

Power, Civil Society, and an Inchoate Politics of the Daily in Burma/Myanmar

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Burma/Myanmar's postcolonial elites have established a military-state with hybrid-imperial structures, characterized by high despotic but low infrastructural modes of power, and fueled by rent-extraction. Given the resulting evisceration of opposition political groups, citizens understand explicit politics as dangerous. That said, cleavages between state and the polity afford vast space for "civil society" groups (CS) to form and operate. CS stabilize the political economy by managing citizen needs; conversely, CS stand as a wedge between state and masses, (potentially) constructing spaces to coordinate and magnify potential demands. Yet CS currently err toward managing needs. Opposition must politicize Burmese masses and CS through idioms that interface with CS's material tasks—a "politics of the daily"—encouraging them to make, collectively, a multiplicity of non-adversarial demands. This may compel the state to pivot and seek new bargains, at which point elite advocacy-oriented CS can provide progressive policy reforms. The paper will examine recent inchoate social-political movements in Burma for models of this politics.

AFTER A TUMULTUOUS FOUR years for Myanmar—punctuated by mass protests in September 2007, the devastation of Cyclone Nargis in May 2008, and a contentious national election in November 2010—by early 2011 many Burma-watchers were left wondering if those epic events amounted to sound and fury signifying nothing.¹ Indeed, they had anticipated that 100,000 protesters and a mismanaged natural disaster would subsequently lead to the cracking of the ruling military regime and a transition to democracy (OSI 2007). Instead the ruling military-state junta created a proxy civilian party, presided over an election beset with fraud and intimidation, and installed a "new" government. This effectively normalized the 2008 Constitution and closed the book on the country's last democratic poll, which had been held in quasi-abeyance for two

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¹Contrary to popular understanding, both "Burma" and "Myanmar" have always been used by those native to the space, the former typically in colloquial speech, and the latter mostly in the formal written language. To consciously avoid the binarism ascribed to the use of one over the other in English (where "Burma" signifies solidarity with the opposition, while "Myanmar" endorses the regime), this paper will use them interchangeably.

decades.² Most ethnic groups put down weapons to reluctantly rejoin this political process (Smith 2006), while the principal opposition, the National League for Democracy (NLD), remained irreconcilable and was officially dissolved as a consequence. When its leader, Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, was finally released from house arrest, her political activities were initially declared “illegal” and she was threatened with reincarceration.³ Actors on the outside, too, were ineffectual in their central focus on effecting democratic change: U.N. mediation was repeatedly unsuccessful, and neither sanctions nor punitively low foreign aid⁴ directly coerced the junta into capitulation (Pedersen 2008, 232). China (Steinberg 2001a, 223–39), ASEAN (Tonkin 2008, 3–4), and India continued to support the junta economically and covet it strategically, providing external cover from Western coercion. But beyond this, internal political challenge appeared anemic; the military-state maintained an effective monopoly over explicit political expression.

And yet, despite its effective weathering of these paroxysms (protest, emergency, election), the military-state then began showing stunning signs of reform: by late 2011, political prisoners had been freed, the unheard-of phenomenon of public pressure leading to a change in policy (the halting of the Myitsone mega-dam project) had occurred, and the same Suu Kyi—threatened only months before to avoid politics—had been allowed to run for parliament. When this article went to print, debate was raging over what the changes signified, if anything at all. Sanguine observers heralded nothing less than a new dawn in Myanmar (ICG 2011), while wary counterparts insisted that the superficial “reforms” risked papering over deeper consolidation of military control (Zarni 2011).

How to reconcile these two stories? Rather than adjudicating between them, this article seeks two orthogonal objectives: first, to make the apparent contradictions explicable by describing the *system* of political economy and social regulation that has developed in the sixty years since independence. The second objective will be to argue that these political events risk capturing the attention of internal and external actors alike, when more important lessons generated by the events perhaps lay elsewhere. The paper will argue that recent events have illuminated actors that heretofore had been flying below the radars of

²In 1990 the out-of-touch regime allowed free and fair elections, and was summarily defeated, resoundingly, by the democratic opposition.

³Burma’s authorities were warning Suu Kyi to abstain from political activity under the pretext of maintaining safety and order (“Myanmar Tells Suu Kyi to Stay Out of Politics,” *Agence France-Presse*, June 29, 2011).

⁴Despite the deep penury into which the country continues to descend (Zarni 2007, 209), Burma receives a fraction of aid compared to less impoverished countries in the region. Dividing total Official Development Assistance (ODA) by population reveals that Myanmar received \$4.00 per person in ODA in 2007 whereas Lao PDR received \$67.19, Cambodia received \$46.70, and the comparatively well-off Vietnam received \$29.34 (OECD, http://www.oecd.org/countrylist/0,3349,en_2649_34447_25602317_1_1_1_1,00.html#M, accessed June 3, 2009. See also U Myint (2006).

many observers and policymakers: whether organizing protests, pulling bodies out of lakes, or delivering civic education seminars, civil society groups (hereafter “CS”) are literally and figuratively *everywhere* in Burma (Heidel 2006). As such, exploring how they function can stimulate *a new way of seeing* the challenges facing Myanmar: instead of making state-to-state or “international community”-to-state politics the only ways to contest an authoritarian regime, Burmese CS provide a window through which we can penetrate an opaque political economy and inform us about the way life (in the villages and urban slums) actually functions, and can also demonstrate how an alternative politics may contest the status quo. Myanmar scholars—including in a recent issue of this journal (Thawngmung 2011)—are increasingly mining these political spaces and practices, exploring daily experiences of average citizens. This article hopes to continue this conversation, contributing to determining what role these largely forgotten actors can play in driving change from within. Indeed, if the government is serious about reform, these forgotten actors will be seminal in channeling and shaping it; if the government is not, these actors will need to emerge to help compel change.

