I

Introduction

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INTRODUCTION: MYANMAR TRANSFORMED?

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In early February 2016 crowds gathered around televisions in tea shops across Myanmar to watch their new representatives be sworn in to positions in the *Pyithu* and *Amyotha* Parliaments, the lower and upper houses, in the capital Naypyitaw. In a country ruled by soldiers for over five decades, many doubted whether the military would hand legislative and executive power to a government led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy, given its refusal to do so when the party won the elections in 1990. Watching NLD representatives take seats in Myanmar's parliament brought tears of cautious optimism to the eyes of many of these self-proclaimed democrats. Their hopeful sentiment was reinforced a few weeks later when U Htin Kyaw, a close aide of long-time democracy campaigner and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, was made President. Soon after, Suu Kyi herself assumed the newly-created position of "State Counsellor", a role she claimed would place her "above the President" (Marshall and Mclaughlin 2015).

Since the heady months of early 2016, the limits of Myanmar's transformation from military junta to alleged beacon of democratization

have become tragically clear. Levels of poverty and household debt remain catastrophic for many households. Meanwhile, on-budget funding for the armed forces, or Tatmadaw, in 2017–18 almost exceeded financing for health, education and welfare *combined.* In contrast to the vibrant political environment and growth in civil society between 2011–15, hopes that the NLD's election would herald a more progressive and inclusive Myanmar have faded rapidly since 2015. Civil liberties have come under repeated attack, with Myanmar declared the "biggest backslider in press freedom" across the globe by the Committee to Protect Journalists as a result of the escalating imprisonment of reporters and social media users during Suu Kyi's tenure. Protests by students in support of education reform have been suppressed, and land disputes remain intractable with little hope for justice or compensation for those dispossessed over decades. Furthermore, the status of religious minorities and progressive activists has become increasingly precarious, as exposed by the blatant assassination of prominent Muslim lawyer and architect of Suu Kyi's "State Counsellor" position U Ko Ni in January 2017.

Nowhere have these dynamics been borne out more tragically and violently than in Rakhine State where the precarious humanitarian, political and security order which had existed since the 2012–13 communal violence has collapsed entirely. Attacks on military outposts by a Rohingya armed group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), in October 2016 and August 2017 prompted successive and escalating waves of what the military termed "clearance operations". Thousands of houses were burnt, driving over 750,000 Rohingya people to neighbouring Bangladesh. At the time of writing in early 2018 authorities continued to restrict access for independent media, human rights monitors and UN-appointed investigators to affected areas of northern Rakhine State. However, refugee testimony, satellite imagery and investigative reports suggesting systematic extrajudicial killings, torture, sexual violence and arson by Myanmar's military and Arakanese militia have led the United Nations to declare this "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing" (Cumming-Bruce 2017). Both the national military and Suu Kyi's government have denied most allegations, labelling ARSA a "terrorist" group whilst reinforcing the message that Rohingya are neither a "national race" nor rightful citizens of Myanmar (see Cheesman 2017).

Images of mass graves and atrocities committed by security personnel against Rohingya have emerged at the same time as protests in Rakhine

State that dramatically exposed the parlous state of relations between Naypyitaw and increasingly assertive Arakanese political elites. Growing resentment towards the NLD's perceived Bamar imperialism, symbolized by the appointment of an NLD chief minister in Rakhine State following the 2015 election, appears to have generated considerable elite and grassroots support from Rakhine people for another militia, the Arakan Army, which is closely linked to Rakhine elites (Davis 2017). Despite the escalating insurgency apparently claiming the lives of hundreds of Tatmadaw soldiers since 2016,[1] far more than the comparatively poorly resourced Rohingya militant group ARSA, the government has been reticent to label the Arakan Army "terrorists". But neither have Naypyitaw officials been willing to include the group in Myanmar's formal peace process. The resulting upsurge in AA attacks since late 2017 targeting security forces in Rakhine and Chin States, combined with the subsequent crackdown of January 2018 when police opened fire on Rakhine protesters, killing eight people before arresting senior Rakhine politicians on charges of treason, threatens to destabilize the region further. As the government in Naypyitaw signals the limits of tolerable dissent, its optimistic plans to repatriate and integrate Rohingya refugees currently in Bangladesh back into Rakhine State are likely to be met with stiff political and military resistance from Arakanese elites.

