a mass atrocity campaign alongside radical pro-democracy reforms, and not before?

Problematizing this peculiar co-occurrence of democratization and mass violence should help us to better understand their dynamics. Some promising studies have explicitly focused on Myanmar's democratization and pose that atrocities may be driven by civil–military competition resulting from democratization. We pose that democratization also generated rivalry within the military that could account for the atrocities.

The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, by examining power shifts within the military that resulted from democratization, the paper contributes to a better understanding of Myanmar's military and its role in atrocities. Particularly, we argue that the atrocities were affected by strategic incentives of Myanmar's new military leadership. The paper demonstrates how atrocities in Rakhine strengthened the position of Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing versus rival military elites. While atrocities against Rohingya followed decades of state and Buddhist nationalist propaganda,[11] we argue that the atrocities were a by-product of military rivalry that resulted from democratic transition.

Second, building on recent research on elite rivalry in authoritarian regimes,[12] the paper suggests new mechanisms for a previously suggested relationship between democratization and mass violence.[13] Myanmar demonstrates how democratization can destabilize intra-military relationships and generate elite rivalry. Pre-existing factionalism

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[4] Benjamin Valentino, Paul Huth, and Dylan Balch-Lindsay, "Draining the Sea: Mass Killing and Guerrilla Warfare," *International Organization* 58, no. 2 (2004): 375–407.

[5] E.g. Elliot Brennan and Christopher O'Hara, "Rohingya and Islamic Extremism: A Convenient Myth," *Policy Institute for Security and Development Policy*, Policy Brief 181 (2015).

[6] The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA—not to be confused with the Arakan Army), a small and ill-equipped insurgency group became active in 2016. E.g. Peter Lehr, *Militant Buddhism: The Rise of Religious Violence in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

[7] E.g. Green et al., *Countdown to Annihilation*; Azeem Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Genocide* (Glasgow: C. Hurst, 2018); Hans-Bernd Zöllner, *Caught Between the Crocodile and the Snake: Contexts of the "Rohingya Issue"* (University of Windsor, Universiti Sains Malaysia and Berghof Foundation, 2017).

[8] Particularly since the Rohingya minority was rendered stateless in 1982. Ibrahim *The Rohingyas*, 51.

[9] Renaud Egreteau. "Foreign Policy and Political Changes in Post-Junta Myanmar," in *Routledge Handbook of Asian Security Studies*, ed. Sumit Ganguly, Andrew Scobel, and Joseph Chinyong Liow (London: Routledge, 2018), 301–11.

[10] E.g. Seth Mydans, "President Replaces Junta in Military Shadow Play," *New York Times*, 30 March 2011; Lee Jones, "Explaining Myanmar's Regime Transition: The Periphery is Central," *Democratization* 21, no. 5 (2014): 780–802.

[11] E.g. Lehr, *Militant Buddhism*.

[12] E.g. Giacomo Chiozza and Hein Erich Goemans, *Leaders and International Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011); Eelco van der Maat, "Genocidal Consolidation: Final Solutions to Elite Rivalry," *International Organization* 74, no. 4 (2020): 773–809.

[13] Lars-Erik Cederman, Simon Hug, and Lutz F. Krebs, "Democratization and Civil War: Empirical Evidence," *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 4 (2010): 377–94.

within the military turned salient with the resignations of the entire military top. We argue that the new leadership ultimately utilized mass atrocities to consolidate their position and resolve this rivalry.

Democratization and Atrocities

Why did the Myanmar military embark on a mass atrocity campaign during a process of democratization? We pose that the pressures of democratization can trigger atrocities. While there is a broad scholarship on democracy and peace,[14] some recent studies suggest a relationship between democratization and violence as well.[15] Two of these explanations tie directly into dominant general explanations for mass atrocities: first, democratization could affect civil conflict over government or territory,[16] which can result in atrocities as part of counter-insurgency campaigns;[17] and second, democratization could give rise to extremist ideology,[18] which remains the dominant explanation for mass atrocity.[19] A third explanation suggests that democratization in military regimes can lead the military to instigate atrocities to safeguard their position versus civilian rivals.[20] We argue that none of these explanations fully explain the violence, however.

Democratization can lead to insurgency when minority groups seek independence.[21] At first glance, it may seem plausible that atrocities against Rohingya are part of a counter-insurgency campaign. A wide body of scholarship argues that atrocities can be effective in fighting insurgencies.[22] Through coercion or popular support, insurgents rely on civilians for food, supplies, cover, and recruitment.[23] Unable to target insurgents directly, the government can adopt atrocities against civilians to "*drain the sea in which rebels swim*": by removing the civilian population, the government can cut rebels from vital civilian support.[24]

However, the indiscriminate violence of atrocities[25] also generates resistance and may invite foreign intervention or sanctions. Atrocities are therefore mostly effective as a

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[14] E.g. see for an overview Håvard Hegre, "Democracy and Armed Conflict," *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (2014): 159–72.

[15] Cederman et al., *Democratization and Civil War*; Lars-Erik Cederman, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Simon Hug, "Elections and Ethnic Civil War," *Comparative Political Studies* 46, no. 3 (2013): 387–417.

[16] E.g. Cederman et al., *Democratization and Civil War*; Cederman et al., *Elections and Ethnic Civil War*.

[17] E.g. Yuri M. Zhukov, "Counterinsurgency in a Non-Democratic State: The Russian Example," in *Routledge Companion to Insurgency and Counter Insurgency*, ed. Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Paul Rich (London: Routledge, 2010), 286–300; Jason Lyall, "Does Indiscriminate Violence Incite Insurgent Attacks? Evidence from Chechnya," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, no. 3 (2009): 331–62; Benjamin A. Valentino, *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the Twentieth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); and Valentino, et al., *Draining the Sea*.

[18] Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[19] E.g. Scott Straus, *Making and Unmaking Nations: War, Leadership, and Genocide in Modern Africa* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015); Benjamin A. Valentino, "Why We Kill: The Political Science of Political Violence against Civilians," *Annual Review of Political Science* 17 (2014): 89–103.

[20] Chris Wilson, "Military Anxiety and Genocide: Explaining Campaigns of Annihilation (and Their Absence)," *Journal of Genocide Research* 21, no. 2 (2019): 178–200; Darin Christensen, Mai Nguyen, Renard Sexton, "Strategic Violence During Democratization: Evidence from Myanmar," *World Politics* 71, no. 2 (2019): 332–66.

[21] Cederman et al., *Elections and Ethnic Civil War*.

[22] E.g. Zhukov, "Counterinsurgency in a Non-Democratic State"; Lyall, *Does Indiscriminate Violence Incite Insurgent Attacks?*; Valentino, *Final Solutions*; and Valentino et al., *Draining the Sea*.

[23] E.g. Valentino et al., *Draining the Sea*.

[24] E.g. Ibid.; Alexander B. Downes, *Targeting Civilians in War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

[25] Indiscriminate violence targets victims irrespective of their behaviour—based on location, class, ethnicity or religion, for example. It therefore signals to potential targets that compliance will not shield them from violence. It therefore

counter-insurgency strategy when selective violence is unavailable.[26] Rebels need at least some control over territory to generate support from the population. Without control, rebels can neither protect supporters nor punish government collaborators and informants. Government control, conversely, protects government collaborators from rebel retaliation. It therefore allows the government to identify rebel supporters and renders selective violence both feasible and effective.[27] Still, even in areas with a significant rebel presence, mass atrocities are rare. Extant scholarship, therefore, demonstrates that mass atrocities may be instigated when the insurgency poses a significant threat to the regime; when a group has substantial support from the civilian population; or when the government lacks other means to defeat insurgents.[28] Consequently, for any of the mechanisms of counter-guerrilla mass violence to hold, there needs to be a significant guerrilla presence to counter.

Contrary to the narrative provided by the Myanmar military,[29] however, no organized Rohingya insurgency existed at the time atrocities began.[30] Only in 2016, years after the start of the atrocities in 2012, did a small and ill-equipped insurgent group form in *reaction* to military atrocities.[31] Counter-insurgency explanations cannot account for the timing of the atrocities.

