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I

Introduction

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MYANMAR'S CONFLICTED POLITICS

Nicholas Farrelly

BROKEN LIVES, BITTER HOPES

One of the sad facts about the long history of conflict in Myanmar is that nobody knows how many people have died, how many lives have been broken. Perhaps a million? Maybe more? In the civil wars, some of which have raged since the 1940s, the mountains and valleys have echoed with gunfire and artillery blasts, with shouted commands, and with the screams of the people as they have fled for their lives. Damage still pockmarks the landscape, landmines often lie unmapped, a hazard to everyone, and vast territories remain locked in standoffs between the government and its remaining opponents. Round after round of negotiations between these ethnic armed groups and the central government have enjoyed only mixed success. In some areas, central authorities have accepted local governance arrangements that see armed ethnic groups control substantial economies. They levy local fees and taxes, determine what gets taught at school, and inculcate society with their values of resistance and ethnic pride. These arrangements have often proved unstable, with ceasefires teetering, held

together only by economic largesse and grim appreciation that the costs of war are immense. Where compromise cannot be found, Myanmar's people suffer through long-running jousts, which can sometimes escalate into full-blown battles, forcing thousands from their homes. During the past half-decade — even as life in Myanmar improved for tens of millions of people — difficult conditions have remained in parts of the Shan, Kachin and Rakhine States. In certain areas, ethnic armed forces have battled hard against the central government, unwilling to concede ground to what they consider occupying forces.

In the past, there was in fact no clear distinction between Myanmar's armed forces, often known by their Burmese name, the Tatmadaw, and the central government. Under the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) that ruled until 2011, Myanmar's military high command and executive leadership were one-and-the-same (see Seekins 1999; Rogers 2009; Farrelly 2013). In practice, this system gave army officers, whatever their rank, dual responsibilities as both administrators and war-fighters. For instance, the head of Myanmar's Northern Command, usually a major general based in the Kachin State capital, Myitkyina, also served as the chairman of the Kachin State Peace and Development Council. This parallel structure disciplined civilian bureaucrats to the expectations of their military superiors. The SPDC mandated strict limits on all public spheres, and there was relatively severe scrutiny of information flows, publications and artistic expression (Brooten 2006; Carlson 2016; also Brooten 2013). The education system and the media were strangled so that only officially endorsed perspectives were circulated openly (Han Tin 2008, pp. 121–123). Dissenters were rounded up and subjected to long periods of incarceration (see Cheesman 2015). Many decided that survival under the military regime was impossible and fled abroad for a better chance at a livelihood and happiness. Thailand ended up absorbing millions of Myanmar exiles and migrants; thousands more ventured to Malaysia, Singapore, India and China (Farrelly 2012a; Meyer et al 2015). Significant numbers were also resettled in the western democracies that, with varying degrees of assertiveness, kept up pressure on the military regime.

What is remarkable is just how much has changed since the formal end of the SPDC era in 2011. The first step was the transition to a semi-civilian regime, where former senior military officers, including top brass from the SPDC, managed the new constitutional government (Egretreau 2014). President Thein Sein, who had been the fourth ranking officer in the SPDC,

was the head of state from 2011 through to 2016. Shwe Mann and Khin Aung Myint, who served the transitional government in pivotal roles as speakers of the Union Assembly, also had backgrounds as top commanders in the military regime (Chit Win, this volume). Their civilian reincarnation was accompanied by important changes to the country's security agencies (see Selth 2014) and to the range of opportunities for popular participation in the political process (Lall and Hla Hla Win 2013). During this phase of democratic development, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) dominated the legislature in Naypyitaw and also held large majorities in the fourteen states and regions. They learned to work with a range of ethnic and democratic political parties, and also with their uniformed military peers. Over time, the USDP became fractious, with dueling powerbrokers in the legislature and the executive vying for control. Among the democratic forces, Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), which had boycotted the 2010 election, ended up winning seats at the 2012 by-election. With elected representatives serving in the country's legislatures, Myanmar's iconic opposition movement quietly went about the business of re-establishing a vibrant nationwide network of campaigners.