METHODOLOGIES

Against simplistic binary descriptions—totalitarian accounts in Burmese commentary and classic authoritarian portrayals in political science—I describe Burma’s political space as incorporating multiple particular governmentalities (Foucault 2007); I examine those by exploring (a) the institutions or actors that *de facto* govern subjects (states, customary leaders, CS representatives, businesses, spiritual guides, etc.); (b) the modes that those forms of governance take (“rights”-based, negotiated bargains, implicit deals, etc.); therefore (c) the kinds of relationships that develop (patron/client, state/citizen, corporation/employee, NGO/“partner,” “international community”/victim); through which (d) power then flows to produce, regulate, punish, discipline, or expel subjects. And finally (e) how the different zones constituted by these different fields of governmentality, with their respective intensities, intersect with and hence influence one another to create a broader system or *assemblage* (Deleuze and Guatarri 1987 [1980]). Taking up each of these permutations is beyond the scope of any single paper, but this methodological framework informs the project. Indeed, only by more precisely understanding this system can collective political attitudes become comprehensible and social space at Myanmar’s peripheries and within its interstices become apparent, thereby contextualizing current CS actions and animating our ability to perceive the form this potential takes.

To accomplish this, *inter alia*, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 150 members of 61 Burmese CS and/or political organizations in December 2009 and January 2010. Organizations were identified through referrals, and

cross-referenced with NGO lists compiled by the Burma Library (in Mae Sot, Thailand) and Local Resource Center in Yangon, respectively, to ensure adequate coverage. Organizations are kept anonymous due to their sensitive activities.

Finally, two conceptual deviations from classic civil society conceptualizations attend my use of CS. First, I define CS as those *groups* making social decisions outside of direct state control and without ambition toward capture of, or participation in, the state. I avoid language such as “individuals coming together” to “make collective decisions” because I neither imply quasi-democratic or even necessarily collaborative decision making, nor do I suggest that *individuals* are what drive CS decisions. Instead, CS often take on institutional consciousnesses and logics that act recursively on those people who constitute them (Žizek 2008, 167). Second, CS will be used plurally—signifying a multiplicity of organizations—and will also imply an alternative *space* that CS both constitutes (by virtue of its operation) and enters into.

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MEDIATED DESPOTIC POWER AND RENT-EXTRACTION

This section will make analysis of CS possible by building a model of political power in Myanmar, tracing its evolution by integrating variables of political economy, ideology, organized violence, and collective action.

I begin with power in pre-national Southeast Asia, which Thongchai (1994) outlines as emanating radially out of dynastic centers and diffusing over space. As distance from centers increased, dynastic states had decreasing abilities to control subjects for conscription, corvée labor, or tribute. Dynasties did not build durable political institutions at local levels; if they had so attempted, erstwhile subjects would have fled into the jungle, undermining the state’s resource base (Scott 1976). Consequently, sociopolitical power in pre-national Burma operated in personalized, corporeal ways (Steinberg 2001b, 93–8), through local leaders (*myothugyi*) who deployed *pon*⁵ (charisma).

When the British annexed Burma, the colonial administration continued “indirect rule,” merely adding more sophisticated extraction apparatuses (Tinker 1956, 387). The British, quite reasonably, did not spend precious resources developing a centralized bureaucratic state. And while they brought new ways of controlling populations (the map, the census, a rule of law backed by police, a taxation system, etc.—cf. B. Anderson 1983), the British also applied these technologies in indirect ways. Therefore, while these tactics created or ossified ethnic identities (Leach 1970)—leading to conflicts between these new ethnicities that continue today—sociopolitical structures in village life were not displaced: colonial administration simply grafted an

⁵Nash (1965, 72, 79–84) describes *pon* as a charismatic form of power naturally leveraged by individuals to structure sociopolitical power relationships.

administrative system with limited infrastructural linkages onto existing modes of power (Nash 1965, 4; Pye 1962, 12–3, 83). Even where they destroyed *myothugyi*, the British were not able to *replace* this rule with sociopolitically meaningful substitutes. Hence, “The vast majority of villagers lived outside the civil institutions introduced by the British” (Badgley 1970, 101). Scott (1976, 20–28) notes how the “modern” state’s cash crops changed material conditions and reorganized the economy, but state political power remained detached from local life. Economic penetration made political penetration unnecessary; traditional society and local attitudes surrounding politics and governance did not revolutionize.

Constitutional leaders (1947–62) consciously attempted to rectify this disjoint by seeking to build an unmediated state, evidenced by the introduction of party politics and government services to villages. However, Constitutional government systems could not overcome the structural separation of center from periphery: loan programs were outstripped by Chinese and Indian moneylenders (Turnell 2009); bureaucratic apparatuses (the civil service; an independent judiciary) had little potency upon reaching peripheries (distant villages) or interstices (private interactions in Rangoon).

As the Constitutional administration failed to alter local political culture and cohere the state, ethnic and communist groups rebelled against the center.⁶ Insurgencies disrupted commerce and security, and left the polity unsure of Burma’s political leadership. Military elites, motivated by a nationalist desire to protect the country’s sovereignty from what it perceived as Constitutional capitulation to insurgency, and by their perception that continued chaos undermined their agendas, orchestrated a coup in 1962.