Democratization could also give rise to extremist and exclusive ideologies that are commonly associated with mass atrocities.[32] Some nation building projects construct a core population in exclusive terms, which can drive atrocities against minority groups.[33] Exclusive ideologies can generate sectarian cleavages[34] or affect how elites evaluate threats.[35] While several studies on Myanmar focus specifically on sectarian cleavages between Buddhists and Muslims in their explanations,[36] extant scholarship has discounted sectarian cleavages as a primary cause of atrocities.[37] Sectarian cleavages are

solves collective action problems that resisters face, generates resistance, and invites foreign intervention. Selective violence on the other hand targets victims on the basis of behaviour. It signals that resistance is costly and that compliance provides security. E.g. Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Elisabeth J. Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). N. B. Straus refers to indiscriminate violence against groups as group-selective violence. Straus, *Making and Unmaking Nations*.
[26] E.g. see Kalyvas, *Logic of Violence in Civil War*, particularly pp. 151–60; Philip G. Roessler, "The Enemy Within: Personal Rule, Coups, and Civil War in Africa," *World Politics* 63, no. 2 (2011): 316; Van der Maat, *Genocidal Consolidation*.
[27] Kalyvas, *Logic of Violence in Civil War*.
[28] Downes, *Targeting Civilians in War*; Valentino et al., *Draining the Sea*; and Valentino, *Final Solutions*.
[29] UNHRC, *Fact-Finding Mission*.
[30] Brennan and O'Hara, *Rohingya and Islamic Extremism*. The sole Rohingya insurgent group that had been active in the 1990s — the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation — was defunct by 2012. Brennan and O'Hara, *Rohingya and Islamic Extremism*.
[31] The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA — not to be confused with the Arakan Army), became active in 2016 but their operation was small, ill-equipped, and did not seem to have the support of the civilian population it claimed to represent. Lehr, *Militant Buddhism*.
[32] E.g. Straus, *Making and Unmaking Nations*; Valentino, *Why We Kill*; and Valentino, *Final Solutions*.
[33] E.g. Straus, *Making and Unmaking Nations*; Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy*.
[34] E.g. Robert D Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History* (New York: Picador, 2005).
[35] E.g. Straus, *Making and Unmaking Nations*.
[36] E.g. Ibrahim *The Rohingyas*; Francis Wade *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim 'Other'* (London: Zed Books, 2017); Harrison Akins, "The Two Faces of Democratization in Myanmar: A Case Study of the Rohingya and Burmese Nationalism," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 38, no. 2 (2018): 229–45; Green et al., *Countdown to Annihilation*; Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas*; Zöllner, *Caught Between the Crocodile and the Snake*; and Lehr, *Militant Buddhism*.
[37] E.g. Valentino, *Why We Kill*; Straus, *Making and Unmaking Nations*; Lee Ann Fujii, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); Valère P. Gagnon, *The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

created, stirred, and exploited by regime elites as part of the atrocities they initiate. The active role of Myanmar's military and police in atrocities against Rohingya follows this understanding: as in other atrocities, the violence was state driven from the start.[38]

Ideology also affects how elites evaluate threats.[39] If elite ideology drove the military leadership to commit atrocities, we should observe evidence of anti-Muslim sentiments within the military itself. Indeed, General Hlaing has referred to the Rohingya as "Bengali migrants," and – at the height of the atrocities in 2017 – referred to "the Bengali problem" as an "unfinished job."[40] It is plausible that ideological beliefs of elites help shape behaviour.

And yet, while elite ideology is plausible as a structural explanation, it cannot really explain the timing of the violence. To explain the onset of violence we need infer a change in elite radicalism. However, our assessment of elite radicalism is often based on the occurrence of violence – the very violence that we seek to explain. Anti-Rohingya sentiments similar to those of General Hlaing have been widespread in previous military administrations.[41] Were previous military administrations less radical or do we merely *attribute* less radical ideologies because they did not initiate atrocities? Beyond personal differences between leaders, elite ideology cannot sufficiently explain the timing of the violence in Rakhine. Moreover, while General Hlaing's statements on the Rohingya[42] are undeniably part of the atrocity *process*, they are no more convincing as a *motive* than the counter-guerrilla narrative pushed by the military.

Radical ideology explanations also discount the very real costs of indiscriminate violence through increased resistance or international sanctions and intervention,[43] especially at a time when Myanmar's military sought to rejoin the international community.[44] While exclusive ideology plausibly affects the structural conditions and processes of atrocities, it is less convincing as an explanation for the timing of atrocities. As an explanation for the timing of atrocities, radical elite ideology is what remains when we lack rational alternatives.

Myanmar's democratization process provides more fruitful explanations for the timing of atrocities. Recent studies pose that democratization in military regimes gives rise to civil–military rivalry, which in turn drives atrocities.[45] Military elites may instigate atrocities and conflicts to preserve their position under pressure from democratization. Focusing on Myanmar, scholars have posed two main mechanisms that tie civil–military competition to atrocities: military elites may instigate conflict with outgroups to bolster their role as protector of the nation; or to prevent civilian encroachment on lucrative military-controlled industries.

First, democratization could lead to atrocities because atrocities could bolster the military's role as protector of the nation versus a civilian competitor. Under pressure from

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[38] E.g.Hannah Beech, Saw Nang, and Marlise Simons, "Kill All You Can See: In a First, Myanmar Soldiers Tell of Rohingya Slaughter," *New York Times*, 8 September 2020; Matthew Smith, "*All You Can Do Is Pray:" Crimes Against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Burma's Arakan State* (Human Rights Watch, 2013); Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas*; Green et al., *Countdown to Annihilation*; Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within*.

[39] E.g. Straus, *Making and Unmaking Nations*.

[40] E.g. Simon Lewis, Siddiqui Zeba, Clare Baldwin, and Andrew R. C. Marshall, "Tip of The Spear: The Shock Troops Who Expelled the Rohingya from Myanmar," *Reuters*, 26 June 2018.

[41] Green et al., *Countdown to Annihilation*; Ibrahim *The Rohingyas*.

[42] Lewis et al., *Tip of the Spear*.

[43] E.g. Kalyvas, *Logic of Violence in Civil War*.

[44] Egreteau, *Foreign Policy and Political Changes*.

[45] Wilson, *Military Anxiety and Genocide*; Christensen et al., *Strategic Violence During Democratization*.

democratization, elites may stir violent nationalism to build support.[46] Wilson, for example, argues that military regimes can commit atrocities when they lack the popular support required to respond to the pressures of democratization with a coup – as is evident from the landslide victory of Aung San Suu Kyi. Under these conditions, popular atrocities may serve to bolster the military's role as protector of the nation.[47] This argument can explain the timing of atrocities under the structural conditions of an exclusive ideology. While elites themselves may not be ideologically invested in the repression of minorities, they acknowledge that exclusive ideologies are popular and may repress minorities to gain popular support versus a civilian rival.

This argument has at least face validity and fits with an understanding from some outside observers that atrocities against Rohingya had seemingly popular support within Myanmar.[48] It is therefore entirely possible that the military tried to increase its electoral support though popular violence. The popularity of the violence could also explain the support the military received from Aung San Suu Kyi before the International Court of Justice.[49]

And yet, this argument is not without limitations either. While Aung San Suu Kyi did receive some popular support for defending Myanmar against foreign charges of genocide,[50] it is less clear that the military gained significant support for initiating the atrocities in the first place. While it is easy to demonstrate that the Rohingya are widely viewed as Bengali migrants, it is harder to demonstrate that atrocities against an outgroup meaningfully affected people's votes in favour of the military. Especially, when the violence peaked in 2012 and 2017 – well before any run-up to the 2015 or 2020 elections. Rakhine is isolated from the rest from the country and is unlikely to impact most people's lives. And while racist attitudes exist in most societies, there is no evidence that atrocities are connected to electoral gains.[51]

Indeed, the landslide electoral victories of the National League for Democracy (NLD) in 2015 and 2020 suggest that atrocities did not significantly shift support in favour of the military. Also, the popularity of the NLD ultimately did not prevent the military from retaking power by force after losing the 2020 elections – even though the military did face stiff civil resistance and a potentially steep cost for doing so. It is possible that the military believed that atrocities would generate electoral support but this explanation would attribute significant errors of judgement to the military.

