Myanmar's Transition to a New Inclusive Society

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In this issue, we bring together critical practitioners, scholars, and writers of Myanmar to examine how the country can build an inclusive society. We started this endeavor with an initial writing workshop at Chiang Mai University hosted by the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development in December 2018. As the military coup on 1 February 2021 ended Myanmar's nominal transition to democracy—which began with the 2010 election—the Burmese state continues pursuing perhaps the most prolonged struggle to consolidate power and build a Westphalian-style "Leviathan" state in Southeast Asia. A Burmese state that is inclusive and reflective of its diverse cultures has never been realized in Myanmar's history. The current political crisis shines the clearest light on how there was no state to fail, despite what many observers think; the crisis is the most poignant illustration of how Myanmar's struggle for an inclusive state and a new open society persists among diverse ethnic groups, including the non-monolithic Bama population. Analysis of the 2021 coup-induced political crisis and its impact on Myanmar's democratization process to create an open inclusive society deserves a separate volume. The articles in this volume, which were written before the 2021 coup, do not explicitly address the coup and consequent political crises in Myanmar.

Myanmar stands in the world today as having the longest civil war among the world's 193 United Nations member states since WWII. It is ethnically and culturally the second most diverse country in Southeast Asia after Indonesia, with 135 officially determined ethnic groups and many more going unrecognized by the state. Myanmar faces enduring ethnic conflicts and wars, ethnoreligious conflicts between Buddhist and Muslim communities in Rakhine State and several cities in the country, land-grab conflicts, and conflict within Buddhist communities.

The 1 February military coup makes the political process to build a new and inclusive society less certain. Myanmar's nominal transition to democracy in 2010 opened up much-needed wider scholarly attention across the world. Scholarly attempts to revitalize a rich tradition of critical and independent scholarship on society and politics in Myanmar had only recently begun. We are a part of this endeavor and, in this issue, we devote our attention to whether and how Myanmar could achieve an inclusive, peaceful, and democratic society.

It is essential to understand Myanmar's struggle for a more inclusive society within the contexts of (1) the history of ethnic diversity and conflicts; (2) religion and society; (3) military domination of politics and state-building in the post-independence era; and (4) local-global economic forces. All of these contexts continue to shape the nominal transition to democracy. Careful observation and reading of Burma's history will illuminate how complex forces from these four contextual frameworks shape the struggle to achieve an inclusive society.

Perhaps more than any other historical event in Myanmar's history, the 8.8.88 protests defined and paved the way for a movement toward a more open, inclusive and democratic society. Those nationwide political protests against a one-party authoritarian state and successive political movements against the military regime have been singularly devoted to achieving a democratic federal union in Myanmar. Several student activists and leaders who led the 1988 democracy movement left for Myanmar's border areas after the coup on 18 September 1988 and worked with ethnic minority groups along the border to advance the armed struggle against Myanmar's military rule. The political project that grew out of the 1988 protests in Myanmar, despite its painfully slow beginning—a nullified election in 1990, up to the National League for Democracy victory in the 2012 by-elections, then in 2015, and 2020—is a clear message to military state-builders that the traditional Bama nationalist framework has never reflected the desire and diversity of Myanmar's ethnic and religious communities. Consequently, Myanmar as a state has never committed to seriously achieving an inclusive polity:

it has always, in practice, been defined in more narrow and exclusionary terms by the Bama ethnonationalists at the helm of power, namely, the Myanmar military.

Several articles in this special issue inform us that Bama ethnocentrism and Buddhist nationalism continues to resist the inclusion of non-Bama and non-Buddhist political communities and leaders into significant political decision-making processes. The current political crisis in Myanmar has further amplified that resistance. At the same time, the determination and diversity of the pro-democracy protests against the 1 February coup amplifies the voices of inclusive forces. The articles in this special issue collectively argue that Bama ethnonationalism is still tangible in Myanmar's politics today and continues to serve as a hindrance to making Myanmar an open and inclusive society. It is historically evident that whether building dynastic kingdoms or a modern nation-state, the Bama majority has defined what the nation-state of Myanmar should be and occupied a position of power sufficient to "annihilate" others who do not fit into their political fold. Whether that historical trend will repeat or end permanently as Myanmar's politics develops will be determined by how the forces of inclusion find creative solutions to constitute a new and open society.