Perry (2007) and Callahan (2003) respectively describe the military as a self-interested organization articulating its own desires (extraction) and defending these interests through protection or domination. Charles Tilly famously theorized that states first establish such extraction “rackets,” modes that are eventually institutionalized through a dialectical balancing between society and military/state. States outside Europe, however, did not experience that dialectic (Tilly 1985, 186); policies of “extraversion” (Bayart 2009)—linkages with external markets and strategic partners—gave autochthonous elites sources of material support that they translated into political control: in Burma, the military acted like a vortex, sucking in resources and moving its own agenda forward at the polity’s expense (Callahan 2003, 222). Specifically, the military-state controlled the rice trade and nationalized small manufacturing and other resources (gems, minerals, teak, and eventually natural gas), and began extracting enormous rents from the export of these natural resources (Perry 2007, 52), tactics that could be labeled as hybrid *rentier*.⁷

⁶Perhaps due to the state’s inability to communicate a civic national identity, rebellions took ethnic (sub-civic national) and communist (meta-national) forms.

⁷For *rentier* state literature see Chaudhry (1997) and Beblawi (1987). I refer to the state as a “hybrid” one as it does not conform to traditional *rentier* models, given the Burmese state at this

But why was the military able to accomplish this while the Constitutional state could not? The missing variable lay in the politics: the military was able to set this process in motion by developing an implicit bargain with classes and their groups: the military-state would deliver a secure society and sovereign state (by addressing the insurgencies), and would leave intact most local forms of power (men of *pon*; much religious organization) in exchange for control over certain aspects of the economy and militarily centralized despotism. Where the Constitutional government in Burma overreached in its attempt to cohere a state, the military-state was satisfied with a less ambitious extraction racket, which it managed loosely like an imperial power.

Further, the military-state delivered real benefits to peasants, including de facto land reform (stripping land from Indian and Chinese moneylenders who had foreclosed on Burmese peasants during the Great Depression⁸—cf. Turnell 2009); elimination of land taxation (Badgley 1962); and initially an increase in credit (Turnell 2009, ch. 8). The “agrarian socialism” articulated by the military-state also connected with rural subjects on an ideological plane: the Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) espoused self-reliance, self-sufficiency, moral rectitude, and respect for local charismatic power (Steinberg 2001b, 117; Badgley 1970, 103).

Though rigid procurement policies did create popular resentment, the system simultaneously allowed for massive black market dealings, large enough to perhaps comprise more than half the export economy during the BSPP period (Perry 2007, 60–61). This black market was inefficient, but it did match goods with consumer needs by tapping external markets (J. Anderson 1993, 73). Therefore, rural rice producers grew their crops, kept the best rice for themselves, loaded their bags with pebbles when they sold the minimum to the procurement boards, and smuggled out whatever other surplus remained (Silverstein 1977, 220). As Wiant notes, if the people did not like a social policy, they would “dismiss it as another bit of madness from Rangoon” (1981, 66). Some policies (like procurement) could not be dismissed, but many social formations (Peasant Organizations) could. The system provided few incentives for increasing production, but rural Burmese crafted decent lives remarkably free from the state’s grip: the government created apparatuses that shot through social space and into Burmese lives to extinguish *political* challenge, but the system simultaneously allowed for CS to deliver religious and social services to needy citizens alongside state partners (Heidel 2006, 6; Hlaing 2004, 394–96).

point did not have a natural resource (like oil) that could be exported without citizen participation. Instead, Burma’s system is similar in ways to El Salvador’s coffee elite/military regimes. See Paige (1997, 23, 27–32).

⁸Consequently the state held de jure ownership of land but granted usufruct abilities to citizens.

This extraction system had the secondary consequence of also economically aiding the insurgencies (who taxed the black markets), but this was a trade-off the military-state seemed unable to mitigate—given that rents it could extract throughout the process were essential not only for its own organizational sustenance but also for its ability to fight those same insurgencies. Aggregation of military-state power created a dynamic cycle: it *further* undermined national reconciliation, leading to *more* challenges from ethnic armies, *further* justifying the military's hold on state power (Silverstein 1981, 54). This is not an argument for a conspiratorial Orwellian state that created perpetual war to justify its rule. More likely it was the unintended consequence of the political economy of extraction, war, and this particular form of state-building.

Thus, while the (recorded) economy almost immediately began to decline—given that the black market was growing rapidly, unskilled bureaucrats were mismanaging local economies, and the generals were mangling the macro-economy (Turnell 2009, chs. 8 and 9)—the state was using rents to subsidize cheap rice for urban poor, and black market side businesses were making elites rich. An initial equilibrium was struck.

Into the 1970s and 1980s, extracted spoils bolstered the military's ability to wage its multi-front wars. While these wars consumed enormous resources, the military slowly conquered more area controlled by ethnic or communist factions, hence undermining insurgents' resource-bases while increasing the military-state's own. Significantly, the end of the Cold War changed Asian regional politics (Lintner 1999, 96–9, 153–56; Smith 2006, 52), meaning that insurgencies could no longer rely on tacit support from China, India, Thailand, and states further afield. Insurgent groups began to fall like dominoes: as one insurgency weakened or fell, the military redeployed forces on the remaining insurgents (Oo and Min 2007, 11–22).

As a result of this further consolidation of military power, the military-state was able to manage society whilst giving fewer benefits in return: with sovereignty ensured, and state power more legible (if certainly not hegemonic) at its margins, the state again pivoted and evolved strategies, transferring more resources to developing extractive bureaucracies, policies, and institutions (Callahan 2007, 16–17), and to extending internal *political* domination (strengthening military intelligence/police, harassing political opposition, etc.), while maintaining a looser *social* control at peripheries. For instance, the state relaxed its attempt at a rent-extraction monopoly, allowing joint ventures, and experimented with liberalizing certain aspects of the agricultural sector (Thawngmung 2004, ch. 3). These policies not only provided much-needed foreign exchange, but also acted as a response to the 1988 protests,⁹ where the state felt the limits of

⁹These protests can be seen as the exception that proves the rule of general quietude; in fact, urbanization rates have remained generally constant for thirty years (<http://ww2.unhabitat.org/habredd/conditions/soeastasia/Myanmar.htm>, accessed July 3, 2010), only recently accelerating, leaving

what people would accept. As Khin Zaw Win notes, the state evolved its position from one of “what can we control?” to “what can we take?” (2006, 80), which I interpret as the passage from *building* the assemblage (developing bargains, putting down opponents, etc.) to *managing* it (finding the optimum/feasible level of extraction).