Beyond Rakhine State, the ethnic and religious fractures which were the topic of the most recent Myanmar Update volume (Cheesman and Farrelly 2016) have become more evident since the 2015 elections. This has been most tragically born out against communities in northern Kachin State. While peace was Aung San Suu Kyi's top priority after taking office in 2016, many ethnic minority community leaders feel betrayed that sustained military campaigns have intensified under her administration. As a result of escalating tensions, in 2016 the United Wa State Army (UWSA) formed its own negotiating "Northern Alliance" with other armed groups including the Kachin Independence Army and Arakan Army after it briefly entered—then dramatically exited—the 21st Century Panglong peace negotiations. Rejecting the demands made by the Northern Alliance partners for "all-inclusion", the Tatmadaw subsequently escalated attacks in Kachin and Shan States. Hundreds of families were forced to join more than 100,000 people already displaced by years of conflict since the breakdown of the 1994 Kachin ceasefire in 2012 (Hedström 2016; Lintner 2017). As trust declines and tensions rise in ethnic states, the path towards

long-term peace becomes ever more elusive, compounded by unaddressed insecurity, fear and political grievances.

With the peace process faltering, signatories to the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) and many ethnic civil society groups fear that prospects for long-promised constitutional reforms and political autonomy are evaporating. For populations in ceasefire areas such as Karen and Mon States, the cessation of hostilities has certainly brought benefits in the form of increased freedom of movement, decreased taxation, access to income opportunities, healthcare and education services and less frequent and severe human rights abuses (see KHRG 2014; South and Joliffe 2015). However, power-sharing mechanisms remain tenuous and informal, with many ethnic armed leaders seeing the increasing intrusion of the Myanmar government and military into ethnic armed organization (EAO)-controlled areas of the country as part of a Bamar state strategy to extend authority and extract natural resources (Brenner 2017; Décobert 2016). The escalating clashes between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Tatmadaw in early 2018 bodes ill for the viability of current ceasefire arrangements. For many community representatives there is a strong sense that the same dynamics of land grabs and resource extraction without political transformation—which drove a return to conflict in Kachin State—are now occurring in the absence of meaningful moves towards federalism (Sadan 2016; Woods 2011). Yet the substantive political dialogue and constitutional concessions from state officials necessary to breaking the current stalemate remain subject to Tatmadaw veto, reinforcing the limited power of civilian leaders in peacemaking.

Anxieties about the absence of post-conflict institutional reform are interwoven with contentious debates about the boundaries of political community, belonging and citizenship (Farrelly 2014; see Laoutides and Ware 2016; Welsh and Kai-Ping Huang 2016). In a recent volume on citizenship in Myanmar, P'Doh Kweh Htoo Win, the General Secretary of the KNU, emphasizes that even those who have spent their lives fighting the Tatmadaw still see the possibility of a "Myanmar" identity which is predicated on respect for ethnic and religious difference (see South and Lall 2018, pp. 301–3). NLD elites both in Naypyitaw and in ethnic states, however, have taken few meaningful steps to encourage these more inclusive understandings of political community. Instead, the imposition of statues of independence hero General Aung San in Mon and Kayah States against the wishes of local ethnic leaders have only reinforced fears of

"Burmanization".[2] In contrast, when KNU leaders sought to erect a statue of the group's founder Saw Ba U Gyi as part of their celebrations for the Karen New Year in 2017 they were blocked twice by military officials.[3]

The limits of reform as well as the institutional and symbolic contradictions of the peace process partly derive from the ongoing role of the military in governance enshrined in the 2008 Constitution (see Egreteau 2014). Beyond the *real politik* of the tentative power-sharing arrangement, however, informal institutions such as the centrality of "unity" in NLD ideology have also constrained meaningful reform, accountability and effective representation (Walton 2015). Indeed, discord with Tatmadaw officials has been studiously avoided by the NLD to such an extent that moral and even legal culpability for the atrocities in Rakhine State are increasingly attributed by international observers to Suu Kyi and her government rather than the Tatmadaw's Commander in Chief Min Aung Hlaing.