During these transitional years, progress towards economic, political and social reform was inconsistent. While the government confidently adjusted some critical policies and benefited from renewed foreign interest, those who had anticipated a more thorough transformation of society were immensely frustrated. For any progress, the Thein Sein government needed to coordinate with the armed forces, and with reluctant elements among the USDP (Maung Aung Myoe 2014). Thein Sein's civilianised administration did enough, however, to enjoy a partially rehabilitated international image (see Tin Maung Maung Than 2012, pp. 75–76). Welcoming the NLD into the formal political arrangement was crucial in this regard. In mid-2013 the World Economic Forum put on a grand investment summit, before Myanmar hosted the Southeast Asian Games (for details on the games see Creak 2014) and then, in 2014, the country chaired the Association of Southeast Asian Nations for the first time. The ASEAN and East Asia Summits held toward the end of 2014 were an opportunity to showcase the increasing vibrancy of Myanmar society. Attention then turned to preparations for the 2015 general election. While the floods of mid-2015 affected many people, the elections ended up running smoothly and were judged reasonably free and fair by independent observers. In the final tally, the NLD was triumphant, going on to hold over sixty per cent of seats in the Union Assembly (see Min Zin

2016). It also performed very strongly in the elections for the State and Region legislatures, with the striking exceptions of the Rakhine and Shan States.

In Rakhine State, Myanmar's reforms have yet to have much positive impact, mostly because of ongoing tension between Muslim and Buddhist communities. In 2012, a wave of violence across northern Rakhine State saw 140,000 people, the majority of them Muslims, displaced from their homes. Many villages and neighbourhoods were burned to the ground in this anti-Muslim pogrom. Retaliatory attacks on Buddhist villages tore at the fabric of multi-religious local life, with unreconciled claims of indigeneity providing fuel for the communal antagonism (Thawngmung 2016a). After the smoke had cleared, Myanmar was faced with an emboldened Buddhist chauvinist movement seeking to stamp its values on the national story. Politicians retreated in the face of support for these bigoted politics, which were made famous by the sermons of monks around the country (Walton and Hayward 2014). Wirathu, a preacher from Mandalay, became the most outspoken advocate for the nationalist cause, cloaking himself in ideas about the defence of race and religion. In the lead-up to the 2015 vote, people wondered about the potential influence of nationalist rhetoric on the election outcome. As it happened, the nationalist anti-NLD mobilisation failed to sway enough voters to influence the final result.

With its post-election majority in the Union Assembly, the NLD's Htin Kyaw, one of Aung San Suu Kyi's close confidants, was elevated to the presidency while Henry Van Thio, an ethnic Chin, became vice-president. The military's nominee for vice-president, Myint Swe, a retired general who previously served as chief minister of Yangon Region, took the other senior post. Htin Kyaw's cabinet also blends elements of the old and the new, seeking to strike a balance between experience, technical competence, and democratic orientation. The difficulty for the NLD is that so few of its senior figures have any substantial experience of government decision-making. And now that they have a greater say in national affairs there are difficulties aplenty. For a start, the separation between the military and the government has the potential to introduce tension at the heart of the Naypyitaw decision-making apparatus. There are few obvious mechanisms apart from trust building and personal connections that will avoid future showdowns between alienated elements of the NLD and military.

As Myanmar's political system continues to evolve, *Conflict in Myanmar* takes the time to consider conflict in its military, political and religious dimensions. The story of these enduring problems needs extra attention at

a time when Myanmar's newly elected leaders are seeking to find better mechanisms for resolving old grievances. Aung San Suu Kyi talks of a twenty-first century Panglong Conference that draws its strength from the 1947 deal between her father, General Aung San, and the leaders of three major ethnic minorities. With this in mind, an historical sensibility is the basic foundation for any serious consideration of conflict in Myanmar today. As a response to contemporary conflict situations, this volume is structured around three key themes: war, politics and religion. To help introduce the volume, this chapter explains the historical and political context for each of these issues, starting with war.