Myanmar's various ethnic communities have been struggling for inclusion since Burma's independence from Great Britain in 1948. However, several ethnic communities included in the official list of ethnic groups in the military's 2008 Constitution have been politically excluded from the political decision-making framework. Many of these groups have been fighting against the Myanmar military for over half a century for inclusion or secession. Myanmar's largest case of systematic and violent exclusion at scale is its treatment of the Rohingya people in Rakhine State. As we can see in the map (Map 1), Rohingya might be considered 'stateless people' by some, but that does not justify the inhumane treatment they suffer under Myanmar's military and nationalist Arakanese or Rakhine powers. Several articles in this issue deconstruct how the 2017 Rohingya crisis un-

folded and whether there is a systematic exercise of racial, religious, cultural, and political exclusion of Rohingya in Myanmar's political processes.
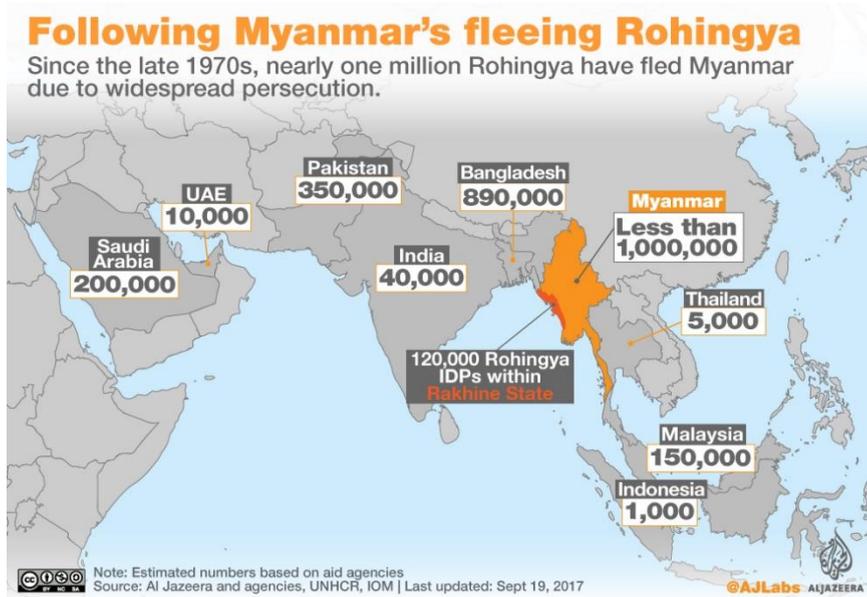
Map 1[1]

Ethnicity and Racism in Burma

Scholarship on ethnicity, ethnic politics, and ethnic conflicts in Burma is well developed, but scholarship on race and racism is less so. The analysis of Burmese nationalists' and the military's point of view on Rohingya people indicates that the case of the Rohingya falls into the racism category. Rohingya themselves want to define the case as legitimate ethnic conflict, and ethnic discrimination against their deserved citizenship of the country and, thus, terms like "ethnic cleansing" or "genocide" were applied by journalists and international observers. Articles by Michael Charney and Tharapi Than nine in this special issue analyze both historical and contemporary complexity surrounding

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[1] Asrar, 2017.

ethnicity and race in Myanmar's politics to imagine an inclusive society. The challenge for scholars is whether the case of the Rohingya should be analyzed as a part of ongoing ethnic conflict and civil war or whether it should be treated differently from the analysis of war in Kachin, Karen, or Rakhine states. The root of this problem is defining the "indigeneity" of ethnic groups in Myanmar. The complacency or lack of criticism among other ethnic groups and ethnic leaders against the Myanmar military's inhumane treatment of the Rohingya suggest that those ethnic leaders and groups agree, more or less, with the Myanmar military's view that Rohingya are immigrants or ethnic groups that belong to Bangladesh and South India, or that they fear that any expression of overt sympathy for the Rohingya would jeopardize their desires for full inclusion. This distinction is crucial because it legitimizes the essence of the 1982 citizenship law and the military's 2008 Constitution to exclude certain groups from the official list of 135 ethnic groups.