From the perspective of ethnic-minority and progressive members of the NLD, the constraints of "unity" imposed in both parliament and party have placed them on a tight leash. These strictures are especially acute at sub-national level where Naypyitaw Hluttaw parliamentarians and national officials have routinely overruled the concerns expressed by state and regional representatives (see Egreteau 2018). As demonstrated by the controversy over the naming of the Chaungzon Bridge in Mon State, which saw Naypyitaw NLD parliamentarians impose the name "Aung San" against local resistance only to see the party lose a subsequent by-election, the attempt to impose "unity" through top-down decree may only compound growing animosity with and within the ruling party. With ethnic parties across the country merging to present a more "united" front of their own, the stage is set for an increasingly ethno-nationalist electoral politics in many parts of the country ahead of the next elections in 2020.[4]

Growing international condemnation of the civilian government has also begun to complicate the geopolitical "rebalancing" long sought by Myanmar's political elites. Amidst the fall-out from the Tatmadaw's "clearance operations" in Rakhine State old patterns of diplomatic dependence on China and Russia to protect Myanmar officials from scrutiny and indictment have re-emerged (Mathieson 2018). In similar signs of continuity with the past, NLD approaches to thorny issues such as Rohingya repatriation and the peace process have relied on the kind of patronage-based state-business relations typical of the 1990s and

2000s (Turnell 2011). At Suu Kyi's personal solicitation, for instance, in October 2017 some of the most notorious tycoons of the SLORC/SPDC period made financial and in-kind contributions of over US$13 million to the agency charged with constructing model villages and providing livelihoods for Rohingya returnees. Framed as expressions of national "duty" or diplomatic solidarity, it remains to be seen whether and how these domestic and international relational imbalances with powerful actors foreclose the possibility of more equitable and inclusive development for the country as a whole.

Neither the resilient formal role of the military in governance, nor reluctance to challenge the rigid commitment to "unity" preclude the potential for a progressive and inclusive politics. Despite the fractures at the heart of Myanmar's formal political order, the promise of "the political" remains for many activists (see Cheesman 2016). As the contributors to this volume highlight, despite the constraints imposed by the present form of hybrid governance there is considerable scope for civilians to advance visions of reform. Split into three sections that provide grass-roots, spatial and institutional perspectives on reform—People, Places and Politics—the chapters of *Myanmar Transformed?* take stock of the mutations, continuities and fractures at the heart of Myanmar society and politics in recent years. Many of these chapters draw on intensive and immersive research in provincial areas of Myanmar to explore the impacts and prospects for progress opened by political and social liberalization. To ask whether Myanmar has transformed is not simply to question what has and hasn't changed. Beyond an assessment of the progress and pitfalls of transition from junta rule, the authors also assess the scope of action and offer visions of reforms achievable within the context of Myanmar's hybrid civil–military arrangements. In the vexed moment Myanmar's people and leaders now find themselves in, the chapters offer new and alternative ways to understand and improve the lives of ordinary people.

PEOPLE

Democratic transitions are generally assumed to make governments more responsive to the social demands of median voters, improving accountability and state-led service delivery. Beyond elite-level politics, Myanmar's reforms must therefore be assessed on whether and how they impact the lives of ordinary people. Focusing on social dynamics in rural

villages, where seventy per cent of Myanmar's people live, the World Bank team probe Myanmar's social and economic changes by exploring how reforms have altered the "social contract" between citizens and the state. Collating insights from a unique longitudinal qualitative study of villages across the country, they document how interactions with officials have been re-negotiated as villagers gain confidence, calling their newly elected administrators to account through formal mechanisms such as local elections. Especially in land confiscation cases, they show how improved communication with trans-local family and civil society networks via web-enabled smartphones have enabled some villagers to mobilize and even take pre-emptive action against their alienation from land. These mechanisms of accountability have evolved alongside the expansion of government-mediated rural development initiatives, shifting the role of local administrators in sourcing funds from higher tiers of power. Pursch et al. suggest that these dynamics have strengthened expectations of local and Union state officials, including elected representatives, helping to build trust in the state. Yet, there is still much room for improvement, particularly in terms of budget allocation.