WAR

In Myanmar, like in other countries defined by civil conflict, families and communities have been torn apart by their divided loyalties. These battles go back to the 1940s when, in the aftermath of the Second World War, the central government struggled to control secessionists at the margins (Smith 2007). Battles over political ideology and ethnic identity eventually left vast areas of the country relatively ungoverned, with Tatmadaw units bunkered down in well-fortified garrisons. In the early years of conflict, the consequences for local people varied immensely, with many welcoming the fresh ambition of communist or ethnic armies that operated in their areas. Through the 1960s and 1970s, under the socialist government of General Ne Win, conflict shaped all aspects of life, especially in the ethnic majority States (see Nakanishi 2013). Rebels established fixed bases and exerted influence over large proportions of the country. It was only in the late 1980s that the Communist Party of Burma imploded, splintering into ethnic militias, such as the powerful United Wa State Army (UWSA). Some of these groups agreed to ceasefires with the central government, which, after its own change of top-level leadership, was enthusiastic about a self-proclaimed mission to restore "law and order".

The 1990s then witnessed erratic progress towards what the military government described as "peace and development". Some of the ceasefires, like the one agreed with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in 1993, benefited from sophisticated local deal-making that enriched Myanmar military commanders and their counterparts in ethnic military, political and business groups (see Farrelly 2012b). Consolidating these agreements

helped to develop the political prowess of all sides; they learned to work together even when their long-term interests diverged. The government allowed ethnic armed groups to manage designated “special regions” which offered a chance to imagine autonomous cultural and economic policies. Under these often-temperamental conditions, the negotiation of ceasefires was an ongoing process, vulnerable to the whims of new leaders and their commercial associates. In some localities, day-to-day skirmishes have been the pattern for as long as anyone can remember.

The most significant new war of recent years was in northernmost Myanmar, where the old antagonisms between the KIA and the central government reignited. This war, which started in its modern form in 1961, paused under the ceasefire from 1993 to 2011 (for a fuller history see Sadan 2013). Those years of ceasefire created new wealth, in particular among those who controlled the region’s extractive industries. Jade, gold and timber offered untold profits for the businesses that exported to China’s hungry markets. The ceasefire was made possible by the enmeshment of commercial, political and cultural interests. But nobody was greatly surprised when the ceasefire ended. Years of negotiation about the future of the KIA, and its potential transformation into a so-called Border Guard Force, had left all sides questioning the sincerity of their opponents. When in June 2011 the KIA challenged Myanmar government troops, the escalation came quickly. Within weeks, a tempo of guerrilla ambushes, infantry surges, and hit-and-run attacks had forced 10,000s of people to flee their homes. Soon, more than 100,000 internally displaced people sought refuge from the violence, many huddled against the Chinese border (Cook 2014).

This explosion of conflict generated considerable doubt about the overall trajectory of Myanmar’s political changes. It showed that the armed forces remained willing to strike against perceived enemies, including with air power and heavy artillery. Questions about the military’s chain of command fueled suspicion about the extent to which it had surrendered power at all. Under the 2008 Constitution, defence, security and border issues remained the preserve of the armed forces, with the commander-in-chief, by this stage Min Aung Hlaing, empowered to appoint uniformed officers to the relevant ministerial posts. In day-to-day operational matters, it was still the regional commands and the Bureau of Special Operations that played the central roles. For Northern Myanmar, it was Bureau of Special Operations No. 1. Its most important subordinate command, Northern Command, is headquartered at Myitkyina, the bustling riverside capital of Kachin State.

As the war continued, Myitkyina's ordinary business — trade, education, bureaucracy and transport — started to wilt. Munitions and personnel from elsewhere were originally brought in by rail until trains were attacked and the tracks sabotaged. Then boats were used, but they too were vulnerable to audacious KIA raids. Eventually, supplies and reinforcements were brought in by air.

