

# Public Trust in the Myanmar Police Force: Exploring the Influencing Factors

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## Abstract

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While a number of studies have investigated the factors influencing public trust in the police in developed countries, similar research is still quite rare in developing countries. This study is the first to explore this particular topic in Myanmar, a developing country. Specifically, this study measured the level of public trust in the police and investigated factors that influence public trust in the police by collecting survey data in both urban and rural areas of Yangon Region, Myanmar ( $N = 401$ ). Using conflict theory as the guiding

theoretical framework, the present study examined whether Bamar and non-Bamar from both urban and rural areas expressed different levels of trust in the police. Findings revealed that people from urban areas had a lower level of trust in the police than people from rural areas, while no difference was found between the Bamar and non-Bamar populations. In addition, Myanmar people's attitudes towards the police as a whole were substantially influenced by their perception of police accessibility.

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# Introduction

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Public trust is important to police institutions as they have to earn legitimacy from the people. Goldsmith (2005) argued that public cooperation with the police is likely to support police performance when people perceive the police as trustworthy. According to Tyler and Fagan (2008), the public's trust towards the police is widely seen as an important indicator of police performance and fairness of the judicial system. In fact, numerous studies have been conducted on factors that shape public trust in the police. Some of these studies have used the so-called performance theory to explain the cause of trust and distrust in the police (Bouckaert, Van de Walle, Maddens & Kampen, 2002). Essentially, if citizens get good quality police service (good performance), a positive evaluation will be formed; likewise, bad quality service received by citizens (bad performance) will lead to a negative evaluation. For instance, Shoyode (2018) researched about the impact of easy access to the police on public trust through sampling participants from rural and urban areas in Nigeria. The author found that easy access to a police station was one of the important factors that shaped public trust in the police, and that the presence of police officers in this station had a positive impact on trust, while not being able to get help from the police undermined public trust.

Unlike performance theory, conflict theory has highlighted the struggle between social classes when studying the determinants of public trust in the police. More concretely, conflict theory has pointed out that people who are arrested and charged with crimes are mostly from a lower socio-economic level (with low income or unemployed), and, in contrast, rich people tend to be protected by the police (Boateng, 2015). Accordingly, people from higher socio-economic classes are more satisfied with the police, while people from lower socio-economic classes and marginalized groups have negative views of the police (Wu & Sun, 2009). In this respect, differences in attitudes towards the police among ethnic groups living in the United States has been shown in previous research. Specifically, the findings suggested that minority group members, Hispanics and African Americans, had less trust in the police than the majority whites (Tyler, 2005).

## The Current Study

In line with developments in the field of police perception studies, this study aims to investigate the level of public trust in the Myanmar Police Force and its influencing factors in order to foster a trusting relationship between the police and civilians in Myanmar. The Myanmar Police Force (MPF) is a hierarchical organization operating under the Tatmadaw (Armed Forces of Myanmar). In 2011, the MPF had around 80,000 members, operating 1,256 police stations in 330 townships and 73 districts (Selth, 2013). Throughout the years, the distribution of police officers across the country has become more equal, expanding to more remote and even ceasefire and conflict-affected areas, even though most of the ethnic armed organizations refuse to receive police administrative centers and rely instead on paramilitaries and the Tatmadaw to send criminals to the closest police station (Selth, 2013). At the same time, the role of the MPF in internal security challenges has extended to issues that had been previously tackled primarily by the Tatmadaw, such as public protests, and its number of combat-ready battalions has increased (Selth, 2013). Moreover, since 2011, a series of reform measures have been implemented with the help from the international community (Myanmar Police Force, 2014).

Since not a single study has been done to evaluate the factors that shape public trust in the MPF, the current study aims to identify these factors by extending the findings of previous studies to the context of Myanmar. First, building on conflict theory, this study hypothesizes that participants from ethnic minority groups will have less trust in the MPF than the ethnic majority. This hypothesis was also formed because historically, the MPF has been made up of mostly Bamar people and due to a Bamar-centric doctrine, promotion of non-Buddhist and non-Bamar personnel to higher ranks has been systematically limited (Maung Aung Myoe, 2009). Second, it is expected that participants without easy access to the MPF will have a lower level of trust in the police than those for whom access is easy. This hypothesis is based on performance theory, which suggests that police with good performance – in this case, with easy access – will have the trust of

the community they serve. Finally, inspired by a study conducted in Taiwan that found a lower level of trust in the police in urban rather than rural participants (Wang

& Sun, 2018), the study's third hypothesis will test differences in trust between urban and rural populations in Yangon Region, Myanmar.

