I

Introduction

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1

INTRODUCTION: LIVING WITH MYANMAR

Justine Chambers and Charlotte Galloway

When Myanmar's first democratically elected officials took their place in the *Pyithu* (lower) and *Amyotha* (upper) houses of Parliament in February 2016 it heralded in a new era – one of hope and optimism – for the greater part of Myanmar's population. The National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi held an 86 per cent majority of elected seats. Clad in orange as a mark of their difference from the military's light green, a collective sigh of relief was felt across the country, as the new members of parliament took their seats. After half a century of military rule, the process of installing the new government was by all accounts a triumph for democracy. Fears that the military, who by constitutional rule are reserved 25 per cent of seats in both the lower and upper houses, would agitate and refuse to hand over power to the NLD did not eventuate. While the 2008 Constitution, written by the former military junta, barred Aung San Suu Kyi from taking the position of president, the NLD-led parliament created the new role of State Counselor for her – a role effectively seen by all as the head of state, "above the president" (BBC 2016).

Significant gains in reforming Myanmar had already been made during the term of the military-aligned Union Solidarity and Development Party

(USDP), which formed a majority government after the flawed general elections of November 2010. While there remain many questions over the state of Myanmar's "transition", it marked the starting point for the country's move away from military rule toward a halting process of democratisation (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2012; Cheesman et al. 2014; Crouch 2017a; Jones 2014). President Thein Sein, a former military general, led these changes, praised as a "champion of democracy" (Hunter 2014). And yet, built on the 2003 commitment to a roadmap to a "discipline flourishing democracy", efforts to reverse a legacy of isolation also cemented the *Tatmadaw*'s power in the nation's "democratic" future under the guise of liberalisation (Egreteau 2016; Jones 2018; Brooten et al. 2019).

One of the key election promises of the NLD government in 2015 was the enactment of constitutional reform to limit the role of the military in national affairs. Alongside their control of security-related cabinet portfolios, important sections of the constitution entrench the *Tatmadaw*'s influence over the parliament and legislative affairs, marginalising civilian rule (Crouch 2019a). However, the NLD's commitment to this area was soon subject to critical scrutiny after the historic elections, when Suu Kyi reached out to the *Tatmadaw* leadership and they agreed to "cooperate on peace, the rule of law, reconciliation and the development of the country" (Senior General Min Aung Hlaing cited in Fuller 2015). The concurrent release of the *Tatmadaw*'s first Defence White Paper in February 2016 was also telling, outlining the ongoing importance of the military in national security and political affairs (Maung Aung Myoe 2018, 204–205). As the country's most powerful interfacing agency between the government and the nation's people, the transfer of the General Administration Department (GAD) from military to civilian control in 2019 was one indicator of important public sector reform (Arnold 2019). There were also raised hopes in January 2019, when the NLD put forward a legislative motion to form a committee to consider constitutional amendments (Crouch 2019b).[1] However, in many ways the NLD has done little to overtly challenge the military's entanglement in national affairs (Maung Aung Myoe 2018; Selth 2018).

Great things were expected of the NLD government when they were elected in 2015. It can be said on reflection that many of the expectations of the new government for an almost overnight improvement in political, economic and social wellbeing were unrealistic with the military maintaining their constitutional control over parliamentary and national affairs. Another

major challenge was the simple fact that the party lacked sufficient resources and preparation for the execution of major policy reform. Enacting rapid change in a government system that lacked experience and infrastructure was always going to be a challenge. More than four years on, many of the same concerns and questions about Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD's ability to govern and enact meaningful change are still there.

Nowhere has this been more evident than in their approach to addressing the country's complex identity politics. Not long after the 2015 elections the ongoing conflict between the *Tatmadaw* and Rohingya communities erupted into a major humanitarian crisis, causing one of the largest exoduses of refugees in Southeast Asia since the 1970s (MacLean 2018; see also OHCHR 2018). The overwhelming majority of analyses on the situation have not minced words, condemning the Myanmar government and the military's operations in northern Rakhine State. Several international and domestic investigative bodies were formed, with the Independent International Fact Finding Mission concluding that "crimes in Rakhine State, and the manner in which they were perpetrated" had "genocidal" intent.[2] Subsequent international manoeuvrings saw the Republic of The Gambia take Myanmar to the UN International Court of Justice on charges of genocide against the Rohingya. Aung San Suu Kyi represented Myanmar at the ICJ hearing in the Hague in December 2019 and firmly rejected the charges made against the military. Although she acknowledged serious crimes may have been committed by the military's security clearance operations, her position made it clear that she supported the *Tatmadaw*'s response to what she perceived as an armed "terrorist" group.[3]