The System’s Consequences

We can call this a system of *hybrid-imperial* population control (Motyl 1999), characterized by *high despotic* but *low infrastructural* power (Mann 1984, 115). Understanding the military-state allows us to begin answering the question: Why, when the state began to deliver less and less, have people not responded politically? Loose infrastructural control, libertarian local attitudes, a despotic state, and a glut of natural resources have converged to lead peripheral subjects navigating an only *gradually* worsening situation to develop successful coping strategies that are *non-confrontational* and *non-organized*. Dispersed modes of production—farms not factories—mean that people are geographically separated, easily divisible (Rudy, forthcoming). Subjects hence tend to avoid, mitigate, or subvert the state’s exploitative policies through strategies that Thawngmung typologizes, following Hirschman, as “exit, compliance, passive resistance, individual contacts, and voice” (2004, 183). These techniques appear quite reasonable given that any direct challenge of the state requires organizational skills, time, complex communication networks, resources, and the willingness to face imprisonment and/or death if challenge should result in conflict rather than victory. Social movement scholars utilizing game theoretical models find that “contentious collective action” often emerges from subjects’ lack of any alternative option (Tarrow 1994, 2); Burmese, conversely, would have myriad alternative recourses. Forming a contentious group requires actors to collectively overcome the incentive for individuals to “defect” (making confederates bear the risk of failure), and Burmese oppositional groups have not found the commitment devices to vault those barriers. Therefore, for individuals to solve collective action problems, they must communicate (internally and externally) that their operations are resolutely non-contentious, hence avoiding the prisoner’s dilemma. This may partially explain the lack of contentious action in Burma.

Any aspiring social-group participant must also understand the power terrain: the military-state is strongest at its government/security centers in Yangon, Naypyi-daw, and other large cities; where it is strongest, the state attains significant control at reduced cost: despotic power, while focused around political expression, leeches into the social realm as well. When people are dominated politically—and when

Burma one of the least urbanized countries globally (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urbanization_by_country, accessed July 3, 2010). This implies that the political economy maintained a delicate balance: delivering side-payments to cities at a level sufficient to keep them from rioting, but not so great as to suck in Burmese from the countryside.

almost any act can be interpreted as political—quietude results. This manifests as an avoidance of political topics, coded speech when there is speech about politics at all, and a general enervation of “social capital.” This is why foreign media often present accounts of whispering in Burmese streets: the state inscribes potential for political challenge upon every foreigner, like a node that when hooked up with a Burmese person becomes a visible conglomerate of threat. Burmese citizens navigate these foreigners with care, hence the whispering (Prasse-Freeman 2010a). Quietude can be seen as a *learned* and habituated behavior.

But alternatively, on increasingly distant institutional and geographical levels, instead of expressing the will of the central state, local state representatives have latitude to negotiate with society: mid-level commanders enjoy significant local autonomy (Callahan 2001, 41); administrative officials in “non-political” ministries can experiment with new projects. These bargains often allow society to retain some freedom: Pedersen (2008, 155) and Thawngmung (2004) both outline how some local communities *elect* their local leaders, maintaining a highly localized politics: as a Thawngmung interviewee puts it, “peace and tranquility in our village depend on the type of headman (village chairman) we have” (2004, 28).¹⁰

The way power currently functions is clearly not perfectly homologous to its operation in pre-national times, but we do observe striking similarities in regards to the spatial diffusion of power, the charismatic role of local leaders, and communities’ self-reliance. The main differences reside in the way the military-state’s security and extraction technologies have penetrated the peripheries in linear, temporary lines (rather than constituting saturating, durable fields). CS appear to implicitly understand these lines, and carve out and then inhabit social space to accomplish their goals around, beneath, and beside them—all of which discourages contentious tactics. The following section will analyze how this occurs.

THE “FREEDOM” OF CS

Burmese citizens’ social needs, diffuse patronage economy requirements, and local official budgetary and skill shortfalls converge to make CS indispensable to the system’s maintenance, and hence “free”—or they at least retain leeway to operate.

First, given a declining economy and accelerating human security challenge, given that direct taxation of citizens is almost nonexistent at peripheries (Turnell 2008),¹¹ communities may have realized that the central military-state is both

¹⁰On the other hand, in politically contested areas (especially in ethnic zones), there can be little negotiation at all, and political control can be suffocating (Callahan 2007, 22).

¹¹Some claim that the regime “taxes” its citizens indirectly through expansionary monetary policy. However, this is not synonymous with taxation because no *negotiation* with the polity is involved—an agent of the state does not come to take cash. Rather, given the opacity of the economy, inflation “just happens,” and can be portrayed as a random event or the byproduct of being a “poor country.”

unwilling to provide for their needs and unwilling to even participate much in their lives. Citizens instead internalize the burden of managing their own challenges: US \$300 million annually in emigrant worker remittances flow into local economies, providing foreign exchange used for consumption and local credit schemes (Turnell et al. 2008, 11); community-based organizations have developed fee systems based on the relative wealth of their community members (Heidel 2006, 52–5), creating welfare systems in place of state taxation/redistribution mechanisms; religious organizations (both monasteries and churches—cf. Smith 2002, 26) mitigate health shocks and prevent dire poverty (Thawngmung 2004, 189). While the despotic power of the state crowds out particularly *assertive* associational life, there are still an estimated 270 indigenous NGOs and 214,000 community-based organizations (CBOs) operating in every corner of the country (Heidel 2006, 60), acting as an additional buffer.