# Methodology

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This study used quantitative methodology, specifically a questionnaire, since it aimed to obtain generalizable results from a large population sample. The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions, most of which were closed-ended, answered either *Yes-No* or on a Likert Scale ranging from 1 (*no trust at all*) to 5 (*total trust*), except the last question, which was open-ended. First, the participants were asked about their level of trust in the MPF's fairness (e.g. "How much do you trust the MPF to make decisions based on the law, not on personal bias?"), effectiveness, and transparency. Then, the questionnaire asked about the participants' previous experience with the police as well as some demographic information. The questions were created based on previous literature about fairness (Tyler, 2014), trust (Clark et al., 2017; Jackson & Bradford, 2010), accessibility (Shoyode, 2018), and contact between people and the police (Worden & McLean, 2017). The questions were first formulated in English and then translated into Burmese. After the questionnaire was finalized, it was tested in a small pilot study to make sure it fit the local context. Based on the pilot study, the survey was revised by changing some Burmese words, adjusting the answering scale, and rewriting the consent form.

## Sample, Sampling, and Procedure

The sample included 401 participants in total, divided into four sub-groups: urban and rural, Bamar and non-Bamar. The study used a non-probability sampling method called quota sampling, choosing the same number of

participants from each sub-group. Moreover, the study also employed a convenience sampling strategy, recruiting participants by contacting leaders of local organizations and community leaders in rural areas as well as by approaching participants at their homes. Since the aim was to obtain an equal number of participants in each sub-group, different places in four Yangon townships with highly homogeneous populations were selected: urban Insein, Hlaing, and Bahan as well as rural Hmawbi. All data was collected during February 2019.

The procedure with each participant was the same. First, the participants were presented with the purpose of the research and asked to give their informed consent to participate in the study. Then, the participants were given a chance to ask questions if anything was not clear regarding the research survey. If they agreed to participate, the participants began to answer the questionnaire. After the data collection was finished, the participants were debriefed by presenting the purpose of the research project in more detail, being thanked for their participation, and given the contact information of the researchers in case they had any questions or concerns afterwards. Some of the approached participants were afraid to answer the questionnaire as they found the research topic to be too sensitive, or because they did not feel enough trust towards the researchers. For this reason, the majority of the data was collected in the presence of a focal person, and convenience sampling was used to make sure that the participants felt comfortable enough to answer the questionnaire.

## Findings

The final sample included 375 participants in total, since 26 questionnaires were invalid for different reasons; for example, some participants were out of the age range from 18 to 75 or did not answer all questions. In the final sample, the distribution of Bamar and non-Bamar in urban and rural areas was comparable (see Table 1). 49.9% of the sample was female, while 83.4% of the whole sample was Buddhist. The mean age was 33.56 years. When asked about their opinion on whether it was easy or difficult to get help from the police in their current community, most of the participants answered it was easy and this was true in both urban and rural areas (see Table 2). Finally, 71.2% of the sample stated that they had interacted with the police at least once.

To demonstrate significant differences between the participants based on ethnicity (Bamar, non-Bamar), location (urban, rural), and accessibility (accessible, not accessible) in their trust (fairness, effectiveness, and transparency) in the police, a between-subjects multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was used. Here, the aim was to test for the effect of the hypothesized independent variables (ethnicity, location, and accessibility) on the dependent variable of trust in

Table 1: Distribution of Bamar and Non-Bamar Participants in Urban and Rural Areas ( $N = 375$ ).

	Urban	Rural	Total
Bamar	77	102	179
Non-Bamar	98	98	196
Total	175	200	375

Table 2: Perceived Accessibility of the Police in Urban and Rural Areas ( $N = 368$ ).

	Urban	Rural	Total
Easy to get help	109	146	255
Not easy to get help	60	53	113
Total	169	199	368

the police while controlling for the public's experience with police. The public's experience with the police was entered as a covariate in the analysis, because it has been shown to have an impact on trust in the police in previous literature (Worden & McLean, 2017).