Indeed, after decades of neglect of ordinary people by successive regimes, the government may be missing a valuable mechanism to boost state legitimacy. In Chapter 3 Yawbawm Mangshang and Michael Griffiths examine how expanding the scope of state-mediated social protection mechanisms is essential if decades of negative experiences of the state are to be overcome. Focusing on the role that social protection schemes can play in building public trust, and establishing legitimacy based on consent, they argue that welfare provision can bridge the distance between the citizen and the state by demonstrating state commitment to social rather than solely military notions of "security". Their vision is not one of a welfare state developed decades down the line. Rather, they envision more inclusive state-led social protection mechanisms including the expansion of existing schemes, greater government taxation and collaboration with informal sectors of local social protection which are already ubiquitous across Myanmar. While increasing funding for welfare is vital to these goals, state officials and institutions also have an opportunity to generate trust with citizens through acknowledging and partnering with local societal mechanisms of social redistribution that have developed over decades.

Taking societally rooted structures of care seriously is especially important if a sustainable peace is to emerge in Myanmar's restive

borderlands. Decades of conflict in many ethnic states has bequeathed complex non-state structures of community-based primary health care often linked to ethnic armed organizations and their aligned civil society networks (Décobert 2016). As Si Thura and Schroeder note in their case-study of health service delivery in Karen State, following the 2012 ceasefire Karen health providers and the Myanmar Ministry of Health and Sport have cultivated relationships of trust essential not just for improving the wellbeing of people in conflict-affected areas but also cultivating more sustainable ceasefire arrangements. Importantly, they note that early efforts in joint training and service delivery in south-eastern Myanmar have been recognised and expanded with high-level commitment from the NLD and MoHS since 2016. Since the Thein Sein-era blueprint for political dialogue remains the basis of peace negotiations (see Su Mon Thazin Aung 2016), more formalized progress in collaborative governance and social service delivery systems across the country can only be advanced once all armed groups have signed the nationwide ceasefire agreement. The goodwill generated by the recognition of non-state expertise and legitimacy since 2014, however, offers a vision of the kind of collaborative approach necessary for a meaningful peace dividend in war-ravaged communities.

PLACES

Liberalization in Myanmar has brought intensified flows of capital and goods on a scale unseen since the collapse of socialism in 1988. However, as Myanmar has become more integrated into global dynamics of finance and extraction since 2011, the economic and social impacts of deepening marketization have varied significantly across the country. Focusing on rural Myanmar, Myat Thida Win and her co-authors highlight how structural economic shifts have driven extraordinarily rapid agricultural mechanization in recent years. As young and unskilled farm workers have migrated in droves to growing urban centres in search of higher wages, scarcity-driven increases in the price of farm labour have prompted agricultural mechanization at the household level. The resulting uptake of mostly Chinese labour-saving machinery can only be understood in light of new technologies of credit such as hire-purchase arrangements, however. First introduced in Myanmar only in 2013, they now underpin the vast majority of purchases of combine harvesters and four-wheel tractors, and more than a third of two-wheel tractors. These structural changes have

not been consistent across the country, though. Indeed, Myat Thida Win et al. reveal substantial variation in mechanization by region and household according to crop-type and degree of household reliance on agriculture as a source of income. What emerges is a picture of agricultural households attempting to manage the risks created by Myanmar's structural economic shifts using the technologies—financial, mechanical and otherwise—now available to them by virtue of the same macro-level reforms.

The paradoxes of Myanmar's social and economic reforms become even more apparent in Myanmar's periphery and in the contestation over resources and their distribution. The political dynamics of extractive industry projects and the associated impacts on community are deeply contentious in the resource-rich areas of Myanmar's ethnic states, where some of the world's longest civil conflicts have been waged since independence in 1948 (Jones 2014; Lintner 1994; Smith 1999). In northern Kachin State, in particular, the question of resources and how they are distributed remains a significant challenge to the peace process (Sadan 2016). One of the most important dimensions of the breakdown of the seventeen-year ceasefire agreement between the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Myanmar government in 2011 was the accommodation between the Myanmar military and Kachin elites around natural resource exploitation, otherwise described as "ceasefire capitalism" (Woods 2011; see also Jones 2016). Few of these dynamics have changed under the NLD government, with deepening grievances regarding exploitation of resources as well as the social dislocation caused by extraction and illicit drugs. This perception has been reinforced after the nomination and election of T Khun Myat as the speaker for the House of Representatives (*Pyithu Hluttaw)* in March 2017 by the NLD. T Khun Myat not only has a history related to the narcotics trade, but he is a former leader of a Kutkai militia that allied with the Tatmadaw in northern Shan State. Indeed, as Gabusi outlines, the legacies of the authoritarian era continue to stall reform in Myanmar and block paths to a more sustainable peace process.