Second, democratization could lead to atrocities because atrocities could preserve military control over lucrative industries versus a civilian competitor. Specifically, Christensen, Nguyen, and Sexton argue that democratization in Myanmar threatened military elites with the loss of control over a lucrative jade industry to civilian rivals. By initiating

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[46] Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, "Democratization and War," *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 3 (1995): 79–7.
[47] Wilson, *Military Anxiety and Genocide*.
[48] E.g. Richard Paddock, "General's Purge of Rohingya Lifts Support," *New York Times*, 26 November 2017.
[49] Aung San Suu Kyi's defence of Myanmar against a challenge by Gambia before the International Court of Justice could have both been caused by and generated popular support for repression of the Rohingya — e.g. see Elliott Prasse-Freeman, "Aung San Suu Kyi at the ICJ," *Anthropology Today* 36, no. 1 (2020): 3–4.
[50] E.g. Nyi Nyi Kyaw, "Myanmar in 2019," *Southeast Asian Affairs* 2020 (2020): 235–54.
[51] Studies that explore the relationship between elections and violence suggest that election outcomes could drive civil conflict over territory or government. E.g. Cederman et al., *Elections and Ethnic Civil War*. We did not identify research that suggests that atrocities impact electoral results.

conflict with the Kachin Independence Army, the military could retain control over the jade mines of Kachin state.[52]

While Christensen et al. convincingly show an increase in violence after democratization in jade mining areas, these are predominately located in Kachin state.[53] Northern Rakhine, which is the epicentre of violence against Rohingya, is not of significant economic importance to the military. While Rakhine has substantial offshore gas reserves, these are exploited at Kyaukphyu, some 120 Miles south of where atrocities actually occurred.[54] Northern Rakhine is also separated from the rest of Myanmar by the Arakan Yoma Mountains and has limited road connectivity to the rest of the country.[55] Civil–military competition over resource rents therefore provides a better explanation for counterinsurgency operations against the active and well-equipped Kachin insurgency than for atrocities against civilians in Northern Rakhine.

Democratization, Military Rivalry, and Atrocities

We argue that civil–military relations and democratization can contribute to atrocities but that key parts of the puzzle are missing. Studies that pose a link between civil–military rivalry and atrocities demonstrate that atrocities occurred during a democratization process that was characterized by the existence of civil–military rivalry. They do not show that atrocities were committed *because* of this rivalry, however. As we argue below, Myanmar's democratization process didn't just generate rivalry between military and civilian elites, it also generated rivalry *within* the military. We argue that this intra-military rivalry can explain the cooccurrence of atrocities and democratization.

With the focus on intra-military rivalry, we propose a previously unexplored mechanism for the occurrence of atrocities – with different implications for the understanding and prevention of mass violence. We pose that democratization can generate dangerous rivalry between military elites. Atrocities affect the support coalitions of military elites and therefore have the potential to resolve military rivalry. We suggest that atrocities are likely related to elite rivalry as a type of "genocidal consolidation."

Democratization upends existing authoritarian structures and may jeopardize elite control of the military and the state. It can therefore turn pre-existing factionalism between military elites into deadly competition – particularly when one faction can threaten to join the civilian opposition, as was the case in Rwanda and former Yugoslavia. In Myanmar, a potentially volatile transition of power within the military coincided with a process of democratization.

It is well established that elite rivalry is the most salient threat to authoritarian elites.[56] Within developed democracies, institutions and norms regulate interactions between elites and protect elites from violence. Within authoritarian regimes, however, checks and balances that protect elites from competitors are mostly weak or absent. Authoritarian elites, therefore, commonly interact in an environment of anarchy. Without

[52] Christensen et al., *Strategic Violence During Democratization*.
[53] Ibid.
[54] E.g. Lee Jones, "A Better Political Economy of the Rohingya Crisis," *New Mandala*, 26 September 2017.
[55] E.g. Mauro Testaverde *Concept Project Information Document (PID) – Rakhine Recovery and Development Support Project - P168797* (Washington, DC: World Bank Group 2019).
[56] E.g. Roessler, *The Enemy Within*; Milan Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

enforcement of agreements between authoritarian elites, institutional arrangements are a fragile equilibrium at best.[57]

Without enforcement of agreements, power concentration becomes a self-reinforcing process.[58] As power becomes more concentrated within fewer elites, elites' need for power increases.[59] It is not that authoritarian elites are particularly power-hungry – although they certainly can be. Rather, as elites gain power, their threat to other elites increases. Authoritarian elites, therefore, have an incentive to check the power of ascendant rivals. Ascendant elites, like General Hlaing, in turn have an even greater need for power to safeguard their position from the threat of coups or purges.

Elite relations can thus turn volatile, which is further exacerbated by the high risk of losing life or liberty that authoritarian elites face upon losing power.[60] It is during these times of elite rivalry that authoritarian elites are locked into a security dilemma; elites will seek to strengthen their support coalitions versus their potential competitors. However, this only further fuels competition, strains relations, and effectively decreases security for all.[61]

The power of authoritarian elites is built on private support coalitions with clients and alliances with other elites and is simultaneously checked by rivals. To survive elite rivalry, individual authoritarian elites thus seek to: (1) maintain, strengthen or build their own support coalitions; and (2) undermine the support coalitions of key rivals.[62] We argue that atrocities can be part of a process of genocidal consolidation that serves these main goals: mass atrocities build new support coalitions and undermine or capture rival coalitions through raising, locking, and restructuring.[63]

First, elites may use atrocities to *raise* support coalitions that are free from control of rivals. While military regimes do use the military to commit atrocities, atrocities are often executed by quickly raised militias that consist of young, poor, and low-status individuals that join for economic and status gains. These militias are, therefore, not just raised to execute the violence, they are raised through violence; their allegiance is bought with the wealth and status that violence provides. In Rwanda, for example, the genocide resulted in an immediate expansion of the Interahamwe militias as the poorest joined to gain from the violence.[64] Atrocities thus help build patron-client relationships by providing these militias with payment, legitimacy, and mutual goals.[65]

Recent scholarship demonstrates that militias can counterbalance professional forces as a coup proofing strategy.[66] Militias are particularly effective to pressure civilians and capture bureaucracies, local governments and local security structures – which can include local military command.[67] Militias can strengthen the coalition of military elites,

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[57] E.g. Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*.

[58] Power can be more or less concentrated within a few elites. E.g. Dan Slater, "Iron Cage in an Iron Fist: Authoritarian Institutions and the Personalization of Power in Malaysia," *Comparative Politics* (2003): 81–101; Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*.

[59] E.g. Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*.

[60] E.g. Chiozza and Goemans, *Leaders and International Conflict*; Roessler, *The Enemy Within*.

[61] Van der Maat, *Genocidal Consolidation*.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid.

[64] E.g. Alison des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999).

[65] Van der Maat, *Genocidal Consolidation*.

[66] E.g. Erica de Bruin, *How to Prevent Coups d'État: Counterbalancing and Regime Survival* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020); and Sheena Chestnut Greitens, *Dictators and Their Secret Police: Coercive Institutions and State Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[67] Van der Maat, *Genocidal Consolidation*.

challenge local officers, and provide auxiliary support in a military coup or purge. While militias do affect power relations within military regimes, militias are unlikely to challenge professional troops on the battlefield. Locking and restructuring are therefore much more significant to military consolidation.

Second, elites may use atrocities to *lock* rival support coalitions in the execution of the violence. Chiozza and Goemans demonstrate that troops committed to a conflict cannot be used in political conflicts between rival elites.[68] Atrocities generally do not require the same commitment of force as wars. They are commonly executed by irregular groups and require little effort from the professional military, which has taken an auxiliary role in some atrocities and a more active role in others – as was the case in Myanmar. However, troops do not need to be in combat to be locked out of providing effective support to elites. Unlike atrocities, military coups (and purges) are complicated military operations that require speed, coordination, and secrecy. They require the total and immediate commitment of available force as "*forces held back today will be useless tomorrow.*"[69]

Consequently, location matters; support coalitions that are in close proximity with highway access to the political centre can be mobilized in support, while support coalitions committed to the borders or the countryside cannot – at least not without tipping off rivals.[70] Rival elites' support coalitions that are locked in the execution of counterinsurgency operations cannot be mobilized for political leverage, used in a potential coup, or protect against a purge – even when there is no meaningful insurgency. While atrocities require little effort from the military, troops are often stationed in the area for a prolonged period of time. Consequently, atrocity campaigns can result in a fait accompli in which military elites are forced to either allow their support coalitions to be locked in prolonged "counterinsurgency operations" against unarmed civilians or out themselves as disloyal.[71]

Last, elites may use atrocities to *restructure* rival support coalitions and wrest them free from the control of rival elites. Restructuring is the creation of new organizations – or units – by combining existing organizations, such as the creation of new army units under a combined command structure. Through restructuring, elites may place troops that were previously part of the support coalitions of rival elites under their direct control. Large projects of mass violence, such as mass atrocities, can tie down restructured units in the execution of the violence and therefore allow for new command structures to set.