Myanmar's management of the Rohingya crisis had immediate consequences. The tragic events of 2017–18 shattered an already tentative international confidence in the new government and Aung San Suu Kyi's reputation as a champion of human rights and democracy icon. Her silence on the military's brutality reinforced the complexity of Myanmar's ethnic divides, revealing an unpleasant "truth" that there was negligible humanitarian spirit within the new government in the management of a community largely seen as "Other" (Cheesman 2017; Kyaw Zeyar Win 2018; Schissler et al. 2017; Wade 2017). International funds for investment, which had risen significantly since the 2015 elections, were markedly reduced. Both the United States and the European Union imposed sanctions against senior Myanmar military commanders. Foreign tourism declined

dramatically and pushed back targeted growth forecasts. Myanmar also increasingly saw itself forced back into the orbit of China, who sought to maximise their own advantage from the crisis in exchange for political support (Zhang 2020).

Not only did the justice icon fail to acknowledge the scale of the violence and subsequent suffering of Rohingya communities, but she failed to use her "moral authority" to stem the virulent anti-Muslim sentiment that proliferated in the wake of the violence (Chambers and Cheesman 2019). However, while Suu Kyi has been widely criticised by the international community, she has benefited domestically from the crisis and a widespread nationalist antipathy for the Rohingya. On the same day that she represented Myanmar in the Hague, rallies were held in support of her across major towns in Myanmar as well as amongst the diaspora community, backing her "defence of the nation" (Naw Betty Han 2019). And yet, domestic support for *Amay Su* (Mother Suu) has also been accompanied by growing unease amongst ethnic nationality communities due to what is perceived as her ongoing defence of the military's actions in other parts of the country.

In addition to the Rohingya crisis, armed conflict in Rakhine, Shan and Kachin States has intensified and the peace process is on rocky ground. When the NLD came to power, Aung San Suu Kyi declared the peace process to be *the* national priority, hoping to end the multiple ethnic insurgencies that have plagued the country since independence. After decades of experiencing violence at the hands of the *Tatmadaw*, the ushering in of the civilian government also raised hopes for a genuine peace accord and ethno-religious reconciliation. However, the loss of human life and material destruction in borderland areas continues to incur heavy social and economic costs to ethnic communities (Hedström 2016). For Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) participating in the peace process, there is also a growing sense that the same political-economic dynamics that drove the resumption of conflict in Kachin State in 2011 are now occurring elsewhere (Gabusi 2018; Sadan 2016; South 2018a).[4]

In 2019, formal peace negotiations stalled when both the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), the two most influential signatory groups of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), suspended their participation. While all parties to the NCA have agreed *in principle* to building a "democratic federal union", the challenge of forging an inclusive national identity on the basis of which a new federal

state can be imagined is an ongoing challenge, particularly in a state beholden to cultural and categorical determinisms (see Cheesman 2017; Ferguson 2015; Robinne 2019; Walton 2013). After numerous rounds of informal negotiations, another conference was held in August 2020, but little was achieved and key EAOs remained absent (Mathieson 2020). Indeed, the peace process remains hindered by ongoing issues over inclusivity (Lwin Cho Latt et al. 2018) and the *Tatmadaw*'s focus on disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration. There are also ongoing obstacles to implementing the NCA and basic principles for a future federal union. The negotiation of interim arrangements in ceasefire areas, for example, fails to properly take into account existing administrative and justice systems of EAOs (Harrison and Kyed 2019; Lue Htar 2018; South 2018a, b). Significant challenges also remain to securing a political settlement that would establish how populations and territories should be governed, including the rights to preserve and protect minority customs, traditions, languages and literature (South and Lall 2018; South 2018a, b).