A careful reading of the 1982 citizenship law and the 2008 Myanmar Constitution would support the analysis that the military and Burmese nationalist leaders recognize the legitimacy and theoretical inclusion of 135 ethnic groups from the list they developed in Myanmar's politics. However, Myanmar denies the existence of the Rohingya as an ethnic group in its state historical records before 1824. This is the first order of distinction that needs to be understood to appreciate why Aung San Suu Kyi, State Counselor from 2016-21 and at the time of writing a political prisoner once again, was hesitant to raise the question of the 1982 citizenship law and the classification of Myanmar's 135 ethnic groups.[2] She seemed to accept that Rohingyas are members of communities in Rakhine State and could be citizens if they do not use the term Rohingya to describe their ethnicity in their citizenship paperwork. She failed to acknowledge Rohingya as an ethnic minority in her International Court of Justice speech in the Hague on December 11, 2019.

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[2] Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, 2017.

The domination of the Myanmar military in Burmese politics punctuated recently by the 2021 coup should also remind Western journalists and headline makers, who forcefully reported the failure of Aung San Suu Kyi's explicit defense of Rohingya people, how complex the local historical context and political climate is in which she has to maneuver. The assassination of U Ko Ni, who led the process to reform the military's 2008 Constitution for the National League for Democracy (NLD), at Yangon Airport on 29 January 2017, was a clear signal sent to Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD leadership. It is one thing to criticize players in the field from the perspective of the spectator but it is quite another thing to be a player on the field. The complexity of Myanmar politics, rooted in its history and power dynamics among groups, foretells how challenging the path will be to achieve an inclusive and open society in Myanmar. For Myanmar in 2021, neither the military nor the NLD alone can bring a permanent peace and inclusive society without the meaningful participation of other diverse ethnic and political groups.

Buddhism and Inclusion/Exclusion

The question of inclusion and exclusion in the formation of Myanmar's polity necessarily requires us to deconstruct the role of religion in Myanmar's history and politics. It also inevitably raises the further question of how Burmese Buddhist concepts could ever be used to justify the actions of Myanmar's successive military governments, which cracked down violently on people's protests in 1988, Buddhist monks' protests in 2007, committed the crimes against the Rohingya people in Rakhine State, and since the 1 February 2021 military coup again more blatantly perpetrate large-scale arbitrary arrest, torture, and murder of peaceful protesters and civilians. It requires outright politicization of religion to find justification in the tenets of Buddhism for the exclusion of any member of society, let alone violently expel them. Articles by Htet Min Lwin and Shae Frydenlund and Shunn Lei in this issue engage with religion and inclusion/exclusion questions.

Several scholars of Buddhism in Myanmar have unraveled the critical and contentious role of Theravada Buddhism in Burmese politics and political thought.[3] It has even been argued that "in order to understand the political dynamics of contemporary Myanmar, it is necessary to understand the interpretations of Buddhist concepts that underlay much of modern Burmese political thought".[4] It sounds plausible to judge and portray a society's foundation through the majority's religion and values, but it unintentionally decimates the intellectual role of minorities. The problem with a narrow and glamorized version of a country or ethnic group seen only through the lens of the majority is a tragedy of intellectual zeal that makes one's subject unique and one's question the only one worthy of pursuit. In this sense, the inclusion and exclusion problem regarding religion and society begins with intellectual exclusion of the existence and value of the minority by sentimentalizing the majority. From this angle, Htet Min Lwin's article on Mahāgandhārum Sayadaw, Moe Htet Nay's article on Myanmar culture, and Joshua's article on religion and politics in the Kachin conflict contribute to diversifying the view of religion and politics in Myanmar beyond Buddhist tenets.

For some Burmese citizens, because they live in Myanmar and Buddhism is the majority's religion, anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic sentiment is taken almost as a right that they should exercise. This might explain why most Myanmar citizens do not question or even consider the inhumane treatment of Rohingya by the military as a dent in their moral universe. However, such perceptions are reportedly changing in the wake of the Myanmar military's indiscriminate violent arrest, torture, and killing of protesters and civilians in urban areas during the crackdown against 2021 democracy protests. The majority of urban citizens in Myanmar are suffering the same type of violence inflicted upon Rohingya and other ethnic minorities for years. It is important to note that while most citizens may not pose questions

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[3] See Mya Maung (1964), Rozenberg (2010), Sarkisyanz (1965), Scott (1882), Spiro (1970) and Tun Myint (2014).