Leveraging violence to restructure support coalitions is likely more common than generally realized. For example, at the breakup of Yugoslavia, the Yugoslav Army initially remained committed to the Yugoslavian state over individual Republics like Serbia and had previously clashed with Milosevic.[72] However, at the start of the conflict with Croatia, pro-Serbian hardliners successfully paired Yugoslav Army units with Red Berets

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[68] Chiozza and Goemans, *Leaders and International Conflict*.
[69] Edward N. Luttwak, *Coup d'État: A Practical Handbook* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 149.
[70] Luttwak, *Coup d'État*.
[71] Note that locked troops can resolve commitment problems and ultimately leave all elites more secure.
[72] E.g. Florian Bieber, "The Army Without a State," in *State Collapse in South-Eastern Europe: New Perspectives on Yugoslavia's Disintegration*, ed. Lenard J. Cohen and Jasna Dragović-Soso (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2008), 301–32. For example, the Yugoslav army refused to quash anti-Milosevic protests. Bieber suggests that the army sought to depose Milosevic in March 1991 but that it lacked support from Prime Minister Markovic. Bieber, *The Army Without a State*, 323.
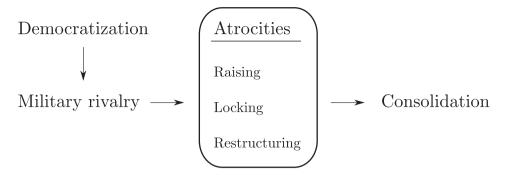
Figure 1. Causal diagram of the military rivalry explanation.

Special Operations Forces – under direct control of Milosevic – to victimize Croatian and Slavonian civilians.[73] Through restructuring and raising paramilitary troops, Milosevic was able to take control of the Yugoslav security forces and consolidate power. The Myanmar military has previously adopted restructuring as well as it integrated of ethnic militias into its formal military command structure as Border Guard Forces, for example.[74]

Locking and restructuring both tie supporters in the execution of atrocities and may, therefore, seemingly contradict each other. However, because the timing of the violence is controlled by the dominant faction, these are actually supplementary strategies. Locking is the anvil – a fait accompli that temporarily weakens a rival's ability to stage a coup; while restructuring is the hammer – a more permanent consolidation measure to seize on this temporary weakness.

Figure 1 below shows a simple causal diagram of the genocidal consolidation process as it may have occurred in Myanmar: first, democratization catalysed existing rivalry between military elites; second, atrocities resolved this rivalry through the mechanisms of raising, locking, and restructuring; and third, these mechanisms ultimately allowed for consolidation of power of General Hlaing over his immediate rivals.

Evaluating a Military Rivalry Explanation

By introducing a new explanation, we are problematizing potential causal relationships of atrocities. Atrocities are complex processes that are commonly overdetermined – i.e. the available evidence could support more than one explanation. Also, few potential explanations are fully falsifiable. To deal with this, we here evaluate the causal structure of the main explanations; evaluate whether the main explanations are falsifiable; and provide observable implications of our theory.

At least two explanations likely do not fit the available evidence. While democratization can trigger civil conflict, there was no meaningful insurgency in Northern Rakhine. Also, as further demonstrated below, Northern Rakhine was not of particular economic

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[73] See Gagnon, *The Myth of Ethnic War*, 106; Robin Alison Remington, "The Yugoslav Army: Trauma and Transition," in *Civil-Military Relations in the Soviet and Yugoslav Successor States*, ed. Constantine P. Danopoulos (London: Routledge, 2019).

[74] E.g. David I. Steinberg and Hongwei Fan, *Modern China-Myanmar Relations: Dilemmas of Mutual Dependence* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2012); John Buchanan, *Militias in Myanmar* (Asia Foundation, 2016). Ten percent of regular *army troops were* added to every BGF battalion. E.g. Steinberg and Fan, *Modern China-Myanmar Relations*, 305.

importance. The atrocities, therefore, cannot be explained as counterinsurgency mass killings or by threatened economic interests caused by civil–military rivalry. The other explanations are harder to falsify but we can gain additional leverage by unpacking the causal structure and process of atrocities.

Causal explanations have two main components: predictors – immediate conditions that trigger events; and attributes – structural conditions that interact with predictors to cause the event.[75] In our explanation, the main predictor is elite intra-military rivalry caused by democratization. Conversely, in the civil–military rivalry explanations, the predictor is civil–military rivalry caused by democratization. And in exclusive ideology explanations, ideology is both posed as predictor and attribute. Valentino, for example, argues that elite ideology is the predictor of the violence, while Straus argues that ideology is an attribute that leads elites to evaluate crises differently.[76]

Predictors and attributes together produce the outcome in which attributes are like a powder keg and predictors are the spark.[77] Ideology as an attribute synergizes well with other explanations but as a structural cause, it cannot explain the timing of the violence by itself. We can also posit the civil–military and intra-military rivalry explanations as attributes: atrocities are likely easier to execute when the wider population is supportive or at least indifferent; or when atrocities strengthen or at least do not weaken the relative support base of the military elites that initiate the atrocities.

However, when we are trying to understand predictors – i.e. how democratization might trigger atrocities – we are mostly dealing with rival explanations that are not readily falsifiable. All three theories should be considered falsified if their core components are unobserved: an absence of an exclusive ideology; a clear unpopularity of the atrocities; or an absence of elite intra-military rivalry. However, all three theories pass these simple "hoop tests"[78] and are otherwise not fully falsifiable.

However, we *can* construct additional hoops by providing observable implications of our theory. Based on the mechanisms of our theory, we would expect to observe: intra-military rivalry resulting from democratization; atrocities to occur in a remote area far from the capital; raising of militias; locking of rival troops of a rival faction; the restructuring of rival and allied troops; military purges; and the ultimate consolidation of General Hlaing.

The main complication is that we risk attributing a military rivalry explanation to common atrocity processes. Key observable implications such as the use of militia and military forces are integral parts of atrocity processes. At the same time, the manner in which these forces are raised, locked, and reconstructed also affects the support coalitions of regime elites. For example, the creation of militias likely alters the balance of power and can therefore change the behaviour of military elites. However, without additional evidence on the actual use of militias against rivals, we cannot definitively tie the creation of militias to elite rivalry. Similarly, the use of troops can suggest locking and restructuring but they won't provide conclusive evidence unless we have evidence on the operational

[75] E.g. see Eelco van der Maat, "Simplified Complexity: Analytical Strategies for Conflict Event Research," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 38, no. 1 (2018): 87–108.

[76] Valentino, *Final Solutions*; Straus, *Making and Unmaking Nations*.

[77] Van der Maat, *Simplified Complexity*.

[78] E.g. see James Mahoney, "The Logic of Process Tracing Tests in the Social Sciences," *Sociological Methods & Research* 41, no. 4 (2012): 570–97.

details of atrocities. The problem is that governments have a strong incentive to hide these operational details, while NGOs and researchers are currently not attuned to uncovering this evidence.[79]

Our explanation is not the only explanation to suffer from this problem. Exclusive ideology can steer and incite communal violence and is therefore an integral part of the atrocity process. Also, elites justify policies by reference to the national interest. Elites are therefore likely to refer to ideology but very unlikely to refer to private interests to justify atrocities. As a result, process tracing of elite statements can overstate the effects of elite ideology over alternatives. We cannot definitively resolve these issues within a single study. We can, however, be explicit about these limitations and provide clear observable implications that allow us evaluate the merits of elite rivalry as a potential explanation for atrocities. We hope scholars will ultimately be much more attuned to the relationship between the operational details of atrocities and elite rivalry.

Our argument, therefore, focuses on observable implications of the theory as listed in Table 1. First, we identify military rivalry resulting from democratization. Here, we rely on well-established rivalry processes that preceded democratization to establish elite rivalry as a potential cause of the violence. We then identify power shifts, disruptions in the balance of power, and acute rivalry within these military factions resulting from democratization. In doing so, we provide an explanation for the initiation of the atrocities in the period after Than Shwe and his Junta stepped down.

Second, we identify Rakhine as part of the power base of one of these factions and Northern Rakhine as a remote area of limited economic importance that would allow for locking of a rival's military. This may explain why the atrocities occurred in a region without an active guerrilla presence. Third, we seek to demonstrate that the violence allowed for the centralization of military power through raising, locking, and restructuring of troops. Last, we aim to show how violence affected the command structures of the military, which likely resulted in the purges of military elites and the consolidation of General Hlaing's position.

Factionalism, Rivalry and Democratization

In 2008, Senior General Than Shwe installed a new constitution that secured the dominance of the military in a future transition to civilian rule. This constitution did not only lay the groundwork for military-led civilian rule, however, but was also Than Shwe's exit strategy. For the general faced a problem common to aging authoritarian rulers: how to secure the continued safety of himself and his family when he was no longer in power? Only a few years before, the previous strongman, General Ne Win, had lived to see his grandchildren sentenced to death; Ne Win died under house arrest later that year.[80] Than Shwe sought to avoid a similar fate.

The general that had held on to power through a careful balancing act of divide and rule,[81] sought to secure his retirement by uprooting the military structures upon which he

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[79] Without elite rivalry explanations gaining traction we would not expect this evidence to surface.