Outside the official peace process, the NLD's inability to take seriously the voices of ethnic communities has had significant consequences. In many ways Suu Kyi appears to continue to impose a singular cultural vision of the nation and its history on the country. This builds off decades of Burmanisation throughout ethnic areas under military rule and what Walton and Haywood (2014, 4) describe as an "entrenched wariness, if not outright fear and hostility" towards the Bamar majority and the central government (see also Walton 2013). Controversies over the naming of a nationally funded bridge in Mon State, where local preference was overridden by central government, and protests against erecting statues of the Burmese independence hero Aung San in ethnic towns across the country, are being seized on as examples of Bamar ascendency (see Medail 2018). This is also reflected in the NLD's engagement with ethnic parties. The Arakan National Party (ANP), for example, had a strong showing in the 2015 polls but was denied major roles in the local administration, fuelling local resentment and a resurgence in support for the Arakan Army (AA) (Smith 2020, 95, 107–110) – recently declared a "terrorist organisation" (Nyein Nyein 2020).[5] As detailed by Cecile Medail (2018, 278) in our previous volume, while self-determination lies at the heart of civil conflict in Myanmar, these ongoing controversies illustrate "the incompatability of ethnic aspirations with a particular notion of national identity promoted by the Bamar militarised elite."

Beyond the peace process and identity politics, the NLD government has come under increasing criticism for their lack of progress on other fronts (Moe Thuzar and Cheong 2019; Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2020; Pederson 2019). Key economic, social and political reforms are stalled and the justice system also faces significant structural issues, continuing what Nick Cheesman (2019) refers to as a "routine practice of impunity" embedded in "mundane juridical and administrative arrangements" (2019, 891). With conflicts over land a key issue affecting rural communities (HRW 2018; Lue Htar 2018; Mark 2016, 2017), the continued centralisation of the courts, the limited realm of judicial authority and a "culture of procedural authoritarianism" leaves little room for restitutional justice (Crouch 2019b). Under Suu Kyi's leadership, many expected the government to further liberalise colonial-era press censorship laws and policies that restrict human rights and freedom of expression. However, there are still significant risks to journalistic production and the work of civil society activists, in particular (Brooten et al. 2019; Eaint Thiri Thu 2019; Salai Thant Zin 2019). And yet, to focus on what is lacking in the country's reform process, also neglects what is also occurring and the complex dynamics of what it means to *live with* a country going through profound social and political change.

The wide-ranging, myriad and multiple challenges of "Living with Myanmar" is the subject of this volume. Taking the call from Elizabeth Rhoads and Courtney Wittekind (2018), any analyses of Myanmar's present political reform process must take into account the various levels of "interaction and agency" at all levels of society. Rather than focusing on the stasis of the current government, the chapters in this volume instead highlight dynamics of the various levels of change and contestation occurring, including the various "processes of change and the agents that propel such processes forward" (Rhoads and Wittekind 2018, 174). Each of the authors explore the multiple and productive ways that people, activists, state officials and external actors are engaging with Myanmar's historical, geographic and institutional complexities. Split into four sections, this includes an analysis of parliamentary and economic life and the ways that various groups attempt live with institutional legacies and plural identities. Many of the authors in this volume are change agents themselves, and their work helps to highlight the contradictions, ambiguities and complexities of what it is like to live with and navigate the political institutions, socialities and historical legacies that continue to shape the country's ongoing political transformation. This is not a comprehensive

coverage of what is happening in the country. However, what is clear is that while there is a great sense of frustration and impatience with the various hurdles that stymy reform, there is a diversity of actors deeply committed to making change at all levels of society.

PARLIAMENTARY LIFE

With 25 per cent of seats reserved for the military, there is no denying their ongoing influence over parliamentary life. It appears that under the NLD the *Tatmadaw* has actually strengthened its parliamentary delegation and expanded its involvement in lawmaking activities and legislative oversight (Maung Aung Myoe 2018). Yet in parallel with the ongoing restrictive presence of the *Tatmadaw*, in Chapter 2 Egreteau shows that during their first four years in power, NLD parliamentarians have been busy working to improve the country and the argument of a parliamentary deficit is "misplaced". Under the top-down leadership of the State Counselor, the balance of power appears to have shifted to a core elite, with a dominant executive controlling parliamentary debate and oversight (Barany 2018). In what is widely regarded as a strict standard of party discipline, draft proposals and motions prepared by individual legislators are routinely dismissed by the house speakers and backbenchers are continuously warned against using their oversight duties. However, when interrogating the activities of NLD legislators pre-and post the 2015 elections Egreteau suggests that while the State Counselor Office and the presidency do dominate the legislative process, the parliament has consolidated its position as the prime site for policy discussion and popular representation. In particular, there has been a strong focus on NLD parliamentarians engaging with their electorates and representing their constituents' views in the legislature.