The complexities of natural resource management and the legacies of military rule is similarly exposed in Myanmar's special economic zones. As Pyae Phyo Maung and Tamas Wells note in their chapter, these zones of regulatory exception to promote industrialization have repeatedly been met with stiff opposition from communities sceptical of the promised local economic benefits and fearful of environmental degradation. As freedom of expression has expanded since 2011, special economic zones

in Dawei in the country's south, Thilawa, near Yangon, and Kyaukphyu
in the country's western conflict-affected Rakhine State have become not
just sites of intensified commercial activity and extraction but also places
of heightened political contestation. Pyae Phyo Maung and Wells note
that campaigns and strategies of public and elite advocacy have forced
changes aimed at mitigating the environmentally destructive elements of
SEZs as well as securing compensation for land previously expropriated
from villagers. Despite these signs of progress, their chapter highlights
that groups are constrained by the profound imbalance in resourcing
between their own advocacy activities and the SEZ activities led both by
companies and by government officials. Indeed, the concessional deals
which underpin these special spaces have often proven resilient despite
the change in government, creating what one observer colourfully termed
"zombie" zones that won't die despite stiff opposition from civil society
(see Pyae Phyo Maung and Wells). With international governments and
investors placing considerable pressure on the NLD, it remains to be
seen whether Suu Kyi's government will be able to provide the robust
protections expected by local communities impacted by SEZs.

Perceptions that Myanmar's political representatives are aloof or
unresponsive may be compounded by the fact that most decisions about
regulating and mediating the consequences of marketization are made
by elites ensconced in the capital Naypyitaw. In recent years, Nicholas
Farrelly has been on a journey of exploration in Naypyitaw, which has
been the heart of national administration since 2005. His chapter explains
that the city was carved from scrubland and paddy fields based on the
military's commitment to the idea that space is integral to the exercise
of power. Naypyitaw tends to be seen by most foreign observers as a
bizarre and even lunatic place that apparently defies the ordinary laws
of geography, society and culture. As Farrelly notes, however, there has
been little serious effort to understand this monumental city beyond its
broad boulevards and over-sized infrastructure. Prior to 2011, most people
in Myanmar had no notion of the scale of construction and bureaucratic
activity outside the historic town of Pyinmana. Yet, as a replacement for
Yangon, Naypyitaw has already established its reputation and stature as
a burgeoning middle-class city categorically distinct from life in rural or
borderland Myanmar. As Farrelly notes, it is little wonder that at moments
of domestic and international crisis, the NLD government has made the
most of Naypyitaw, the dictator's customized capital, seeking to utilize

this spacious alternative to ordinary Myanmar urban or provincial life as a retreat from the harsh scrutiny of voters, troublesome civil society and the international community.

POLITICS

Over the last five years much has been written on the nature of the country's quasi-civilian governance structures and the influence the military retains over parliament and executive power (Egreteau 2014, 2017; Farrelly and Chit Win 2016; Jones 2014; Slater 2014). In this context, Maung Aung Myoe's chapter takes stock of the tenuous power-sharing arrangement between the civilian administration and the military since the National League for Democracy took power in March 2016. Many of the formal and informal legacies of authoritarian rule—including military control of twenty-five per cent of the parliament and a number of key ministries including the military and Home Affairs—have proven resilient, significantly constraining the ability of the new NLD government to deliver the kind of change expected by everyday people (see also Maung Aung Myoe 2014). Yet, as Maung Aung Myoe demonstrates, the formal dominance of the military over key ministries and its twenty-five per cent representation in parliament have been the source of minimal public tension between Suu Kyi's civilian government and Tatmadaw officials. Only in very rare instances, such as requests to review the qualifications of civilian ministers, has the NLD publicly rebuffed military intrusion into "civilian" affairs. Instead, the NLD government has more or less decided to adopt the Tatmadaw's position as its own default policy in issues related to defence and national security. Such a position not only draws criticism from international observers but has become one of the key sticking points to the peace process and Aung San Suu Kyi's ability to secure a lasting settlement with all EAOs.