First, the analysis found no significant within-subjects main effect of trust in the police,  $F(1.98, 709.29) = 0.77$ ,  $p = .46$ , where the trust in the police's effectiveness was rated as the highest ( $M = 3.07$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ), trust in the police's transparency as the lowest ( $M = 2.89$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ), with fairness between the two ( $M = 3.06$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ). On the other hand, tests of between-subjects effects showed that perception of accessibility had a significant main effect on the levels of trust in the police,  $F(1, 359) = 35.59$ ,  $p < .001$ . Accordingly, participants who felt they had easy access to the police had higher trust in the police ( $M = 3.23$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ) than the people who perceived it was difficult to get help from the police ( $M = 2.52$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ).

Moreover, the difference between urban and rural areas in terms of the levels of trust in the police was also significant,  $F(1, 359) = 50.77$ ,  $p < .001$ . Here, the participants from the rural areas had higher trust in the police ( $M = 3.38$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ) than the participants from the urban areas ( $M = 2.58$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ). However, no significant effect of ethnicity on the levels of trust in the police was found,  $F(1, 359) = 0.57$ ,  $p = .45$ . Even though non-Bamar participants ( $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) trusted the police a bit more than Bamar participants ( $M = 2.84$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ), this difference was not significant.

Finally, between-subjects interaction effect of ethnicity and location was found,  $F(1, 359) = 8.27$ ,  $p < .001$  (see Figure 1). Specifically, in the urban areas, the non-Bamar participants had lower trust in the police ( $M = 2.41$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ) than Bamar participants ( $M = 2.62$ ,  $SE = 0.10$ ), while in the rural areas, non-Bamar participants had higher trust in the police ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ ) than Bamar participants ( $M = 3.05$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ). In contrast, even though accessibility itself had a significant main effect on the levels of trust in the police, no interaction effects were found between accessibility and the other independent variables.

## Discussion

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This study aimed to test performance and conflict theory of trust for their applicability in Myanmar by examining variables that influence Myanmar people's trust in the police institutions. The findings obtained five observable patterns in the Myanmar socio-cultural context. First, the study found that the values of all three variables of trust (fairness, effectiveness, and transparency) were comparably low, and while there was no significant difference between them, transparency was the lowest. Possible reasons for these low levels of trust can be found in the participants' answers to the only open-ended question in this study, where the participants got a chance to express their experience with and perception of the police more freely. A number of participants described unfair and disrespectful treatment by police officers, the officers' corruption and personal bias, as well as the police's lack of readiness and willingness to help; these might be some of the factors causing the public to have a low trust in the police. Additionally, the political systems used by previous Myanmar governments could have made the government institutions generally untrustworthy in the eyes of the public.

The second observable pattern was that the findings of this study did not support the general assumption that participants from ethnic minorities would have less trust in police institutions than participants from the ethnic majority (Tyler, 2005). In contrast, the results of this study indicated that the ethnic minorities had a slightly higher level of trust in the police than the ethnic majority. In theory, democratic societies should have better protection of ethnic minority groups' political rights, more so than any other type of government (Morris, 2011); yet, the maturity of democratic culture in Myanmar is debatable. On the other hand, other factors such as age, gender, class, or income may have trumped the influence of ethnicity on participants' trust in the police force. In any case, it is important to note that the ethnic minority status was not an important determinant of public trust in the police in the present study, because the level of trust in the police was not significantly different between Bamar and non-Bamar participants; in fact, it was comparably low, ranging between neither distrust nor trust.

The third observable pattern revealed that police accessibility was significantly related to public trust in the

MPF: the easier the police could be reached by the public, the more trust there was. This result supported the study's second hypothesis and was also consistent with the previous literature (Shoyode, 2018). Next, the results also revealed a significant main effect of location on public trust in the police, where the participants from rural areas had higher trust in the police than the participants from urban areas. Hence, this observation supported the study's third hypothesis and was consistent with Wang and Sun's (2018) results obtained in Taiwan. Although the findings of these two studies are consistent, their interpretation could be different. Wang and Sun suggested that the urban participants in their study were influenced by media coverage of police misconducts and fear of crime, while in the current study, the participants from urban areas could have less trust in the police due to lack of access to the police. Specifically, the administrative system of the police in Myanmar is different between urban and rural areas; while urban areas have police stations in each township, the rural areas have surveillance officers, one per three villages.