Second, even the rents the generals themselves extract from society have a way of working their way back into local economies, supporting communities. John Badgley argues that

senior officers never forget from whence they come, and to a remarkable degree retain localism through wives and extended family in their values. What that means is: civil society generally rewards those medieval loyalties and values. *Sayadaus* [senior monks] capitalize on that sentiment by donations, the most successful fully understand their essential political meaning. Civil leaders, especially businesswomen and men, capture trust based on that; thus investment springs forth in surprising amounts despite an archaic banking system.¹²

Hence even military men derive symbolic or cultural returns from fields of prestige, obligation, and connection that are fueled and maintained by the flow of resources. CS constitute an essential node in this flow.

Third, peripheral state officials are squeezed from both above and below: in addition to reporting up anything that could be construed as a threat to state sovereignty, officials simultaneously are compelled to deliver—with few resources—a modicum of health and services to the citizens in their areas. Therefore, wanting to administer a functioning society (which they can exploit), all while avoiding collaboration with “subversive elements,” many officials on the peripheral levels accept assistance from *explicitly non-political* CS for delivery of social welfare and educational services.

In other situations, state agents (especially soldiers) *do* expropriate directly from citizens, but to call this “taxation” (Vicary 2010) reinstalls the idea of a Weberian bureaucratic state, where citizens could then make claims on the state based on the relationship built through the taxation mechanism (cf. Giddens 1987, 157). Instead, this must be read simply as expropriation: improvisational, extra-legal, and often violent.

¹²E-mail with author, September 4, 2008.

Within this structure, when couching messages in non-political terms (Heidel 2006, 38–9; Purcell 1999, 70–75;), CS can engage the state, enabling participation from both citizens and state apparatuses. Says a Yangon-based Myanmar NGO leader:

Don't appear from the outside, but from the community. You always have to deal with the authorities, convince them there is no danger.... Much depends on the connection with the commanders, personal relations.¹³

Regional civil administration officials, for instance, are often happy to receive support. Government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) have their own wills at peripheries, and often manifest net benefits to society. Even local military officials are sometimes willing to be partners. These representatives hold different goals than do the generals in Naypyidaw, and complex negotiations occur at the peripheries, defining often-implicit bargains. As the director of a different Yangon-based Myanmar NGO put it:

Most commanders don't get involved, so we just work with civilian ministries, who are happy for [the help]. These commanders put a blind eye on us. We inform them for the project, they say, "yes, just do." We offer to submit information, and they say: "We don't want it." [Alternatively], some local authorities have passion, and some even participate in the village committees. This is even happening with some township authorities.¹⁴

This statement describes a spectrum of peripheral-authority involvement: some authorities may desire only plausible deniability; others are actively involved. In the former case, local agents simultaneously deploy two contradictory desires: they want to ensure CS do not act politically, yet they also refuse to *know* what CS actually do. There is space underneath the radar. In the latter case, those who take an active interest can be enrolled in project outcomes, if not in all of the processes. While moving closer to the center necessitates increasing obfuscation, local organizations develop strategies (such as eliding details when communicating with the centers of power, see Khin 2008, 34) that ensure organizations have freedom when they are in the field.

CIVIL SOCIETY'S LIMITATIONS

There is often hope that burgeoning CS at the margins will utilize the space to begin mobilizing *politically* to challenge the state from below. This belief has

¹³Interview, Yangon, January 14, 2010.

¹⁴Interview, Yangon, January 14, 2010.

developed in part from a selective reading of history: following the '90s-era Eastern European democracy movements, faith has developed that civil society must contain both pluralistic values and democratic ambitions. While Burma's CS certainly do not conform to those "ideal" definitions (Mutebi 2005, 185–86), eschewing the oppositional role ascribed to them (Oxhorn 2007, 100–101), there remains hope that a will-to-democracy will spontaneously erupt within them imminently.

While civil-society-as-savior is a convenient argument, the sociopolitical realities in Burma are cause for pause. First, even if CS are progressive,¹⁵ their emergence in itself guarantees neither near-term nor eventual democratization (Alagappa 2004, 11). Bargains between CS and state are just as likely. Second, many civil societies in Burma (perhaps the vast majority) do not contain the political goals that external observers project upon them. As mentioned above, CS accept political domination in exchange for space to pursue coping agendas. Their lack of political expression comprises a spectrum: all the way from being democrats-in-hiding, unwilling to act without the proper conditions; to groups generally indifferent to "big-P"¹⁶ politics; to groups actively *opposed* to participating in political processes. (The rumor that many NGOs suggested that their staff *not* participate in 2007's protests, calling them futile, is telling. It also demonstrates the particular disciplinarity deployed by these NGOs, as they actively construct a different social-political identity for their members.) While it is difficult to discern the precise distribution of CS along this spectrum, we do know the crucible of state-civil society relations has (literally) thrown out many irreconcilable democrats: thousands have left the country to live in exile. Many who remained have been trained through recursive interactions to not think or act politically. This in turn changes the strategic interactions between the (now-stronger) state and the (now-weaker) civil society in the next "game" stage.