The peace process which was initiated under President Thein Sein in 2011 largely remains intact under the NLD (Pederson 2014). However, as demonstrated by Lwin Cho Latt, Ben Hillman and their co-authors, relations between the central government and the country's ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) remain fragile and contested. The lives of people in Myanmar's ethnic states have been wracked by conflict for over six decades (Cheesman and Farrelly 2016). Under brutal military and counterinsurgency campaigns the civilian population of borderlands areas have been exposed to years of instability and egregious human rights violations (Sadan

2016; Smith 1999). These dynamics have sparked mass displacement and migration to neighbouring countries and wreaked incalculable harm on family, community and culture (Hedström 2016; Seng Maw Lahpai 2014). After so many years of conflict, negotiating a peace settlement was always going to be a considerable challenge (Farrelly 2012). But as their chapter explains, the government and the military are increasingly at odds with EAOs around the key notion of which groups get to negotiate the basis of a more federal political system. The transfer of civilian power to Suu Kyi and repeated rounds of negotiations have yet to produce concrete mechanisms capable of resolving these tensions at the heart of the peace process.

Nowhere is the fragility of majority-minority relations more evident than in northern Rakhine State, where since August 2017 state military "clearance operations" have killed an estimated 10,000 people and brutally displaced more than 750,000 people to neighbouring Bangladesh.[5] As Kyaw Zeyar Win's chapter demonstrates, the intractability of the Rohingya situation derives from intense and systematic securitization of the group by successive military governments (see also Schissler 2016; Wells 2016). Following the 1962 coup by Ne Win, Rohingya people were actively positioned as a threat to the territorial integrity and security of the nation state (Cheesman 2017; Thawnghmung 2016). As Kyaw Zeyar Win explains, the negative attitudes towards the Rohingya that are a legacy of military rule have taken on a new degree of ferocity in the more open political environment of contemporary Myanmar. Since liberalization in 2011, anxieties regarding the decline of Buddhism at a time of democratization have taken expression in both print and increasingly accessible social media, often serving to further entrench symbolic depictions of the Rohingya as a threat to ideas of freedom and nation (Brooten and Verbruggen 2017; McCarthy and Menager 2017; Walton and Hayward 2014). In addition to state actors, Kyaw Zeyar Win thus demonstrates that monks, civil society organizations and even everyday people have become agents of securitization, often enlisting social media to shape public opinion and mobilize support against the Rohingya. Indeed, while the UN has said the situation in northern Rakhine state "bears all the hallmarks of genocide" (UNOHCHR 2018), the military campaign against the Rohingya gained widespread grassroots support across Myanmar and has become a rallying call for nationalists against what was largely perceived as a foreign population which poses a threat to the nation state.

In this context, it is no surprise that questions related to identity and citizenship continue to loom large in Myanmar's politics. Where one-third of the of the country's population are non-Burman, issues related to ethnicity remain at the heart of Myanmar's transition (see also South and Lall 2018). Aung San Suu Kyi has expressed firm support for a federal, democratic solution and has unparalleled political authority to deliver it, particularly with the Burman majority. However, as Cecile Medail's chapter shows, without attention to continued differential treatment of ethnic peoples in many parts of the country as well as the privileged position of Burmans with regard to the national ''Myanmar'' identity, ethnic reconciliation in Myanmar will remain elusive (see also Lall and Hla Hla Win 2012; Walton 2013). Cecile's exploration of Mon people's perceptions of ethnic identity and nationality citizenship provides a telling insight into these dynamics. As she highlights, many Mon people continue to perceive the Myanmar state as dominated by a Bamar majority which seeks to impose its own culture, history and language on ethnic minority peoples. Her chapter also highlights the critical importance of lasting political settlements to ethnic conflicts in border areas through symbolic politics (see also Laoutides and Ware 2016). Indeed, in addition to greater inclusion of non-Burman voices in the political decision-making process, the government of Myanmar will need to open to public discussion the question of what it means to be "Myanmar" and members of all ethnic and religious groups will need to be a part of this process.

