



Elite Formation in Myanmar's Borderlands through Militarized Na Ta La Schools

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Abstract

This research examines the *National Races Youth Development Training Schools*, locally known as the *Na Ta La School Schools*, a specialized boarding school system designed by the Myanmar military. Employing an ethnographic methodology, the study draws on field observations, participant observation, and in-depth interviews. It analyzes how the Myanmar military instrumentalizes the Na Ta La Schools to produce loyalist bureaucratic elites in Myanmar's borderlands as part of nation-building processes. The findings indicate that the military uses the Na Ta La Schools to consolidate its power and assert control in the borderlands. The system operates under the Ministry of Border Affairs, one of the three ministries exclusively reserved for the military under the 2008 Constitution. The institution targets marginalized ethnic and religious minorities, providing fully funded education in exchange for systematic indoctrination and mandatory religious conversion to Buddhism. Graduates of the Na Ta La Schools are rapidly fast-tracked into influential bureaucratic roles and integrated into the state apparatus, thereby creating a new class of loyalist elites who help expand state authority within their native peripheral homelands. The military and the state mobilize them as loyalist bureaucratic elites and ideological agents to promote state narratives and propaganda. As part of a long-term state-building process, this strategy seeks to replace their indigenous allegiance with a 'union spirit' that prioritizes loyalty to the military and a military-led central government. In this sense, the Na Ta La Schools function as a strategic mechanism of nation-building, often referred to as 'Burmanization', to ensure peripheral control and sustain long-term political control over diverse and contested borderlands through the systematic indoctrination of future generations. These findings show that this system involves student recruitment practices, the curriculum, the systematic selection of instructors within a closed ideological loop, the national network, and the rationale for military involvement. Ultimately, the research demonstrates how the military employs targeted schooling as a strategic instrument for nation-building and political control.

Keywords: Myanmar, Na Ta La Schools, Education, Borderlands, Military, Ethnic Minorities, Nation-Building, Loyalist Elites, Bureaucrats, Burmanization