This results in obeisance on the part of perhaps the majority of grassroots groups. A CBO-network representative described it bluntly:

At the peripheral levels, there is no bargaining, no negotiation. Rather, [when talking to a commander] it is, "Sir, we would like to do these activities, are you going to allow it?" They never ask for anything.... It is completely up to [the commanders].¹⁷

Four other Burmese NGO leaders with extensive on-the-ground CBO networks independently concurred that this statement effectively describes most grassroots organizations operating today.¹⁸

¹⁵See Berman (1997) for the case of the reactionary, rather than progressive, Weimer Republic civil society.

¹⁶This expression emerged repeatedly in my interviews, denoting adversarial and/or party politics; "small-P" politics, alternatively, signified a strategy of slowly changing material and social conditions, preparing the populace for the point where "big-P" politics would be relevant again.

¹⁷Interview, Yangon, January 15, 2010.

¹⁸Interviews, Yangon, January 13–20, 2010.

Returning to Tilly, who asserts that civil society can hypothetically balance against the state, if CS never *express adversarial politics* (if social influence never translates into political power), they may never constrain state will. Therefore, while the bargains that exist between CS and peripheral state officials allow the political economy to sustain and reproduce itself, these bargains simultaneously undermine the impetus for social movements that would spur political change. Indeed, as symbiotic relationships continue to develop at peripheral levels, CS have fewer incentives to become adversarial and political: to the degree that CS supplant the state, challenges of the center are enervated. While these bargains seek, and may effect, better conditions for local societies (measured in lower degrees of extraction), they also result in political stasis in which elites and local societies remain separated, with extractive institutions, political domination, and patronage economies linking them together through the mediation of CS. This is regrettable not in itself but because CS mitigation cannot keep pace with the erosion of material conditions.

POLITICIZING CS THROUGH A POLITICS OF THE DAILY

I propose that a three-part political cycle, each part respectively led by what we can refer to as “political opposition,” “grassroots CS,” and “elite CS” may destabilize the current machine and lead to a political process that reshapes the machine itself. The process: (1) By structuring an alternative political discourse that enunciates an explicit break from “traditional” politics and that centers around socioeconomic idioms, opposition forces can begin to build a collective political consciousness. (2) Grassroots CS can translate this new narrative to constituents *and* begin to make gentle demands on the state for better governance. This can undermine current equilibria and compel a response. (3) Because the demands are gentle, they are unlikely to precipitate a crisis, but rather may create bargaining moments as the regime seeks new equilibria to ensure stability. At this point, advocates in elite-level CS who have been articulating technical-administrative policy solutions will become vital to allow the state to maneuver, improving conditions for the grassroots. At this point, the cycle either “settles” on a new normal or uses that new normal (and momentum generated from its creation) to begin again.

This basic model must be unpacked and challenged. Four problems are immediately evident. First, what begins the cycle? Where is this opposition and why can we assume they will advance “alternative” political claims? Second, will CS respond? Third, why will the regime in turn react with reform rather than through systematic and all-out assault on those making the demands? Finally, if we assume that all three steps hold, what happens then? Will this cycle become dynamically reinforcing, or will it settle into a new equilibrium that is improved materially, but perhaps less susceptible to *further* change?

A New Oppositional Politics?

First, opposition political groups might examine their own strategies in light of the vast CS activity outlined above. However, currently the opposition—the NLD and the “underground networks” that coordinate with exile groups—are largely ignoring CS and instead focusing political efforts on civil rights and procedural political agendas. Much of this derives from their political marginalization. From a high-point of activity during the 1990 elections, they have systematically been isolated, crushed, and undermined by the regime. Township offices shuttered, leaders jailed, supporters harassed, the NLD has been unable to conduct politics on the ground. This compelled a painful choice: NLD leader Suu Kyi saw value in remaining a continual symbolic reminder that there was something else in Burma besides the military’s version of history and the future,¹⁹ but the cost was a growing chasm between the people’s needs and opposition demands, as activists fled to the border or built networks inside that often remained insulated unto themselves.

Opposition groups have therefore found it difficult to hear what people want: without a political process it is difficult to reflect desires of constituents—to turn needs into policies. Therein lies an aporia: *without democracy we cannot know if people want democracy*, or more accurately: in what precise order (security, stability, food/shelter, right to assemble, right to vote) do people want things that they have reason to value? These together have led to a double-bind: not only has the opposition made a Faustian bargain (remaining inactive locally in exchange for remaining “legal” (Steinberg 2001a, 284), but also, lacking linkages inside Myanmar, it has become fundamentally externally oriented, looking outside for sources of strength (both symbolic and material).

This opposition has come to embody a paradoxically *apolitical politics*: moral indignation, trenchant critique of an abusive regime, but few proposed alternative policies—and none that reference the plight of a farmer or laborer. Indeed, opposition websites (NLD, NLD-LA, NCGUB) both rarely mention living conditions or propose alternative policies.²⁰ The oft-referenced

¹⁹Leela Gandhi (1996–1997) argues that Suu Kyi’s views might not be reconcilable with the necessary bargaining inherent in politics.

²⁰For the NCGUB, compare six statements on democracy (<http://www.ncgub.net/NCGUB/staticpages/index9d7e.html?page=kb-democracy>, accessed July 27, 2010) and nine statements on human rights (<http://www.ncgub.net/NCGUB/staticpages/index8ffa.html?page=kb-human-rights>, accessed July 27, 2010), against one on economy (<http://www.ncgub.net/NCGUB/staticpages/index8aaa.html?page=kb-economy>, accessed July 27, 2010), and one on environment (<http://www.ncgub.net/NCGUB/staticpages/index82d0.html?page=kb-environment>, accessed July 27, 2010). The NLD’s English statements never mention economics in 2009 or 2010: <http://www.burmalibrary.org/show.php?cat=2388&do=d&sl=0>, accessed July 27, 2010; one statement in 2008 links economic deterioration with politics: <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docsNLD/NLD-LA-Statement-may-25-eng.pdf>, accessed July 27, 2010. In a random sample of fifteen of the forty Burmese-language 2009 NLD statements, no messages explicitly linked livelihood challenges with the junta’s policies, or mentioned what the NLD would do differently.