[80] Win Min, "Looking Inside the Burmese Military," in *Burma or Myanmar? The Struggle for National Identity*, ed. Lowell Dittmer (Singapore: World Scientific, 2010), 155–84. Ne Win's son in law and grandchildren were given amnesty a decade later.

[81] E.g. Min, *Looking Inside the Burmese Military*.

Table 1. Observable implications.

Observation	Mechanism	Consequences for the theory
Military rivalry resulting from democratization	Elite rivalry is the most salient threat in authoritarian regimes. Atrocities likely affect support coalitions of military elites.	Falsification if absent. Significant support if present
Atrocities occur far from government centre	Troops committed to the periphery cannot aid in a coup or purge.	Falsification if absent. Inconclusive support if present
Atrocities raise militias	Militias are commonly used for atrocities but are also used for counterbalancing and coup proofing.	Inconclusive support if present
Atrocities lock troops of a rival faction	Troops engaged in the execution of atrocities cannot aid in a coup or purge.	Inconclusive support if present
Atrocities restructure troops	Loyal troops take the lead in the execution of atrocities divesting troops from a rival.	Inconclusive support if present
Purges of military elites	Weakening of rival faction allows for purges and reshuffles of officers from rival faction.	Significant support if present
Consolidation of commander-in-chief	Atrocities, purges and reshuffles allow for the consolidation of the commander-in-chief.	Inconclusive support if present
Observable implications of rival explanations		
Atrocities occur in area of economic importance to the military	Atrocities in areas with exploitable resources preserve military control over resource rents versus civilian competitors.	Falsification of civil-military rivalry over exploitable resources explanation if absent. Substantial support if present.
Presence of extremist ideology	Exclusive ideologies drive atrocities	Falsification of elite ideology explanation if absent. Inconclusive support if present.
Presence of rebel threat	Atrocities cut rebels from civilian support	Falsification of counter-insurgency explanation if absent. Substantial support if present
Presence of civil-military rivalry	Civil-military rivalry engenders atrocities that secure economic interests or generate electoral support	Falsification of civil-military rivalry explanations if absent. Inconclusive support if present.
Atrocities generate substantial electoral support	Atrocities provide electoral support to an unpopular military	Falsification of civil-military rivalry explanation if absent. Inconclusive support if present.

had relied. However, as is common in authoritarian power transfers, his path to abdication through military reshuffles, forced retirements, and democratization ultimately resulted in new power struggles within the regime.

Myanmar's post-independence political history is one of military regimes littered with intra-regime factionalism and purges.[82] General Than Shwe was a direct product of Myanmar's military politics. He had risen to the top when he had joined Generals Khin Nyunt and Tin Oo to depose General Saw Maung in March 1992.[83] Initially, Khin Nyunt dominated the Junta and was expected to bypass Than Shwe. However, Than Shwe used his formal position to consolidate power.[84]

General Than Shwe proved adept at balancing his closest rivals against each other,[85] most notably General Maung Aye who had his support coalition in the Eastern regional command and Prime Minister Khin Nyunt who was a protégé of Ne Win and controlled

[82] Ibid.
[83] Min, *Looking Inside the Burmese Military*; William J. Topich and Keith A. Leitich, *The History of Myanmar* (ABC-CLIO, 2013); Maung Aung Myoe, *Building the Tatmadaw: Myanmar Armed Forces Since 1948* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009).
[84] Min, *Looking Inside the Burmese Military*; Topich and Leitich, *The History of Myanmar.*
[85] Initially, Than Shwe used regional commanders to balance against Khin Nyunt. He later allied with Khin Nyunt to promote all regional commanders out of military positions. The sole exception was Lt. General Maung Aye, who, in turn, became a counterweight against Khin Nyunt. E.g. see Myoe, *Building the Tatmadaw*, 69.

the Military Intelligence Service.[86] In October 2004, Than Shwe allied with Maung Aye who had his allies purge Khin Nyunt and the entire Military Intelligence Service.[87] After the purge, Generals Than Shwe and Maung Aye carefully divided the vacated positions among their followers.[88]

With the powerful Military Intelligence Service disbanded, Generals Than Shwe and Maung Aye carefully checked each other's power through appointments, promotions, reshuffles, and purges.[89] General Than Shwe was dominant but not supreme, as both generals could rely on troops to support their position and both had the allegiance of regional and divisional commanders that were key to intra-military power relations.[90]

General Than Shwe favoured loyalists down his vertical chain of command in the west, especially those from the Southwest regional command.[91] Notable Than Shwe loyalists were General Shwe Mann, a former Southwest regional commander who had risen to the no. 3 position as Chief of Staff and Lt. General Thein Sein, a former Eastern Triangle regional commander who was adjutant general at the headquarters.[92] General Maung Aye favoured loyalists from his eastern command, such as Northeastern regional commander Myint Hlaing who had helped purge Khin Nyunt and Ye Myint, who controlled the Military Affairs Security.

While General Than Shwe asserted dominance over the top of the regime, Maung Aye fostered connections to the mid-level officers.[93] Without the powerful Military Intelligence Service, the careful balance between east and west became the main factional division within the regime. A factional balance that was ultimately upended with the transition to civilian rule.

An Uneasy Transition to Civilian Rule

By 2010, Than Shwe and Maung Aye, both ageing and ready to retire, agreed to a transition to military-led civilian rule. While the 2008 constitution was designed to preserve the military's relevance, the transition of power was real.[94] To ensure political relevance following transition, to legitimize Myanmar's fledgling democracy, and to safeguard his own retirement, Than Shwe had the entire top of Myanmar's military resign by the end of 2010.[95]

Former generals were forced to compete in elections as civilians. As Table 2 shows, the highest-ranking generals before the transition formed a civilian government after the transition. By putting General Thein Sein as President and General Shwe Mann as speaker of the House of Representatives, Than Shwe yet again carefully balanced

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[86] Min, *Looking Inside the Burmese Military*; Myoe, *Building the Tatmadaw*. General Tin Oo had been killed (or possibly assassinated) in a helicopter accident in 2001. E.g. see Min, *Looking Inside the Burmese Military*.

[87] E.g. Myoe, *Building the Tatmadaw*; Min, *Looking Inside the Burmese Military*; Andrew Selth, "Myanmar's Intelligence Apparatus and the Fall of General Khin Nyunt," *Intelligence and National Security* 34, no. 5 (2019): 619–36.

[88] E.g. Min, *Looking Inside the Burmese Military*; Selth, *Myanmar's Intelligence Apparatus*.

[89] E.g. Min, *Looking Inside the Burmese Military*.

[90] Ibid.

[91] Ibid.

[92] E.g. Myoe, *Building the Tatmadaw*, 80; Min, *Looking Inside the Burmese Military*; E.g. European Union, "Annex VI to Regulation (EC) No 194/2008: List of Members of The Government of Burma/Myanmar and Persons, Entities and Bodies Associated With Them," *Official Journal of the European Union* L212, vol. 52, 15 August (2009): 10–41.

[93] Ibid.

[94] E.g. Mary Callahan, "The Generals Loosen Their Grip," *Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 4 (2012): 120–31.

[95] E.g. Mydans, *President Replaces Junta*; Jones, *Explaining Myanmar's Regime Transition*.

Table 2. Key changes in military and government positions in 2011.

Name	Pre-transition role	Post-transition role
Than Shwe	President / Commander-in-Chief	–
Maung Aye	Deputy	–
Shwe Mann	Joint chief of staff	House Speaker
Thein Sein	Prime Minister	President
Tin Aung Myint Oo	Quartermaster General (to 2009)	Vice-President
Ko Ko	Chief of BSO-3 (Arakan, Irrawady & Bago)	Minister (Home Affairs)
Myint Swe	Quartermaster General	Minister (Yangon)
Ye Myint	Military Affairs Security	Minister (Mandalay)
Thura Mynt Aung	Adjutant General	Minister (Defence) – rejected post
Min Aung Hlaing	Chief of BSO	Commander-in-Chief

power; this time between his protégés. Than Shwe unexpectedly assigned the influential post of commander-in-chief to the relatively junior general Min Aung Hlaing over several more senior generals.[96]

General Hlaing was checked by a high command of generals with a similar level of experience and was generally perceived as lacking both the experience and personality to take what remained Myanmar's top job.[97] While Hlaing was considered neutral between Than Shwe and Maung Aye, he had been promoted through the East and had commanded both the eastern Shan State Triangle and Bureau of Special Operations, BSO-2, commands.[98] Hlaing's appointment therefore represented a break from Than Shwe's record of appointing supporters from the Western command.[99]