The consequences of this war were felt deeply by the people of Kachin State and adjacent areas of northern Shan State, as explained by Hedström in this volume. While older people had direct memories of the effects of such conflict, an entire generation of local youth, including young women, had been raised under the relatively benign conditions of the ceasefire. They may have learned to resent central government impositions — the learning of the Burmese language in schools, the prominence of Buddhist ceremony in national life, the perception that their opportunities were limited by their ethnicity — and yet most had also enjoyed the benefits of a booming local economy. Myitkyina before the war was a key hub for education, business and cultural initiatives. It also enjoyed increasingly strong links with other areas of northern Myanmar, especially as better roads were constantly under construction, and new areas opened up for mining, logging and hydro-electricity projects. These routes served multiple purposes, especially for the many companies trading with counterparts in China (see Egreteau 2012).

China figured in the wartime calculations in other ways. Under the ceasefire, the KIA reinforced its fixed bases along the Chinese border, setting up relatively independent governance. Under the auspices of what was called "Kachin State Special Region 2", the KIA-controlled territories administered their own affairs and cultivated close ties with authorities across the border in China, including at the political level. They established casinos as one means of earning revenue, while the KIA also levied taxes on passing cross-border trade. When the war erupted, this access to China proved more valuable than ever, offering a way for the KIA to interact with the rest of the world. While the Chinese government is wary of any perception that it actively supports Myanmar's ethnic armed groups, it has also worked assiduously to ensure these groups are not overwhelmed by Tatmadaw firepower. China's double game is a significant factor along the entire length of this mountainous frontier.

That double game is also apparent in the Kokang Region in northern Shan State, where outbreaks of violence in 2009 and 2015 have shifted the terms of local government. The Kokang, whose armed group is more formally

known as the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, were the first to agree to a ceasefire when the Communist Party of Burma imploded in the late 1980s. Their “Shan State Special Region 1” is centered on the borderlands town of Laukkai. Like the KIA-controlled territories in Kachin State, it prospered under the unusual economic and political conditions of ceasefire. The Kokang maintained a reputation as a group with strong links to the regional narcotics business, especially opium cultivation and amphetamine production. The Myanmar government, while sometimes active in its efforts to stop the drug trade, also tolerated the Kokang presence. Part of the explanation for this cosy arrangement is the Chinese government’s support for the ethnic-Chinese Kokang. While designated as one of Myanmar’s “national races”, the Kokang continue to speak Chinese and maintain a wide range of cross-border connections, as seen when the Myanmar government launched offensives against the MNDAA in recent years. Kokang refugees fleeing to China received support not made available to other ethnic groups in similarly desperate circumstances.

The most complicated situation in Myanmar’s borderlands still relates to the United Wa State Army, which may have around 20,000 fighters (Ei Ei Toe Lwin and Htoo Thant 2015; Ferguson 2010). It is the best-provisioned ethnic armed group in the country, with a level of technical and industrial capacity that challenges even the Myanmar government itself. For that reason, the Wa are persistently problematic for the central authorities. While open warfare has been rare, the tentative ceasefire that holds in their areas of Shan State is among the country’s most fragile. Chinese support for the UWSA is one reason that Sino-Myanmar relations are a challenge for both sides. The Wa are also alleged contributors to the production of narcotics and the United States sanctions their top leaders for running a “narco-army”. Indeed their business allegedly ranges from ordinary consumer goods and raw materials through to the illicit flows of weapons, people, and drugs (Chin 2009; Lintner 1994). Making this formidable strategic and commercial force fit the needs of Myanmar’s centralising government is a long-term political and military headache.

Careful management of rebellious groups is apparent further south, where some ethnic armed forces continue to antagonise the government from their bases along the Thai border. Since the late 1940s this “buffer” region has proved beyond the comprehensive control of central governments from either side of the frontier. Such a complicated strategic dynamic has encouraged discreet Thai support for insurgent groups that fight the

Myanmar government, among them the Mon, Kayin, Kayah and Shan ethnic groups. Hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants from these groups have also sought sanctuary in Thailand. They tend to do low-paid jobs in the Thai economy, often under parlous conditions. This workforce is especially evident in borderland provinces where people who once lived in Myanmar provide much of the labour for manufacturing, agriculture and fishing. Myanmar's long history of displacement has created a new underclass in Thai society, ripe for exploitation by callous economic and political interests.