Shwegondaing Declaration²¹ mentions *only* political and legal rights; this is problematic enough in itself, and is further exacerbated by the fact that the platform never describes how realization of those “rights” would have consequences for an average person. One can only conclude that the opposition’s true constituents are not those who live and struggle in Burma, but rather reside in Western parliaments, think tanks, and NGOs.

This politics flies in the face of the sociopolitical issues that demand opposition attention. For example, during my last Myanmar trip I visited a local NGO providing free health services. One particularly frail man, his body decimated by advanced-stage AIDS, had traveled for three hours from his village to receive treatment. But there was a problem: the law said he could not stay at the clinic overnight. With no money to commute each day, with no health services in his own village, and with no connections with the local authorities to stretch the rules, the man would simply have died. Luckily, the NGO negotiated with local authorities and organized a way for the man to stay locally. The NGO solved the *immediate* problem, saving the man’s life. However, the *enduring* problem—the “structural violence”—was not resolved. Three different potentially political issues exist here: health care was not available in the man’s village, he was so poor he could not afford transportation, and he was not allowed to travel freely. Yet the political opposition has not crafted messages that intervene in those three prosaic domains.

This is not to invert the NLD’s paradigm by endorsing socioeconomic “rights” *instead* of political ones. Rather it is to suggest that the daily struggle to survive in an impoverished and authoritarian country must be presented as a *sociopolitical* issue, with social and political solutions, in order to engage those struggling, in different ways, in villages, slums, or middle-class communities. By exploring and reflecting the specific places and stories of neglect that occur where the average person encounters—or *should encounter*—a field of governmentality (in this case, the state), politics is born.

It is possible that this politics may remain stillborn—even these alternative messages falling on deaf ears of people trained to see “the state” as irrevocably disconnected from their lives. But it is Burmese people’s sentiments themselves that suggest a politics of the daily might resonate. In a remarkable sociopolitical campaign outlined further below, the 88 Generation Student movement (88GS) elicited the views of Burmese lower and middle classes (peasants, workers, teachers, pastors, etc.). Called the Open Heart Campaign, writers addressed letters directly to Than Shwe, hoping to tell the junta with an “open heart” about life outside Naypyidaw’s palaces, how the state often chooses to exacerbate the hardships, and how the government could help. The letters (Aung 2008) convey Burmese people’s complex understandings of state power, brought to

²¹<http://burmadigest.info/2009/04/30/national-league-for-democracy-shwegondaing-declaration/>, accessed July 27, 2010

life through socioeconomic issues; of the 2,649 letters received, 54 percent were classified as socioeconomic in focus:

People, from all walks of life, point out barriers to a reasonable standard of living: the price rise in basic foods; the gap between income and necessary expenditures; high health care costs; poor education; low salaries for soldiers, police, public servants and pensioners; blackouts of electricity and the subsequent shortage of drinking water; and underdeveloped public transportation. (18)

More importantly, the letters also suggest²² that classic oppositional political messages elide the complex bargains with which people engage the state. Take, for instance, forced labor (FL), which is mentioned explicitly in 95 letters. While unequivocally a crime under “international law,” many Burmese may not always share this understanding. It is typically not FL *in itself* to which the letter writers are objecting: approximately only one-fourth of the letters interpret FL as abusive, objectionable, or illegitimate per se; strikingly, FL was only once mentioned explicitly as a “human rights” violation.²³ Most of the letters instead described FL as unfair in how it is *deployed* (e.g., Christian pastors complained that they, but not Buddhist monks, were subject to FL), and about the unfairness of FL given the deeper challenges of day-to-day life. Case 10 outlines this latter point succinctly:

I run a shop. When the shop is usually opened, the customers come. However, now, I am forced to labor, so I cannot always open my shop. I also was forced to give the money for that. These hinder my works. The present situation is bad for the poor. There is no job for the one who want to work.

FL here is embedded in a larger struggle to manage socioeconomic realities. Moreover, many subjects seem to present FL as a necessary evil, provided the state does its part by supplying resources (some examples: cases 82, 88), ends wasteful FL schemes (like the planting of *jatropha*—cases 89, 95), or is flexible to unique individual and collective challenges—not forcing the elderly or pregnant to labor, nor forcing labor during particularly bad economic times (cases 9, 40).

²²Textual analysis is only suggestive, given methodological challenges (including selection bias—as particularly upset or politically oriented people are more likely to write in), missing letters (only 400 of 2,700 were presented in the Aung report), and the difficulty in interpreting meaning across languages and cultures.

²³Coding was done by myself and cross-referenced with two research assistants; deviations were reconciled through discussion. Ultimately, we concluded that some letters were too ambiguous for coding, and that significant follow-up research is necessary to tease out more precise understandings of FL embedded in state-society relations.