The ability of MPs to represent the interests of their constituents is further examined by Nyein Thiri Swe and Zaw Min Oo in Chapter 3. Drawing attention to the views of MPs in sub-national parliaments, they explore how parliamentarians construct and enact their representative role both in and outside of the *hluttaw.* This chapter nicely complements Egreteau's research in the national legislature, showing the emphasis placed by MPs on the importance of representing the needs and concerns of their respective constituents in the sub-national parliaments. However, the authors also reflect on how these MPs feel frustrated by

the structural limitations and institutional constraints that limit their representational performance. One of the biggest challenges identified is the constitutionally mandated dual role that many MPs have to fulfil in sub-national parliaments. The role of the military also necessarily inhibits the representational performance of MPs. The difficulty in changing their control of 25 per cent of seats of parliament according to the constitution is seen to corrode the representational performance of the parliament, as a democracy should. However, one interesting dynamic which the authors point to is the increased level of engagement of citizens with the parliament and their evolving expectations. Indeed, in many ways the "social contract" – the terms with which people interact with the state – is being rewritten in Myanmar as pro-democracy parliamentarians find their feet (see also Pursch et al. 2018).

In Chapter 4, Jefferson gives us a more intimate insight into the lives of some of these new parliamentarians, and their experiences as former political prisoners. Moving beyond simplistic narratives of change and transition, he reveals the importance of attending to personal trajectories as mutually constitutive of the socio-political in Myanmar today. Rather than focusing on narratives of interruption and rupture as many do in tales of former prisoners in Myanmar, in their stories time in prison is viewed as part of a life narrative that continues to evolve. Central to his interviews is a theme of frustration with the slow pace of reform in Myanmar, but tempered by the knowledge that the time *will* pass. Indeed, what comes out of the narratives Jefferson presents is a story of an unwavering optimism and pragmatism. For many of the former-political-prisoners-cum-parliamentarians, their memories of the infamous prison system is not always negative. Rather, for some it provided a family and even an education of sorts. For others, it was part of their time "doing politics". Indeed, as he notes:

> I hesitate to characterise the interruptions and disruptions as rupture per se, that is as only an expression of brokenness… They are links as much as breaks and as such imply continuity as much as discontinuity.

These narratives also have implications for how we think about Myanmar's social and political changes and the way that we study it. Rather than seeing what has occurred in Myanmar over the last ten years through a grand transitional narrative of political revolution, these narratives instead reveal the slow and subtle "mutations" to Myanmar's political landscape and its people.

ECONOMIC LIFE

Mutations to the country's economy over the last four years have also not always been so positive. With Suu Kyi's focus on peace and national reconciliation, economic reform was pushed to the side and foreign investment declined significantly as a result of the humanitarian crisis in Rakhine State. This lack of confidence is reflected in the World Bank's "Doing Business 2019" ranking of Myanmar as 171 out of 190 countries, showing just how far the country has to come into making the country more attractive to investors (World Bank 2020).

In Chapter 5, Turnell and anonymous co-author examine the NLD's progress in the economy, focusing on the challenges to macro-financial reforms. They argue that the structures put in place since 2015 have been significant, but the benefits have perhaps not been so evident to the public. In various speeches after the inauguration of President U Win Myint in 2018, the government signalled a renewed emphasis on the economy. In August 2018 the government released the long-awaited Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan (2018–2030). Based on the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, the objectives and principles of the plan recognise that bold measures are needed to "reinvigorate reform" (Ministry of Planning and Finance 2018). Importantly, this includes recognition of the need for policy change that supports sustainable, broad-based growth, good governance, fiscal discipline and increased equality. Indeed, as the authors show, the government has been focused on implementing a long-term vision for the country. This has included tackling corruption, opposition from vested business interests and the development of the new Myanmar Investment Promotion Plan which aims to expand public investment over the next two decades. It will take time, as the authors show, to tackle corruption and untangle the strands of personal and institutional ties that the military still holds over the economy and government policy (Ford et al. 2016; Gabusi 2018; Jones 2014, 2018). However, there are building blocks being put in place to do so.