A different type of manipulation on the Myanmar side has kept these border wars in a perpetually unfinished state. Since the ceasefire agreements first emerged, particularly during the spurt of enthusiastic negotiations in the 1980s and 1990s, the country has endured stop-start progress towards final peace agreements. It does not help that trust in the government is patchy, as explained by Welsh and Huang in this volume. Nonetheless, when the Thein Sein government took power in 2011 it redoubled official peace-making efforts under the guise of the Myanmar Peace Center (MPC). Its mandate, to further diminish the level of conflict around the country, was entrusted to Aung Min, a government minister, who became the preferred negotiator (for details see Su Mon Thazin Aung, this volume). Aung Min worked closely with MPC staff to create conditions for a nationwide ceasefire agreement. While similar initiatives in the 1990s had failed, there was hope that the MPC could generate a more comprehensive and long-lasting peace deal. Negotiations with the different armed groups were slow and, in the end, the agreement signed in October 2015 only included a fraction of the country's major fighting forces. The key point of contention was reluctance to accept a resolution to conflict in the absence of a durable political structure that would offer sufficient autonomy to ethnic groups. The UWSA and KIA were among the major groups that decided to stay out of the deal. They were no doubt motivated not to participate by the idea that, before long, they would be negotiating with a different government entirely.

POLITICS

The NLD won a resounding victory at the 8 November 2015 general election (Thawngmung 2016b; Chaw Chaw Sein, this volume). Its win changes the equation for conflict in Myanmar in many ways. For a start, the new government does not have a track record on which it is possible

to assess its long-term intentions or its potential success in implementing complex policies. In her initial statements, party chair Aung San Suu Kyi has insisted that resolving ethnic conflict remains a high priority. The difficulty for her team is that they will need to negotiate with both their own armed forces headed by Min Aung Hlaing and with the ethnic armed groups, under dozens of different commanders, to secure any long-term peace agreement. With Aung San Suu Kyi serving as State Counsellor, the ethnic armed groups are positioning themselves to demand a genuinely federal union where local rights merit utmost consideration. Some of the issues on the agenda include ethnic language education policy (South and Lall 2016), resource royalty distribution (Thet Aung Lynn and Oye 2014), land tenure (Kramer 2015), and the devolution of greater powers to State legislatures (Walaiporn and Pritchard 2016). At the same time, for ethnic armed groups themselves, the most pressing issues concern their future status after a peace deal. Many have resisted calls for disarmament and eventual demobilisation. Any disarmament, they fear, puts their people at the mercy of future Myanmar governments and they may not be able to rely on central government forces for protection. The fact that ethnic Bamar make up the majority of government troops, and that Bamar, Rakhine, and Mon are the only groups well represented in the officer ranks, is a further cause for concern. Discussion of a “union army” that draws its strength from all ethnic groups has yet to progress.

Nonetheless other political changes, especially elections, have already shifted the basis for interaction. At the start of the transition, the 7 November 2010 general election was held under deliberately constrained circumstances (see Lidauer 2012). The USDP, which emerged from the mass membership organisation created by the former military regime, needed to ensure it won the majority of seats. Along with the twenty-five per cent allocation for uniformed military personnel, this would guarantee it controlled a handbrake on radical political change. When the NLD decided to boycott the election, the USDP’s position strengthened significantly. In the end, the USDP won nearly eighty per cent of seats at the union level, and also seized control of the fourteen State and Region legislatures. Its dominance of politics after the election suggested continuity with the dictatorial period. When Thein Sein appointed his first cabinet, former senior military officers held almost all of the key positions. Over time, some technocratic ministers came to take important posts. These changes did not shift the overall sense that the Myanmar government functioned with the support of the military

rather than the people. At the same time, active elected ethnic representations from the Rakhine, Mon, Shan, Chin and Kachin States made their presence felt (Farrelly 2014).