THE MYANMAR UPDATE SERIES AND THIS VOLUME

The chapters in this volume, *Myanmar Transformed?* are based on papers from the Australian National University's Myanmar Update series. The Myanmar Update has been held at ANU bi-annually since its inception in 1990. The main objective of the Update is to inform scholars, government agencies, policy makers, the corporate sector, NGOs, journalists and members of the Australian community about the most significant political, social and economic changes in Myanmar. For many years, the Myanmar Update was one of the few forums for Myanmar and non-Myanmar professionals to come together, discuss and analyse research done on recent developments and issues facing the country. Previous Myanmar Update themes have covered peace and conflict, national reconciliation, state/civil society relations and the role of the military, agriculture and

rural development, health and education, economic prospects, and international relations. Since 2011, Myanmar has seen an opening up and many extraordinary social and political changes. However, as the social dynamics explored in this book continue to show, the need for scholarship that addresses emerging issues in Myanmar with a keen eye to practical consequences is more important than ever.

The 2017 Myanmar Update held at the Australian National University on February 15–16 asked participants to consider Myanmar's "transformation" under the new National League for Democracy government. In 2017 Aung San Suu Kyi's special representative, Dr Aung Tun Thet, the President's Economic Advisor and also a member of the President's National Economic and Social Advisory Council, gave the keynote. The majority of the presenters at the conference also hailed from Myanmar institutions, a sign of how far the country has come. Universities, long suppressed in Myanmar, are becoming sites of debate and critical thought, including about Myanmar's civil conflict (Lwin Cho Latt et al., Chapter 10 this volume). A few years earlier it would have been inconceivable to have such senior members of the Myanmar government as well as academics visiting ANU and participating in an academic conference that prides itself on free expression and open debate. We hope this momentum continues and that education reform in Myanmar remains a priority of the NLD government in the years ahead. In 2017, the Myanmar Update grappled with the sense of both "optimism and despair" underpinning Myanmar's difficult political, economic and social changes. In light of the tragic events since mid-2017, identifying as this volume does the enduring legacies of military rule, and how obstacles to a more inclusive and democratic Myanmar can be navigated, is more important than ever.

Notes

1   Though casualty figures should always be treated skeptically, Myanmar military documents cited by *The New York Times* claim over 300 Tatmadaw soldiers were killed by the Arakan Army in the first half of 2016 alone. See Beech, H. and Saw Nang. "Myanmar Police Gun Down Marchers in Rakhine Ethnic Rally". 17 January 2018.
2   This was most visible in Mon State around the naming of the Chaugzon Bridge in 2017, prompting large-scale protests. More recently the Kayah State government has commissioned a statue to be made of the independence leader

Bojouq Aung San in the capital of Loikaw, at an estimated cost of K150 million (about US$113,000). See Htun Khaing, "NLD's gilded Bogyoke building spree prompts ethnic backlash". *Frontier Myanmar*, 6 March 2018.

3 See Lawi Weng, "Military Blocks 2nd Attempt to Erect Statue of Late Karen Leader". *The Irrawaddy*, 5 February 2018.

4 On mergers in Kachin parties see Nyein Nyein, "Trio of Kachin Parties Agree to Merger". *The Irrawaddy*, 15 January 2018; on Chin parties see Zue Zue, "Chin Political Parties Merge". *The Irrawaddy*, 19 June 2017; on Mon parties see Bo Bo Myint, "Two Mon Parties to Rapidly Implement Merger". *Eleven Myanmar*, 21 January 2018; and on Karen parties see Chan Thar, "Four political parties merge in Kayin State". *The Myanmar Times*, 7 February 2018.

5 This is based on conservative estimates by the medical charity Medicins Sans Frontieres (MSF) in December 2017. See <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-12-14/rohingya-death-toll-in-the-thousands-says-msf/9260552> [accessed 9 February 2018].

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