Like efforts to implement macro-financial reform, indicators of economic development reveal some improvements while other figures are not so promising. As Warr details in Chapter 6, when tracing the indices of poverty and inequality over more than a decade, there is now a widening gap between the financial health of urban and rural populations, the former being the main beneficiaries. While this is not entirely unexpected

if we look at other countries' development paths, the impact of this gap is significant in Myanmar where 70 per cent of the population still resides in rural areas. Warr argues that while spending in both rural and urban areas has increased since 2015, the inequalities between the two groups have not been adequately addressed. Improved transportation corridors and reliable power and water are still fundamental services that are unequally distributed across the country. He also makes clear the difference between poverty and inequality, and signals a warning that greater economic growth may indeed prove damaging to the Union as inequities will likely widen. In particular, the ongoing fracturing of the peace process will also only further marginalise ethnic populations from developments occurring elsewhere and fuel fires for future conflict.

Despite these warnings, it is important to acknowledge the scale of change in rural areas of Myanmar. In Chapter 7, Okamoto details the place of Myanmar's agricultural sector within its economic development and the significant shifts that have taken place since the relaxation of restrictions on freedom of movement imposed under military rule. In the early phase of the transitional government there was strong investment in industry and expansion of manufacturing. Agriculture fell significantly as a percentage of exports and there was a parallel reduction in the percentage of people employed in agriculture as a result of rural outmigration and rapid and widescale mechanisation (see also Myat Thida Win et al. 2018). For many farmers and their families the promises made by the NLD are yet to be felt, with the majority still largely relying on their own self-enhancing "coping strategies" developed under military rule (Thawnghmung 2019, xvi) and the work of social welfare groups (Griffiths 2018; McCarthy 2019). The NLD has, however, commenced reforms which have assisted in supporting the agricultural sector, including through access to rural credit. Like Warr, Okamoto acknowledges that efforts towards poverty reduction are plagued by well-known issues that other nations in the region face. What is distinctly different about Myanmar is the rate of change and rapid engagement with international agricultural methods, including mechanisation.

The impacts of government reforms in the agricultural sector is further detailed and addressed at a micro level in Chapter 8 by Yin Nyein, Rick Gregory and Aung Kyaw Thein. Through a thorough examination of reforms made to the fisheries sector, they discuss the complexities of existing controls and licensing regarding freshwater fishing and the way

the country's citizens and growing civil society community have taken advantage of new opportunities to contest and advance policies in their interest. While going some ways to protect the rights of small fishermen, it is evident that the multiple levels of government, entrenched administrative procedures and inequalities between "big business" and rural, often poorly educated, small-scale fishers perpetuate an unequal relationship and inhibit economic growth. However, the collaborative partnerships built between state agencies, businessmen, international and local NGOs and civil society groups in the fisheries sector provides a blueprint for future reforms that promote more equitable access to, and sharing of, resources in other sectors. Such partnerships are also a means to achieving greater government accountability and a gateway to the participation of more vulnerable groups in society. Partnerships between the government and the civil society sector are also key to overcoming the multiple institutional legacies of military rule that continue to impede reform.

LIVING WITH INSTITUTIONAL LEGACIES

In the-lead up to the 2015 election, analysts made regular warnings about the NLD's low technical capacity to manage the country's multifarious and fractious reform process. While these factors have indeed hindered progress, historical legacies and a lack of capacity also stagnates change. An increasingly active civil society sector works hard to lay bare the "politics of dispossession" around various projects (Einzenberger 2018; Leehey 2019), including intertwined tactics of "resistance and refusal" (Prasse-Freeman 2020). Others artfully use humour and satire (Chu May Paing 2020). And yet, while political participation has improved significantly since the 2010s there are, as Nicholas Farrelly (2020) relates, still indications that "powerful interests in Myanmar, including the NLD, are uncomfortable with serious academic scrutiny of their policies and actions." As the chapters in this volume highlight, there is extensive internal change occurring, but there is also an immense sense of frustration in the slow pace of reform and bureaucratic hurdles which obfuscate change.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the space of education. As Lall shows in Chapter 9, when looking at the progress of education reform under the NLD, the government appears to be "stuck in quagmires that don't have easy solutions". Unsurprisingly, one of the main challenges to transforming education in Myanmar is the limited resources and capacity of

staff. Despite a surplus of funds and initiatives from development partners to support quality education and evidence-based planning, Ministry of Education staff, teachers and trainers have little time and energy to absorb such work. Like other sectors, transforming the education sector is also deeply inter-connected with issues related to belonging, national identity and the peace process. Overhauling the curriculum, for example, will be key to reversing the decades of Burmanisation imposed under military rule. Concurrently there is also a lack of guidance, authority and political will to recognise the role that ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) play in providing education. Lall concludes by highlighting the importance of better supporting mother tongue-based multilingual education and how its implementation can not only help to ensure equal access to education across the country, but also promote social cohesion.