Notably, a visible rivalry developed between President Thein Sein and speaker Shwe Mann during the 2011–2015 parliamentary term.[100] The former top generals had their support in the Eastern and Western command respectively. President Thein Sein had held the eastern Triangle Regional Command.[101] Whereas Shwe Mann had commanded the influential Southwest Regional Command in Irrawaddy Division.[102] After the 2012 by-election win of the NLD, Shwe Mann increasingly aligned himself with Aung San Suu Kyi,[103] posing a serious threat to the apparent unity of the military. Both in the rivalry between Thein Sein and Shwe Mann and in the intervention in Rakhine, General Hlaing ultimately sided with President Thein Sein. Shortly before the 2015 elections, former General Shwe Mann was detained and forcefully purged from the military-led Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) for working with Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD.[104]

General Min Aung Hlaing was a contentious choice as commander-in-chief and at least one General, Thura Myint Aung, openly rejected Hlaing's promotion.[105] Myint Aung was Adjutant General and had previously held the influential Southwestern Command in

[96] Callahan, *The Generals Loosen Their Grip.*
[97] Ibid.
[98] E.g. European Union, *List of Members of the Government of Burma/Myanmar.*
[99] Min, *Looking Inside the Burmese Military.*
[100] E.g. see Min Zin, "Burma Votes for Change: The New Configuration of Power," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 2 (2016): 116–31; Zoltan Barany, "Exits from Military Rule: Lessons for Burma," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 2, (2015): 86–100.
[101] Myoe, *Building the Tatmadaw*, 80. General Min Aung Hlaing would later hold the same command. European Union, *List of Members of the Government of Burma/Myanmar.*
[102] Min, *Looking Inside the Burmese Military.*
[103] E.g. Nanda, "Shwe Mann Dreams Big in an Election Year," *Frontier*, 3 March 2020.
[104] E.g. Zin, *Burma Votes for Change*; Barany, *Exits from Military Rule.*
[105] Wai Moe, "Myint Aung Dismissed, Placed Under House Arrest," *The Irrawaddy*, 10 February 2011.

Irrawaddy – Top Generals Saw Maung, Than Shwe, and Shwe Mann had all served as heads of the Southwest Regional Command in Irrawaddy Division.[106] Myint Aung regarded Hlaing as his junior[107] and rejected the role of minister of defence that was offered to him. He was subsequently placed under house arrest.[108]

Although the arrest of Lt-Gen Myint Aung was the only publicized dispute, it was likely symbolic of a wider internal dispute that mirrored the more public dispute between Generals Thein Sein and Shwe Mann. As the violence in Rakhine broke out in 2012, General Hlaing notably began to purge and reshuffle some of the once-powerful regional commands to weaken their influence.[109] Whereas junior Western and BSO-3 commanders could have expected a future rise through the ranks under Shwe Mann as they had under Than Shwe, the transition implied that individuals in the Eastern chain of command loyal to Min Aung Hlaing and Thein Sein were now more likely to be favoured.

Between 2010 and 2011, therefore, the transition had had two major impacts on the Myanmar military. First, the entire top brass had resigned to take up civilian roles, uprooting the balanced rivalry between elite factions and leading to a new generation of generals taking top command posts. Second, power had shifted away from the Western military faction, to the Eastern military faction. Hlaing's appointment had therefore disrupted both the vertical and horizontal relationships within Myanmar's military.

A close examination of military rivalry in Myanmar leads to a couple of relevant conclusions with respect to the dangers of elite rivalry, the position of General Hlaing, and the effects of democratization. First, violent elite rivalry is a recurrent feature of Myanmar military rule that has previously culminated in purges of powerful elites.[110] In Myanmar, power and security of the highest-ranking military elites is based on the allegiance of powerful regional and divisional commanders in an uneasy balance between Western and Eastern commanders.[111] Any coup or purge would need the support of regional and divisional commanders.

Second, in choosing General Min Aung Hlaing as commander-in-chief over more senior candidates, Than Shwe had potentially sown the seeds of contention. From Myint Aung's resistance, it is clear that Hlaing's sudden rise may not have had wide support. Opposition against Hlaing's position would most likely come from the Western regional and divisional command – where Lt-Gen Myint Aung would also find his support. However, unlike the open resistance of Myint Aung, any potential covert resistance would have been much more dangerous.

Last, the process of democratization was primarily a guided transition from an old guard to a newer generation. However, it also brought pre-existing rivalries between East and West to the fore. Thein Sein and Shwe Mann openly clashed as Shwe Mann increasingly sided with the NLD from 2012 onward. Ultimately, the generation of Thein

[106] Min, *Looking Inside the Burmese Military*.
[107] Myint Aung graduated from the 18th and Hlaing graduated from the 19th intake of the Defense Services Academy.
[108] Moe, *Myint Aung Dismissed*.
[109] E.g. Callahan, *The Generals Loosen Their Grip*. Similarly, Thein Sein reshuffled the civilian government in 2012, appointing allies to key positions. Thomas Fuller, "President of Myanmar Reshuffles His Cabinet," *New York Times*, 27 August 2012.
[110] Examples of the highest-ranking generals that were purged are Chief of Staff and Defense minister General Tin Oo in 1976, director of Military Intelligence Brigadier General Tin Oo (different Tin Oo) in 1983, General Saw Maung in 1992, General Ne Win, who was imprisoned in 2001 after being deposed in 1988, and director of Military Intelligence General Khin Nyunt in 2004. Yet another General Tin Oo, the no. 3 of the regime was possibly assassinated in 2001.
[111] E.g. Min, *Looking Inside the Burmese Military*.

Sein and Shwe Mann lost influence in assuming civilian positions – especially after losing the elections to Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD. From 2015 onward, the former military elite could no longer regulate interactions and rivalry between the new military top. Moreover, the enduring popularity of San Suu Kyi's NLD implied that a coalition between the NLD and a military faction could result in a very dangerous coup.[112]

In spite of General Hlaing's precarious position as relatively junior officer in a senior position and the heightened elite rivalry that followed Myanmar's democratization, by 2018, Hlaing's position had become unassailable. Moreover, international outcry at the treatment of Rohingya Muslims from 2012 – far from undermining Hlaing's position – only added to his popularity.[113] Between 2011 and 2018, the initially unpopular commander-in-chief had consolidated to become the dominant power in Myanmar. The conflict and atrocities in Rakhine likely played an influential role in this consolidation.

Rakhine's Significance

The process of democratization and retirement of the highest military elites likely resulted in an environment of high elite rivalry. But why would this rivalry result in atrocities in Rakhine in particular? We argue that Northern Rakhine is not of significant economic importance to military elites[114] but that it is remote and isolated from the rest of the country. It was also under jurisdiction of the western military faction. A crisis in Northern Rakhine had the potential to reduce the troops available to the western military faction and ultimately wrest control of units from western generals. It could therefore allow Hlaing to consolidate power.

Rakhine State is traditionally under the jurisdiction of the Western military faction and command. The Southwestern BSO-3 command is at the heart of Myanmar; it covers the populous Irrawaddy delta and surrounds the former capital and emerging metropolis of Yangon. The Western military faction was therefore the primary candidate for any challenges to Min Aung Hlaing and Thein Sein. Shwe Mann's open rapprochement with the popular NLD after the April 2012 by-elections likely only further increased the danger of a western challenge.

Although Than Shwe had attempted to dilute localized power,[115] the military's regional structure had still concentrated individual elite support bases in particular geographically separated command units.[116] This was the result of Myanmar's political makeup. The military intervention in politics in 1961 was in part a response to peripheral insurgency and the military structure had been designed to combat this insurgency. The

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[112] For example, before the 2015 elections, former General Shwe Mann was shortly held and removed as speaker from the military-led USDP by Thein Sein for cultivating relations with Aung San Suu Kyi. E.g. Robert H Taylor, "The Causes of the Proclivity Towards Factionalism in the Political Parties of Myanmar," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 39, no. 1 (2020): 82–97. While we agree with Selth and Wilson that the prospects for a coup by a unified military against the civilian government would have been limited, we argue that a coup of one military faction with the support of the civilian government against a rival military faction would have been a real possibility. Andrew Selth, "All Going According to Plan? The Armed Forces and Government in Myanmar," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 40, no. 1 (2018): 1–26; Wilson, *Military Anxiety and Genocide*.

[113] Paddock, *General's Purge of Rohingya Lifts Support*.

[114] E.g. Christensen et al., *Strategic Violence During Democratization*.

[115] E.g. Kristine Eck, "Repression by Proxy: How Military Purges and Insurgency Impact the Delegation of Coercion," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (2015): 924–46; Min, *Looking Inside the Burmese Military*.