The next phase of political reconfiguration followed the by-election held on 1 April 2012. By this stage, the National League for Democracy had agreed to participate in politics under the 2008 Constitution. Aung San Suu Kyi and forty members of her NLD team were elected to the Union Assembly. While they remained a modest force in Naypyitaw, the NLD could get familiar with how the system worked from the inside. Under these conditions, Aung San Suu Kyi had regular opportunities to interact with senior members of the USDP, particularly the speakers of the Union Assembly, Shwe Mann, and Khin Aung Myint. As retired senior military officers and loyal servants of the SPDC regime, they welcomed her presence in the legislature. The NLD representatives tended to keep quiet, only occasionally attacking government policies or querying the direction of the reform process. Their lack of law-making experience was telling even among an almost entirely novice contingent of USDP legislators.

After much waiting, and while there was some doubt about the potential for a free and fair vote, the 2015 general election offered the Myanmar people a chance to have their say. At the ballot box, voters rushed to endorse NLD candidates even though most were not well-known figures. This trend carried into ethnic areas where narrowly focused ethnic political advocates struggled to receive enough votes to win in the unforgiving first-past-the-post system. This result also revealed the changing demographics of many ethnic regions. They have become genuinely multi-ethnic, especially in urban townships that have drawn migrants from across the country. For now, the hard electoral mathematics seems to favour those parties that can create a genuinely national story of inclusion and change.

But the NLD's strong election result does not imply that political contention has disappeared. Religious politics remains a specific concern, especially among Buddhist communities anxious about the direction of social change. For now, no Muslims sit in the legislatures or hold any senior government positions. Other political interests that are not well represented in the new political system include young people, women, LGBTI communities, and the peasant and labouring classes. Politics in Myanmar remains an elite activity, where Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of the country's independence hero, exemplifies the distance between most voters and the politicians who take their seats in Naypyitaw: her comfort

with international audiences contrasts with what are sometimes erratic performances on the local stage. The NLD makes no apology for this elitism or the advanced age of its senior decision-makers (for context see Farrelly 2016). They are the product of a long-running struggle for greater democratic participation in politics. The harsh reality, for these top leaders, is that their recent electoral success has revealed just how much work still needs to be done.

RELIGION

Perhaps the most demanding challenge in Myanmar today is the social faultline between Muslims and Buddhists. Muslims make up at least four per cent of the population although some guess that the actual proportion is nowadays much higher (see discussion in Crouch 2016, pp. 10–12). Such are the sensitivities around religious adherence that the government has proved reluctant to release the relevant parts of the 2014 census. The unspoken fear is that an accurate count of Myanmar's Muslims will further inflame the simmering resentments felt by many Buddhists. While there is a treasured local tradition of tolerance for different faiths, anti-Muslim sentiments also have a long history (Kipgen 2013). Under the Thein Sein government, the situation deteriorated greatly, particularly in northern Rakhine State, home to the persecuted Rohingya. Anti-Muslim violence in 2012 entrenched the divisions between Myanmar's two largest faith communities, and focused attention on the spiteful rhetoric of nationalist politicians and monks. In this volume, both Wells and Schissler look at the resulting challenges. In the years since that spike in violence, Muslims have struggled to protect their previous status and many Rohingya have been forced to live hand-to-mouth in informal settlements. Others have sought sanctuary across the border in Bangladesh, as explored in this volume's chapter by Khan.