The multiple challenges to reforming education in Myanmar raise a much broader issue regarding access to information, critical thinking and knowledge. The critical importance of "building a knowledge society" is well addressed by Missingham and Carroll in Chapter 10, who highlight the role of library and information studies in developing an informed and participative democracy. Myanmar's tertiary sector is undergoing an extensive review with a strong focus on improving research capabilities. The development of this sector is key to building better social, political and economic outcomes that benefit all members of society. As shown by the authors, there are many challenges which impede digital literacy to support twenty-first century learning, including basic issues like limited internet access and regular power outages. Positively, new partnerships between local and international universities are paving the way forward. The commitment and dedication of university staff dedicated to change is also key to this. However, equity issues are being brought to the forefront as the government now grapples with COVID-19 disruptions to face-to-face education. The impact of controversial internet shutdown in regions of unrest is further marginalising those in conflict-affected areas (Anonymous 2020).

Alongside education, other areas are proving slow to reform, bogged down in processes which obfuscate meaningful change. As Khin Khin Mra and Livingstone detail in Chapter 11, efforts to implement a national gender policy have also stalled under the NLD. The former government enacted the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women 2013–

2022 (NSPAW) as Myanmar's first policy framework to comprehensively address women's rights. However, the implementation of this plan faces similar capacity constraints, funding shortfalls and coordination issues as those examined by Lall. Despite the best intentions of women's groups and networks, the lack of common aims between different organisations and actors has also fragmented women's voices and their impact on institutional and policy reform. Their study also reveals the ongoing gendered legacies of military rule and patriarchal power structures that remain deeply embedded in all levels of government. Informally, social and cultural norms also play a significant role, sidelining women from playing a stronger role in policymaking and institutional reform.

At the heart of this is a question of norms and the difficulty of tackling patriarchal power structures that are entrenched at all levels of society. And despite these critiques of the civil society sector, they remain the driving force behind change in Myanmar. The opening political space afforded by Myanmar's social and political changes has seen a blossoming of civil society networks around various issues, including the rights of women. As Aye Thiri Kyaw and Miedema explain in Chapter 12, with Aung San Suu Kyi at the helm there was a great sense of optimism for women's rights in the period after the 2015 election. Growing public awareness of gender inequality also converged with the global #MeToo movement which gained international traction in 2017 following the exposure of Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein's longstanding exploitation and sexual abuse of women. The authors specifically address how the #MeToo movement has served as a platform for women's rights in Myanmar and how it has brought previously forbidden topics into the spotlight, including sexual abuse and harassment. The traction of the global campaign amongst feminist circles in Yangon also highlights the lightning-fast dissemination of information that has resulted from Myanmar's rapid uptake of mobile phone technology and how this can be used for social good. While others have written on the negative implications of the social media space (Kinseth 2018; Yan Naung Oak and Brooten 2019), these authors show how Facebook and Twitter have also functioned as an enabling environment for many, the anonymity of the virtual space encouraging people to speak out. And yet, while feminists in Yangon have been able to take advantage of the anonymity provided by these platforms, other marginalised groups in society may not be as well poised to do so.

LIVING WITH PLURAL IDENTITIES

Forging an inclusive national identity remains a key issue at the heart of Myanmar's transformation and its peace process in particular (Joliffe 2018; South and Lall 2018; Walton 2013). Peace discussions in Myanmar since independence have been anchored in demands from EAOs around an ethnofederalist arrangement that would provide autonomy and self-determination for ethnic nationalities on the basis of historical entitlement. After decades of conflict, the legacy of broken trust is paramount in negotiations between EAOs and the military, only further heightened ongoing land confiscations and natural resource extraction projects (Barbesgaard 2018; Gabusi 2018; Woods 2015, 2019). However, as Breen and He argue in Chapter 13, elite level discussions around the merits of ethnofederal arrangements do not necessarily reflect the views of ordinary people. Based on a series of deliberative surveys, they show that while people want ethnic identity to continue to be recognised, it should not necessarily form the basis for a federal arrangement. Instead, a form of territorial or regional federalism is preferred by some, with the boundaries being based on criteria like geographical continuity, economic resources and infrastructure. While the results slightly differed in areas with stronger EAO control, participants in the surveys overwhelmingly suggested that ethnofederalist arrangements were impractical in a country as diverse as Myanmar. They also believed that a territorial federalist arrangement might help to mitigate future conflicts and fears of secession, as well as the marginalisation of smaller ethnic groups, such as the Lahu or Palaung. However, giving voice to ordinary ethnic nationality peoples and embedding their rights within Myanmar's governance system is likely a long way off.