Finally, the present study showed that participants who have never interacted with police officers had more trust in the police than participants who have already interacted with police officers at least once. However, this study only controlled for public's experience with police as an influencing factor on public trust in the police, and the results in this respect were not consistent with the previous literature (Wolden & McLean, 2017).

The current study has some limitations. First, due to some participants' lack of trust towards the researchers as well as lack of familiarity with questionnaires, the findings of this study might not be completely reliable. Second, this study sampled ethnic participants within Yangon and in villages which are not too far from urban areas and have good transportation access to police stations. Hence, the internal validity of this study might not be completely secured; future research should collect data from ethnic minorities in ethnic and more remote areas. Third, the study's internal validity might be threatened also due to the particular situation in the sampled rural areas. Here, the community leader appears to perform most of the tasks that need to deal with the police on behalf of the participants, who as a result only rarely interact with the

responsible surveillance officer. The good relationship between the participants and the community leader and a good image of the surveillance officer might have then contributed to the link between accessibility and trust in this study as well as to the higher levels of trust in rural rather than urban areas.

When it comes to external validity, even though the samples of Bamar and non-Bamar participants from urban and rural areas were sizable and comparable, it

is not possible to generalize our findings to the whole population as these samples were not representative. Next, the concepts of trust, accessibility, and the public's experience with the police were operationalized by only a few selected variables; in order to increase the overall construct validity, further studies should include more dimensions of these concepts. Finally, as this study did not use an experimental design, cause and effect relationships between the independent and dependent variables cannot be assumed.

# Conclusion and Recommendations

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The aim of the present research was to examine the level of public trust in the police in Myanmar and its influencing factors. In the research design, the levels of trust were compared between ethnic groups, locations, and areas of different levels of police accessibility, while controlling for the participants' previous experience with the police. To measure public trust, this study used three variables: fairness, effectiveness, and transparency. On the whole, this study showed that the participants who perceived that they had easy access to the police had higher trust in the police. In addition, people from rural areas had higher trust in the police than those from urban areas. Unexpectedly, there was no significant difference in the level of trust between Bamar and non-Bamar participants, but both ethnic groups had quite a low trust in the police.

The scope of this study was limited in terms of collecting data by surveys only. The restrictions were that some participants were not familiar with the survey design, while other people wanted to discuss topics beyond their answers to the survey. Hence, there is a need to explore the public's perception of the police more deeply to let them express their opinions and experiences more freely. Secondly, in the current study, participants' socio-economic status was operationalized through gender, age, ethnicity, and religion, excluding education and income. Further studies should focus on these demographic variables in order to compare the level of trust in the police between the rich and the poor as well as between people with different educational levels.

In spite of these limitations, to our knowledge, this is the first report measuring public trust in the police in Myanmar. The results of this research may be useful to the MPF, as they suggest what needs to be improved based on public perceptions of the institution. To begin with, the overall trust in the MPF in this study was rather low; therefore, the results highlight a need to strengthen police-public

relations through improving the police's transparency, effectiveness, and fairness. More specifically:

- 1/ The MPF should reduce corruption and personal bias among its officers, as the findings showed the transparency to be the lowest among the three types of trust.
- 2/ With respect to effectiveness, police officers should increase their readiness and willingness to respond immediately when people ask for help.
- 3/ To improve the MPF's perceived fairness, police officers' treatment of citizens should be more just and fair to everyone, regardless of ethnicity, religion, age, and gender.
- 4/ The perceived accessibility of the MPF was high in this study; hence, the MPF should maintain the present level of accessibility, since higher levels of accessibility were also associated with higher levels of trust.
- 5/ Our interpretation of the results obtained in the rural areas suggested that good relationships between community leaders and surveillance officers can lead to higher levels of trust in the police, thus the MPF could increase public trust in itself as an institution by encouraging good relationships between police/surveillance officers and community/township leaders in both urban and rural areas.

Finally, as public trust in the police reflects trust in the government as a whole (Goldsmith, 2005), trust in the government could also be developed by progressing the police's performance and strengthening police-public relations. Currently, police institutions may face challenges in fighting crime if there is no public cooperation. While the public needs the police's protection in their daily lives, the police also require the cooperation of public to be effective. To conclude, public trust is essential for the police to be a legitimate government institution, especially in democratic countries.

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