[116] Min, *Looking Inside the Burmese Military*.

command of units is divided by region, and sub divided within each region. Purges and reshuffles within the military are therefore often aimed preventing reginal commanders from concentrating power and mounting a leadership challenge.[117]

However, while purges and reshuffles may prevent a leadership challenge, they can also *invite* a challenge. Direct attempts to weaken the western command could spark a serious and potentially deadly leadership challenge. However, the existence of a large Muslim minority in the isolated region of Northern Rakhine provided an opportunity to indirectly undermine the western command.

Northern Rakhine is separated from the rest of Myanmar by the Arakan Yoma Mountains and has limited road connectivity to the rest of the country.[118] Sittwe – the city closest to the atrocities – has no direct highway connection to the government in Naypyidaw, and road travel between Sittwe and Naypyidaw is roughly 650 km over a single road through the Arakan mountains that could easily be blocked. Troops deployed in the countryside north of Sittwe cannot meaningfully contribute to a coup or purge. Although Rohingya Muslims posed no direct threat, their location and stigmatization[119] makes them ideal targets for an atrocity campaign to tie Western command troops to an inter-communal crisis, centralize command, and address intra-military security problems.[120] Rakhine State was thus an obvious arena in which the new leadership could consolidate its power.

A Process of Genocidal Consolidation

We have argued that intra-military rivalry in Myanmar was likely especially high during the 2011–2018 period as a result of the power vacuum generated by its democratization process. We have also shown that military power in Myanmar is based on its regional and divisional command structure and that the remote location of Northern Rakhine was of key importance to consolidate power.

If civil–military competition would have been the main driver of atrocities,[121] we would expect the violence to develop after the NLD's victory in 2015. Similarly, if the military committed atrocities for electoral gains, we would at least expect the violence to peak running up to the 2015 or 2020 elections. However, the violence began before the victory of the NLD and peaked in 2012 and 2017 – well before any run-up to elections. We therefore argue that the victory of the NLD not only introduced a new military-civilian rivalry[122] but that it also catalysed prior intra-military rivalry.

The period of anti-Rohingya atrocities ran from 2012 to 2018, in which we identify two main phases: the orchestration of inter-communal violence and centralization of the military response from 2012; and the intensification of atrocities and consolidation from 2017. The orchestration of supposed "inter-communal" violence paved the way for the genocidal consolidation process. Although the state had consistently discriminated against Rohingya – denying them citizenship, voting rights, and other human rights[123] – there

[117] Eck, *Repression by Proxy*.
[118] E.g. Testaverde, *Rakhine Recovery and Development Support Project*.
[119] Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas*.
[120] Van der Maat, *Genocidal Consolidation*.
[121] E.g. Wilson, *Military Anxiety and Genocide*; Christensen et al., *Strategic Violence During Democratization*.
[122] Ibid.
[123] E.g. Smith, *All You Can Do Is Pray*; Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas*; Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within*.

had been little animosity between Buddhist and Muslim communities in Rakhine State prior to 2012.[124]

Min Aung Hlaing took control of the Junta in March 2011. From late 2011 anti-Rohingya propaganda was quickly ratcheted up. Alongside a series of seminars on the "question" of Rakhine's Muslim population, an "unremitting" barrage of racist propaganda emerged from local, religious, and government media outlets.[125] Facebook, having been de-censored in 2011 as part of Thein Sein's democratization programme, became host to a constant flow of racist anti-Rohingya posts and had become the military's key propaganda platform by 2018.[126] As Shwe Mann began to coordinate with the NLD following the April 2012 by-elections, the military turned to the orchestration of communal violence.

"Inter-communal" rioting began in June 2012 and was reportedly sparked by the rape and murder of an ethnic Rakhine girl, allegedly committed by Muslim men.[127] Violence against Rohingya Muslims escalated from individual, localized, attacks to fully coordinated systematic atrocities.[128] However, far from reflecting the spontaneous actions of Rakhine citizens, officials had travelled to Rakhine-majority villages and encouraged civilians to join coordinated assaults on Muslim communities – even supplying free meals to volunteers – in a highly coordinated, well-funded atrocity campaign.[129] In a move that invoked images of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, representatives from majority-ethnic Rakhine villages were bussed into Rohingya-majority areas and encouraged to raze villages and attack Rohingya Muslims and "sympathizers" with machetes and sticks.[130]

The rape and murder case was a spark in a deliberately placed powder keg that allowed for a centralized military response. The organized anti-Rohingya movement and propaganda in the months prior to June 2012 resulted in seemingly spontaneous eruptions of violence.[131] This allowed President Thein Sein to declare a state of emergency specific to Rakhine State on 10 June 2012.[132] However, rather than stop the violence, state security services such as the military and police facilitated the violence. They protected and organized the ethnic Rakhine militias that executed the atrocities and increasingly committed atrocities themselves.[133]

Rakhine State's border guard militia or NaSaKa was responsible for much of the atrocities.[134] The NaSaKa, a military-led militia notorious for attacks on Rohingya since its incorporation into the official military structure in 1992,[135] were responsible for coordinated atrocities from June 2012.[136] Ethnic Rakhine militias likely directly benefited from

[124] Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas*;
[125] E.g. Green et al., *Countdown to Annihilation*.
[126] UNHRC, *Fact-Finding Mission*; Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within*, 118.
[127] Smith, *All You Can Do Is Pray*; Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas*; Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within*; UNHRC, *Fact-Finding Mission*; Green et al., *Countdown to Annihilation*.
[128] E.g. Green et al., *Countdown to Annihilation*; UNHRC, *Fact-Finding Mission*.
[129] Green et al., *Countdown to Annihilation*.
[130] E.g. Ibid.; Ibrahim *The Rohingyas*.
[131] Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within*, 118.
[132] UNHRC, *Fact-Finding Mission*.
[133] E.g. Green et al., *Countdown to Annihilation*; UNHRC, *Fact-Finding Mission*.
[134] NaSaKa stands for Border Area Immigration Control Headquarters.
[135] E.g. UNHRC, *Fact-Finding Mission*; Allard K. Lowenstein International Human Right Clinic, *Persecution of the Rohingya Muslims: Is Genocide Occurring in Myanmar's Rakhine State? – A Legal Analysis* (New Haven: Yale Law School, 2015); Siegfried O. Wolf, "Genocide, Exodus and Exploitation for Jihad: The Urgent Need to Address the Rohingya Crisis," *South Asia Democratic Forum Working Paper*, no. 6 (2017).
[136] UNHRC, *Fact-Finding Mission*.

the atrocities in the form of wealth, power, and status that violence provides.[137] Like in Rwanda,[138] there is evidence of increased and potentially forced recruitment of ethnic Rakhine civilians into militias.[139] The violence also likely strengthened military control over these militias. It is not clear, however, whether the initial violence would have strengthened Western or central military control over the militias.

Notably, the NaSaKa was dismantled by President Thein Sein and replaced with national police forces in the aftermath of the violence.[140] This change could indicate a struggle over control of the militias as the NaSaKa had been under local Western command and the national police was under central command.[141] While the NaSaKa command structure was dismantled, its members were not; militias members were likely reconstituted under the a new MaKhaPa command structure that was created in September of that year.[142]

Intensification of Atrocities after the 2015 Elections

The atrocities took place alongside drastic political change in Myanmar. The NLD won a landslide electoral victory in November 2015 and completely ousted the former military top from civilian government in early 2016. While General Hlaing would seemingly have to share power with a civilian government, he was also freed from the influence of the former military elite. However, the complete removal of the old guard implied that they could no longer regulate any potential rivalry between the commander-in-chief and his generals.

Moreover, the NLD had developed ties with the military regime as well as its old guard.[143] As noted earlier, Shwe Mann – the previous number 3 of the junta who had been abruptly ousted by Thein Sein and had its support base in the western faction of the military – had allied with the NLD. As a result, rival military factions could potentially pose a much more dangerous challenge to Hlaing's position.

While repressive measures against the Rohingya continued after 2012, the most intense period of atrocities began in 2017. The 15 Military Operations Command – which was directly under western BSO-3 command at that time – initiated the violence in the spring of 2017.[144] Over the summer, the 15 Military Operations Command likely gained several battalions[145] and was joined by the 33rd and 99th divisions, which remained directly under central command.

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[137] E.g. Van der Maat, *Genocidal Consolidation*.

[138] E.g. Fujii, *Killing Neighbors*.

[139] E.g. Green et al., *Countdown to Annihilation*.

[140] E.g. Htet Naing Zaw, "With Nasaka Border Force Abolished, National Police Move in to Arakan," *The Irrawaddy*, 16 July 2013; Wolf, *Genocide, Exodus and Exploitation*.