Despite long-standing fears of secession, the military's ideology around belonging and exclusion exemplified in the notion of "national races" or *taing yin tha*, also perpetuates the centrality of ethnicity/race in Myanmar's political arena (Cheesman 2017; Robinne 2019). There has been much discussion around how this Burmese term works both structurally and socially to the exclusion of groups like the Rohingya (Arraiza and Vonk 2017; Cheesman 2017; Islam 2018; Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2017; Pugh 2013; Zawacki 2013). However, as Fujimura explains in Chapter 14, the politics of national belonging and "native races" are complex entities, which have deep historical and multi-lingual trajectories. Tracing the way spoken

and written language was used to create a sense of unity amongst the diverse religious and linguistic Karen community during colonial rule, she reminds us of the importance of attending to the multiple, multilingual histories of Myanmar. Her examination of the failures of the Sgaw Karen Baptist elite to reach the diverse population also speaks to contemporary debates about the persisting inability of the majority-Bamar government to engage non-Burmese speakers in a common understanding of citizenship and belonging. Indeed, while the NLD continues to cultivate an image of a party which represents people across lines of ethnicity in the lead-up to the next election, their message of "Collective Strength" will only fall on deaf ears if its diverse peoples aren't deliberately made to feel part of the "collective".

Balancing decision-making for the benefit of the nation while acknowledging the rights of each ethnic group is potentially the single most important challenge for the current government. As Peggy Brett shows, such issues are structurally embedded, including in access to citizenship. In Chapter 15 Brett examines the multiple ambiguities embedded in the 1982 Citizenship Law and the way they act as "hidden forms of exclusion", trapping already marginalised groups in a perpetual state of limbo. She argues that part of this limbo is embedded within the ambiguous logics of the Citizenship Law itself and the narrowly constrained procedures which prove eligibility for identity documentation. In Myanmar, the National Registration Card (NRC) is essential to everyday life, rights and political participation. Even though there are legislated pathways for determining citizenship, procedural implementation at a local level does not appear to support this reform. While the National Verification Card (NVC), for example, was introduced in 2016 by the NLD government as a pathway to citizenship, in practice it effectively functions to deny eligibility for citizenship. With few incentives for government staff to resolve the status of those with other forms of identification, many people face a situation where their citizenship status simply remains unresolved. Indeed, like the issues facing the education sector, changing the practices of embedded administrative processes appears to be very difficult and will only further marginalise minority religious and ethnic communities from the national polity unless deliberately addressed.

CONCLUSION

Three years after the NLD took power, the 2019 Myanmar Update asked participants to reflect on the state of "living with Myanmar". The conference theme was a response to the challenges that people in Myanmar continue to face in living with the legacies of colonialism, civil conflict and military rule. The lack of meaningful reform detailed in the most recent Myanmar Update volume which probed the theme *Myanmar Transformed?* (Chambers et al. 2018), have become more evident in the last two years. The formation of a new government in Myanmar, led by the NLD, was a crucially important milestone in the country's "transition" (c.f. Rhoads and Wittekind 2018). However, as this volume shows, there are many ways to measure and assess what is happening in the country.

Much commentary on Myanmar focuses on the negative – what is "absent". This simplistic analysis ignores the nuances that underpin what is means to *live with Myanmar*. As this volume attests, living with Myanmar has always been many things, reflecting the many diverse peoples who call the country their home. Despite the lack of progress on many fronts, what we want to highlight as we conclude here is the importance of ongoing engagement with Myanmar and its people. Part of the aims of this volume is to provide a platform for Myanmar scholars to publish their work. This is reflected in the history of the Myanmar Update volume series and the growth in contributions from scholars based inside the country, and the diversity of subject-matter since its inception in 1990 (see e.g. Chambers et al. 2018; Cheesman et al. 2012, 2014; Cheesman and Farrelly 2016; Skidmore and Wilson 2007, 2008). After decades of heavy restrictions, Myanmar's research community has built strong partnerships with foreign universities and scholars. These partnerships have seen resultant transformations to the quality and diversity of academic scholarship. This has included growth, albeit slow, in the research output from university academics, and a flourishing network of think tanks and civil society groups contributing to the development of a vibrant and resilient research sector (see also GDN-CESD 2020; Rodriguez 2020).