Under these conditions, even the term "Rohingya" is contested. Those who seek to extinguish its usage on Myanmar soil claim that the designation hides illegal immigrants from Bangladesh who should be expelled from Myanmar territory. Myanmar's own official scheme of categorisation, which encompasses 135 ethnicities, includes one group that is predominately Muslim, the Kaman. They also live in Rakhine State and have been caught up in the recent religious conflicts. By the end of 2012, the violence had displaced over 140,000 Muslims, including Rohingya and Kaman. This

population of displaced people joined the more than 400,000 Rohingya who already live in camps and informal settlements on the Bangladesh side of the border. The international community expressed deep concern about this explosion of communal animosity. Protests from the Muslim world were particularly strident. In the aftermath, there were claims of crimes against humanity and even genocide (Maung Zarni and Cowley 2014; Bauer 2015; also Southwick 2015).

Elsewhere in Myanmar, there was concern that the violence might spread. Cities like Yangon and Mandalay, and countless other towns across the country, have large and well-established Muslim populations. The perception that the Muslim community is large and growing adds to the popular anxieties that are inflamed by hardline Buddhist chauvinist rhetoric. Around the country, the symbols of the 969 movement and of the Committee for the Protection of Race and Religion (commonly known by its Burmese acronym “MaBaTha”) are very common. Through 2013 there was more violence, with significant episodes in Meiktila, in central Myanmar, and at Lashio in the Shan State. Even though the level of violence has dropped since 2014, animosity towards Muslims remains a significant factor in local and national political relations. The NLD and USDP did not endorse Muslim candidates at the 2015 election. And many Muslim voters who were eligible to cast a vote in 2010 found themselves disenfranchised by new rules about voter eligibility.

Other religious minorities face different challenges. Most of Myanmar’s Christian communities are found in the Kayin, Kachin and Chin States where ethnic identity has, for many people, been fused to their Christian faith. Strong Baptist and Catholic congregations exert influence on local politics, often in defiance of the expectations of Myanmar’s Bamar Buddhist majority. Religion and politics are still fused in many minds, especially across the borderlands. The other religious minorities — such as Hindus, Sikhs and Jews — have relatively small populations, around which there tend to be fewer political skirmishes. Nonetheless any consideration of religious conflict still involves these visible minorities, who may also feel alienated from Myanmar’s Buddhist majority culture and the powerful interests that it relies on for support.

THE MYANMAR UPDATE SERIES AND THIS VOLUME

The first Myanmar Update conference was held at the ANU in 1990. Since 2004 the conferences have been organized on a regular, biannual schedule. Over this period, the conferences have become the most significant events of their kind, drawing practitioners, analysts, and academics from around Australia, from Myanmar, and from across the world. The 2015 event was particularly notable. Khin Aung Myint, the speaker of the Union Assembly's House of Nationalities from 2011 to 2016, delivered the keynote address. For him, it was a very rare speech in English and an opportunity to explain the challenges of the transition from military rule. Years earlier it would have been inconceivable that such a senior retired military figure could even travel to Australia, let alone participate in an academic event that prides itself on free expression and open debate. To his credit, Khin Aung Myint relished the chance to present his views and take questions from all-comers. We hope that future events will be similarly open to high-level political figures from among Myanmar's changing group of leaders.

In 2015, the Myanmar Update grappled directly with the dynamics of ongoing conflict and contention. The Buddhist-Muslim faultline was the subject of sustained and sometimes heated discussion. The issue of Muslim refugees taking to the Andaman Sea in search of safer harbour ensured the audience left with a strong impression of the real world implications of academic debate. The Myanmar Update conference series has long sought to engage with Myanmar's difficult political, economic and social conditions with a keen eye to practical consequences. This tradition now offers a rising generation of scholars, analysts and practitioners a chance to test their ideas and to seek out the most effective solutions to prevailing problems. Focusing attention on Myanmar's conflict dynamics is yet another way of showcasing our consistent attention to the most pressing political concerns.