[4] Walton, 2017, p. 3.

about the military's brutal campaign against the Rohingya, the majority did not seem to believe the propaganda campaign against the Rohingya launched by Nay Pyi Taw through Facebook and social media in Myanmar. Whether the 2021 political crisis in Myanmar has significantly altered the majority of Myanmar citizens' views on the Rohingya and the Myanmar military—and how responses to the crisis will contribute to realizing a new inclusive society—is an important question. Do most Myanmar citizens unanimously view the military dictatorship as a common threat to realizing an inclusive society and thus a threat to peace in Myanmar? The emerging evidence and the unified determination among different groups and generations of democracy protesters against the 1 February 2021 military coup suggests an affirmative answer to this question.

Facebook Campaign Against Rohingya

When technology and ideology are deployed skillfully in public media campaigns on today's social media platforms, a democracy can either thrive or suffer from the attendant rise of factual and/or fake information. Myanmar's nominal transition to democracy from 2010 to 2020 occurred during the high point of global communication technological transformation. The Myanmar Tatmadaw, which learned its engineering and technological skills from Russia in order to wage cyber warfare, deployed the Russian model in dealing with open media. Using Facebook, the most popular social media platform in Myanmar, the Tatmadaw and its enablers deployed fake information in a far-reaching campaign. Wai Moe's article and Aiden Moe's article expertly investigate and report findings on the deployment of fake news about the Rohingya crisis. Among other things, they found that 700 military personnel devoted to the Cyberwarfare Department monitor all social media; these findings reveal how the Tatmadaw fabricates fake news against the Rohingya to gain supporters in the Myanmar Facebook world. Their articles are central to this issue as they are independent research papers about the Rohingya crisis exposing how the Myanmar

Tatmadaw deploys social media to justify and support its actions.

At the same time, skillful Myanmar Facebook users, citizen journalists, and local conventional journalists are shedding light on the power of social media in democracy during the protests against the 2021 coup in Myanmar. This movement was led early by Generation Z and illustrates what one might call the "digital democracy movement," an unprecedented dynamic in world history. The creativity, diversity, scale, and reach of the democracy movement throughout Myanmar is inspiring. The daily live feed on Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok that allows for the intermingling of information about Myanmar local protests, crackdowns, virtual global protests, fundraising events, and Zoom webinars on political issues all illustrate social media's power in creating an open and inclusive society.

The Transition from Monocentric History to Inclusive Society

The 1988 democracy movement provided a political platform for Aung San Suu Kyi. She admirably and symbolically led the movement with steadfast determination to transition Myanmar to a democracy before the 1 February 2021 coup. She gained an international reputation as a champion of human rights and freedom. The Saint-like image of Aung San Suu Kyi throughout the 1990s and 2000s as promoted by the mainstream Western media ended with her silence on the Rohingya crisis. As she walks through Myanmar's history, on the one hand as the champion of democracy and on the other hand as a state leader (as she defined herself and her role in the Hague speech), it is a reminder that Myanmar's own contradiction between its past and its present deserves careful interpretation.

Michael Charney's article provides an insightful rendition of Myanmar's postcolonial history and urges scholars to decolonize Myanmar's history to embrace a more inclusive framework for historical analysis. Charney investigates the historical context of Myanmar concerning the Rohingya crisis and issues a

pointed critique. He argues for freeing Myanmar history and historical analysis from colonial impositions. Only then can Myanmar rethink the inclusive framework in its intellectual interpretation. Charney writes, "Regardless of what solution is found to the present crisis, Rakhine will continue to be subject to genocidal conditions and there will be further episodes of murder and flight. This goes beyond the need to abandon the citizenship laws and the Taingyintha paradigm; Myanmar needs to radically reinvent itself on a new basis, if it is to end its continued problems not just with the Rohingya, but with all of its ethnic minorities". Charney argues this new basis is a new intellectual understanding of Myanmar's genuine but neglected ethnic histories that were systematically ignored or incompletely examined in existing scholarship.

Through its articles this special issue collectively presents shreds of evidence for the need to decolonize the analysis of Myanmar's political development, not only from the British imposition on Myanmar's history, but also to deconstruct the Eurocentric imagination of a state that validates the majority's position and the winner's narratives in Myanmar and beyond.

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