Building on this momentum, the following chapters are therefore of great importance in highlighting "where things are at" prior to both the 2020 elections which at the time of printing are still scheduled for November this year. Preparation for the elections has taken an unexpected turn as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic that has swept the world in 2020. Whilst the NLD has been working to remind the public of their focus on

the long-term, structural issues with which they will need time to deliver meaningful change, the impacts of COVID-19 has also allowed them to focus on a message of solidarity and civic pride amidst what is a global economic downturn. Reinforcing the party's narrative of the importance of Suu Kyi to the country in times of crisis, the COVID crisis has given the State Counselor a platform from which to demonstrate her leadership skills and promote her image as "the mother of the nation". In the winner-takes-all electoral system (Bünte 2018), Suu Kyi is unlikely to be forced into a coalition government (Dunant 2020). However, while the NLD is likely to return to power, they may also face a more diverse parliament.

The litany of problems the country continues to face – from the beleaguered peace process to rural land disputes – leaves it vulnerable to challenges from other parties. Prior to the 2015 election there was general unity amongst the state and regional electorates focused on ending military rule. However, if the November 2018 by-elections are a litmus test for 2020, the NLD could have a tough fight on their hands in ethnic constituencies, especially in areas with active conflict. This should already be clear to the NLD – of the thirteen constituencies up for grabs in 2018, the NLD lost six, five of which were in ethnic states. As Morten Pederson suggests, if the NLD has one thing it can rely on, it is the "horizontal accountability imposed by free and fair national elections" (Pederson 2019, 237).

The second-largest party, the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), has focused on a narrative committed to nationalism, patriotism and sovereignty. Led by U Than Htay, they have been campaigning on the line that it's "Time to Think", reminding voters of the NLD's failure to live up to their election promises, in contrast to their own previous successes between 2011–2016. Ethnic parties too will likely pick up some more votes, as they amalgamate (Swe Lei Mon 2020). While the NLD focuses on developing a foundation for stable economic development and careful planning sector-wide reform, these and other parties are banking on the fact that they might pick up some votes from segments of the population eager for tangible change.

In many ways the election will be an important test of how far the country has progressed on the path to democracy. The military's recent declaration that they might postpone elections in parts of war-torn Rakhine State is telling for how far the country still has to go (Shoon Naing 2020). And yet, as the diversity of issues presented in this volume attests, to focus on electoral processes as a symbol of the country's transformation

overlooks the deeper aspects of the country's transition. COVID-19, for example, was unheard of when this volume began to be compiled and its full impact is likely to remain unknown for years to come. At the time of writing in August 2020, the country is yet to experience a major outbreak of the virus, yet the economic ramifications are likely to be significant, with economic growth forecasted to fall to just 0.5 per cent (Turnell 2020). There is also strong evidence to suggest that the gaps between rural and urban areas that Warr describes in Chapter 6 are likely to grow as a result of the impacts of the global crisis (Mi Chan 2020). But Myanmar is resilient and its people continue to find new and creative ways to cope in the face of adversity (Chu May Paing 2020). The population has endured great hardships and divisions. While many contentious matters remain, the adaptability of Myanmar's peoples gives some confidence that the future continues to hold promise.

Notes

1 Significantly this motion was put forward on the 26 January, the two-year anniversary of when U Ko Ni, a vocal advocate for constitutional reform, was assassinated (Crouch 2017b).

2 A/HRC/39/64, Report of the Independent International Fact-finding Mission on Myanmar, 27 August 2018.

3 International Court of Justice, "Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (The Gambia v. Myanmar)". Available at https://www.icj-cij.org/en/case/178 (accessed 10 August 2020).

4 Mandy Sadan's (2016) edited volume provides a detailed insight the 17-year ceasefire agreement in Kachin State and the reason for its collapse in 2011. The ceasefire effectively enabled the strengthening of the Tatmadaw's position over Kachin areas and people, tying ethnic armed elite to the state through lucrative joint ventures which benefited few. These ceasefires did very little to address people's grievances related to human rights abuses nor demands for greater political autonomy.

5 The AA's popularity has grown dramatically in recent years, built off grievances and mistrust towards the political dominance of the Bamar in Rakhine affairs and an extremely popular ethnonationalist campaign (see Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2020, 240–241).

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