Over the past decade each conference has been followed by academic publications, usually in the form of an edited volume. We are delighted that this volume includes a wide range of authors, drawn from across generations, national backgrounds and political perspectives. Taken together, the authors showcase the value of considered academic reflection on contemporary events and the need for creative responses to entrenched issues. The grim reality is that, for generations to come, Myanmar's development will feel the reverberations of conflict. Even when peace is

finally proclaimed it will be necessary to keep revisiting the history of conflict as efforts to put society back together continue. There is no easy answer after so many years of strife and trauma. To help reconcile this history with Myanmar's current situation, the book is divided into three parts in addition to this introduction and the conclusion: 'war and order', 'elections and after', and 'us and them'.

The book's examination of war in contemporary Myanmar begins, in Chapter 2, with Su Mon Thazin Aung's discussion of the peace process that unfolded under Thein Sein. Her chapter offers a crucial foundation for assessment of conflict in Myanmar during this fragile stage of political transition. Next, in Chapter 3, Costas Laoutides and Anthony Ware re-examine the relevance of ethnic identity to the Kachin conflict, drawing on research undertaken since the resumption of hostilities in 2011. Given the level of violence suffered in Kachin areas in recent years, it is important that Jenny Hedström, in Chapter 4, explores the gendered aspects of insecurity in Kachin State. Taken together these Kachin-focused chapters offer a strong overview of the unresolved wars that have made life so difficult in Myanmar's borderlands. Ricky Yue then looks, in Chapter 5, at the Pa-O Self-Administered Zone in southern Shan State. This is an important case study for thinking about how marginal areas have been incorporated into the Myanmar nation-building project. It is followed, in Chapter 6, by Gregory S. Cathcart's discussion of landmines as a form of community protection in eastern Myanmar.

In the next part, writers turn their attention to the political process and the elections. This section begins with Chapter 7, which is by Michael Lidauer. It explains the results of the 2015 general election in terms of evolving conflict dynamics. This is followed by Chaw Chaw Sein's Chapter 8, on the role of various institutions in Myanmar's 2015 election. She looks particularly closely at the election commission, international agencies, and the military. Next is an essay by Than Tun on the challenging context of religion and ethnicity in Rakhine State. He considers the role of Buddhist nationalism in the 2015 election result. Chapter 10 by Chit Win then explores the changing role of the legislature in managing conflict during Myanmar's fragile transition from direct military rule. It offers lessons on the unexpected potential of the Union Assembly to deal with some of the country's most difficult issues. This chapter is followed by Melissa Crouch's interrogation of legislative practice during the reform period, with a specific focus on the various ways that conflict has been managed.

The subsequent part contains five chapters on religious and communal disquiet in a context where hatreds have been mobilised around potent notions of ‘us’ and ‘them’. In Chapter 12 Tamas Wells explains how we might want to sensitively and cautiously appreciate reactions to communal conflict. His chapter is followed by a quantitative analysis, authored by Bridget Welsh and Kai-Ping Huang, of public perceptions of social division based on the 2015 Myanmar Asian Barometer Survey. Matt Schissler then offers, in Chapter 14, an appreciation of Islamophobia and holocaust denial in an effort to make sense of anti-Muslim violence. That essays leads to Gerard McCarthy’s analysis of Buddhist charitable organisations in provincial areas and their role in supporting the social safety net. Then, in Chapter 16, Helal Mohammed Khan considers the profound difficulties of jointly managing the Myanmar–Bangladesh borderlands, the site of so much of the region’s recent heartache.

In the concluding chapter, my co-editor, Nick Cheesman, explains the variety of ways that we should think about political activity. His critique offers guidance on some of the further developments that may emerge in social scientific analysis of conflict and politics in Myanmar. As his intervention suggests, there is no sense in which any of these observations on recent history are the final word. Life in Myanmar continues to change rapidly, and the NLD-led government that took power in 2016 is now forced into a novel set of negotiations with the remnants of the former military regime. The military itself — for so long a principal actor in war, politics, and religion — is adjusting to the contested political landscape. For once, there is hope that deft policy-making and implementation will bring Myanmar’s sad history of violent conflict to a close. If that proves a sustainable result, the country’s political institutions will have changed in many ways. The chapters in this volume identify both the lingering problems and the enticing possibilities of a more peaceful tomorrow.

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