[141] The NaSaKa was under local police command, which continued to be responsible for border protection. However, the national Myanmar Police Force is directly controlled by the minister of Home Affairs, who is nominated by the commander-in-chief. Andrew Selth, "Police Reform in Myanmar: Changes in Essence and Appearance," in *Debating Democratization in Myanmar* (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2014), 205–28.

[142] Wolf, *Genocide, Exodus and Exploitation*. While the disbandment of the NaSAKa did temporarily improve the situation for Rohingya, other agencies such as the Border Guard Police and the MaKhaPa soon resumed repressive measures. E.g. see Green et al., *Countdown to Annihilation*; Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas*; Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within*; UNHRC, *Fact-Finding Mission*.

[143] E.g. Egreteau, *Foreign Policy and Political Changes*.

[144] Wa Lone, "Command Structure of the Myanmar Army's Operation in Rakhine," *Reuters*, 25 April 2017.

[145] Security Force Monitor suggests that at least the 263rd, 352nd, 564th, and 565th battalions were transferred from an unknown division under Western command. E.g. Security Force Monitor, *The Structure and Operations of the Myanmar*

The 33rd and 99th Light Infantry Divisions were notorious for atrocity campaigns in Shan and Karen states respectively.[146] Myanmar's 10 Light Infantry Divisions are elite combat units under direct command of the commander-in-chief.[147] The 33rd Light Infantry Division had previously been commanded by Min Aung Hlaing as Chief of the Eastern BSO-2.[148] From August 2017 onwards, these loyal divisions took full control of the atrocity campaign against the Rohingya in coordination with other military troops, the Border Guard Police, and ethnic Rakhine militias.[149]

Six months of mass atrocities in which 800,000 people had been forced to flee Myanmar[150] likely allowed General Hlaing to consolidate his position within the military. The 15 Military Operations Command is one of three divisions under Western command[151] and therefore constitutes a significant part of the western BSO-3 command. As expected, the initiation of atrocities therefore did tie Western command structures in the execution of the violence and is suggestive of *locking*. Moreover, the subsequent transfer of loyal divisions from the east to take control of the campaign strongly suggests a *restructuring* mechanism that would have been difficult to resist at that point. Though we cannot discount an ideological or military-civilian rivalry motive, the restructuring that took place as part of the atrocity campaign likely directly strengthened the commander-in-chief's position vis-à-vis potential rivals in the military.

The final phase we identify is consolidation. It is clear from General Min Aung Hlaing's behaviour from 2018 onwards that his power has become undisputed. In 2018, he easily purged at least two regional commanders that held the western BSO-3 command: Generals Aung Kyaw Zaw and Maung Maung Soe.[152] General Hlaing further reshuffled regional commanders in the Western and Northwestern regions as well as most ministers and deputies controlled by the military.[153] Additionally, like Than Shwe had done before, he skipped over the older generation for promotion in favour of younger officers to further strengthen his control of the military.[154] That he was able to do so without any concerted backlash further suggests he has fully consolidated his power over the military. Secure from potential challenges within his military, General Hlaing was able to side line the NLD and take power in a violent military coup after the 2020 elections.

Army in Rakhine State: A Review of Open Source Evidence (Human Rights Institute, Columbia Law School, 20 November 2018).

[146] Lewis et al., *Tip of the Spear*.

[147] E.g. Andrew Selth, "Myanmar's Armed Forces and the Rohingya Crisis," *Peaceworks*, no. 140 (2018).

[148] E.g. Lewis et al., *Tip of the Spear*; European Union, *List of Members of the Government of Burma/Myanmar*.

[149] UNHRC, *Fact-Finding Mission*; Lewis et al., *Tip of the Spear*; Simon Lewis and Weiyi Cai, "Sharing the Crackdown: What Facebook Posts From Two Myanmar Soldiers Reveal About the Military's Savage Assault on the Rohingya," *Reuters*, 28 December 2018. The 2018 UNHRC report places members of the 33th and 99th divisions in meetings with the Border Guard Police and ethnic Rakhine aimed at forcing Rohingya elders to accept ethnic cleansing. It also provides examples of these divisions leading — or coordinating with — other units and security forces during "clearance operations." UNHRC, *Fact-Finding Mission*.

[150] UNHRC, *Fact-Finding Mission*.

[151] Lone, *Command Structure of the Myanmar Army's Operation in Rakhine*.

[152] E.g. Htet Naing Zaw, "Deputy Home Affairs Minister Leaves Post to Return to Top Military Job," *The Irrawaddy*, 26 May 2018; Richard Paddock, "For Myanmar's Army, Ethnic Bloodletting Is Key to Power and Riches," *New York Times*, 27 January 2018. As with the dissolution of the NaSaKa, the military argued that these generals were fired for the perpetration of atrocities. Zaw, *Deputy Home Affairs Minister Leaves Post*. This narrative masked the significance of this purge.

[153] Zaw, *Deputy Home Affairs Minister Leaves Post*; Htet Naing Zaw, "Myanmar's Western Commander Appointed Deputy Minister at Military-Controlled Border Affairs Ministry," *The Irrawaddy*, 28 July 2020.

[154] E.g. Htet Naing Zaw, "Younger Myanmar Military Officers Promoted to Key Roles in Reshuffle," *The Irrawaddy*, 11 May 2020; Nanda, "Min Aung Hlaing Reshuffles Senior Military Ranks Ahead of Election," *Frontier*, 19 May 2020.

Conclusion

We have provided an alternative explanation for a state-orchestrated mass atrocity campaign against Rohingya civilians. Far from a reactive policy to the actions of Rohingya militants, we have argued that the atrocities were part of a proactive policy of internal consolidation by a new leadership. We have demonstrated how Myanmar's democratization and the retirement of the senior military generated a power vacuum that drove a pre-existing intra-military rivalry to new heights. We also demonstrated that atrocities were orchestrated under these conditions of high elite rivalry and that the atrocities likely directly benefitted General Min Aung Hlaing, Thein Sein, and the eastern faction of the Myanmar military.

We did not provide a smoking gun, however. Like alternative explanations, we have no direct evidence that the atrocities were orchestrated *because* of rivalry within the military. There may not exist a single parsimonious explanation for these atrocities: those willing to commit atrocities out of ideological extremism or for political gain may seek to hit several birds with one stone. Extremist ideology could simply affect the range of policy options available to those seeking to consolidate power under conditions of elite rivalry.

And yet, we should not be blind to the very real effects that mass atrocity campaigns have on the power distribution within military regimes. Violence is not merely destructive[155] but can also builds coalitions and reconfigures existing power structures. In many ways, violence generates security to authoritarian elites well beyond the immediate conflict. It can explain why militaries that initiate atrocities that are seemingly part of counter-guerrilla campaigns often do so under conditions of elite rivalry. Myanmar is not unique in that respect, counter-insurgency campaigns with mass atrocities in Guatemala, El-Salvador, East Pakistan, Nigeria, and Uganda all occurred under heightened military rivalry. We hope that scholars will consider operational structures of mass atrocities and intra-military rivalry in future analyses of political violence.

The relationship between rivalry and violence may also explain the curious relationship between mass violence and democratization.[156] Like the rivalry between Thein Sein and Shwe Mann, democratization can bring pre-exiting rivalries to the fore and set off factional struggles. Especially in cases where democratization leads to factional struggles within the regime – such as in Yugoslavia and Rwanda – there is likely an increased risk of atrocities.

The relationship between intra-military rivalry and violence has serious implications for conflict prevention. Efforts to improve intercommunal relationships are likely insufficient to prevent atrocities that are driven by intra- military rivalry. Moreover, the tendency of major powers to support rival factions could have disastrous effects. Where possible and politically feasible, the international community should therefore cooperate and promote measures to reduce rivalry in democratizing and transitioning states. Unfortunately, sanctions alone will not deter authoritarian elites as long as mass atrocities directly benefit their physical survival.

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[155] E.g. James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (1995): 379–414.
[156] E.g. Cederman et al., *Democratization and Civil War*.

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Notes on contributors

Eelco van der Maat is Assistant Professor of International Relations in the Institute for History at Leiden University, the Netherlands. His research focusses on focus is on processes and dynamics of conflict and violence with a particular focus on the relationship between elite rivalry in authoritarian regimes and mass violence, and has appeared in journals such as *International Organization*, *Journal of Peace Research*, and *Conflict Management and Peace Science.* He can be reached at e.van.der.maat@hum.leidenuniv.nl.

Arthur Holmes is a graduate from the Master International Relations at Leiden University and is currently working as a Research and Government Liaison Assistant at a prestigious organization.

ORCID

Eelco van der Maat 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4039-0093