This study illuminates how an un-contextualized political agenda may fail to connect with Burmese people. A campaign to end FL might signal to Burmese people an end to the meager social services (materials for infrastructure) that do exist. As such, peasants might oppose it, might ignore it, and/or might feel they are being manipulated by it. Perhaps this is (one reason) why many average citizens have found no ways to inhabit “traditional” oppositional politics based on “human rights,” procedural democracy, and “Rule of Law” (Prasse-Freeman 2011b). These messages do not reflect the perilous lives led by many at the margins; they do not reflect the recursive interactions over time that have conditioned subjects to expect little, and demand less, from the state; and finally, they do not tap into collective values or daily concerns. This not to insist on a rigid binary posing Western rights mentalities against static peasant moral economies (which Scott appears to establish 1976, 17, 25); indeed, there are lines shooting into these communities from urban elites or transnational activists who convey other idioms reflecting alternative political values. These idioms constitute additional percepts enveloped into sophisticated local moral realities, which, while mutable, congeal around a broader *habitus* derived from daily experiences and recursive interactions with various fields of power (of which state authority is only one). These interactions construct particular ways of being governed, which in turn structure obligations and animate bargains. These relationships and institutions cannot be easily classified, and much work remains to explore their precise nature and meanings in Burma’s peripheries and interstices.²⁴ For now the point remains that political messages that attempt to perform and then project an *entirely new* understanding of political subjectivities onto Burmese masses may discover that their subject-objects find the messages illegible. This, I contend, is the situation in which the NLD, and opposition generally, has found itself.

Another Opposition: Burma’s Emerging Politics of the Daily

How then to bridge these differences between oppositional political elites and so-called “average citizens”? The 88GS and other groups (youth movements, some monasteries in Burma’s Buddhist *sangha*) provide nascent models for such bridging.

Led by former political prisoners, many of whom were released in 2005, the 88GS group of approximately forty core members began in 2006 to engage citizens with small campaigns that both slowly built a political consciousness and demonstrated how to express that consciousness. Its respective and progressing Signature, White, Prayer, and Open Heart campaigns of 2006–07 demonstrated

²⁴This article has inadequate space to address the specific nuances of the political rationality of a politics of the daily, a task that will be taken up in ongoing research. See, for a beginning, Prasse-Freeman (2011b).

how a movement can be built by coaxing involvement of ordinary people, sustaining that involvement, and increasingly motivating people to act.

Knowing that it was too much to request that people immediately take explicit risks, 88GS members consciously began with small actions that were both non-threatening and anonymous. According to interviewees,²⁵ the group built upon the confidence and momentum in early activities' *non-failure*, eventually introducing bolder campaigns that would compel citizens to "show their face":

First we tried the Signature Campaign.... People could do it because no risk to them: there was no document with their personal information, just their signature.²⁶ Next was the White Campaign, which allowed people to be involved with little risk—they could tell the authorities, "We are just wearing a shirt, [it happens to be white]." But people were still afraid, because they were in public. But when they did not get arrested, this built their confidence.

The tactic of plausible deniability, above employed by commanders in regards to CS, is here utilized against the state in a different way: those "participating" could always feign ignorance if accosted by authorities: a shirt's color, the prayer act—these do not explicitly signify political actions, and could be painted as coincidences. In Burma, where the law is deployed as a tool of control (Prasse-Freeman 2010b), these kinds of political actions demonstrated a sophisticated politico-legal acumen: rather than giving the authorities the pretense to destroy the nascent movement at the outset, the 88GS gradually built momentum by remaining "legal." Moreover, by making its actions explicitly non-political, the 88GS utilized symbolic repertoires to deliver political messages to the broader public: both "everyone knew" what they were "really" doing, and yet no one was sure.

Evidence of the efficacy of this approach was borne out by the responses: the 88GS claimed 200,000 signatures. But it was the 88GS's Open Heart Campaign (OH) that constituted a truly noteworthy political action, regarding both its socio-economic focus and the type of engagement requested of participants. The fact that 2,689 letters made it to the 88GS (many more are assumed confiscated by authorities) shows people's willingness to engage in politics when the political idioms are grounded in everyday life. "They wanted to speak out [locally], but they could not. The people knew they might get in trouble, but because they knew they had done nothing wrong [they felt that writing the letters was worth the risk]."²⁷ Not able to contest power locally (as there was no tradition of raising demands), people saw the OH as a less confrontational politics—one of

²⁵Interview with three 88GS members, Mae Sot, January 7, 2010.

²⁶As there are no family names in Myanmar, a signature absent other identifying information is risk-free.

²⁷Interview, Mae Sot, January 7, 2010.

appeal, based on generating empathy—that could reach the central state and cascade back down to their own realities.

The OH did not have an opportunity to be taken further, however. Some 88GS interviewees actually retrospectively lamented the 2007 fuel de-subsidization (and the necessity for political protests in response), given it came just when the 88GS were starting to build a broader-based movement. The irony was that the 88GS had created the very political consciousness that precipitated the protests, actions that in turn eventually undermined the 88GS movement due to the arrest of the leaders. Indeed, though consistently excluded from breathless (and Orientalist) Western media accounts of the “Saffron Revolution,”²⁸ 88GS members led the first “walking protests” after the de-subsidization. (Even these first protests were brilliant politics: they took the quotidian act of walking to work and made it a political commentary on a callous regime’s neglect of people’s livelihoods.)

Despite the 88GS’s demise, their interventions have inspired other movements: Buddhist monks and youth groups are continuing to focus on similar socioeconomic idioms. Generation Wave, a loose collection of young activists, distributes pamphlets, makes music, and enacts clandestine graffiti campaigns about livelihood challenges. One pamphlet reads, “Water doesn’t come. No electricity during the [school] examination period. Fathers and mothers have been in economic crisis. The children haven’t got enough pocket money. Now let’s start a revolution.”²⁹ Monks—some under the All Burma Monks Alliance banner, some independently in local chapters—are developing a political consciousness focused mostly on material survival: “We always share the economic troubles: to students, ‘your education is not good, only [a] certificate—it doesn’t mean anything.’ To farmers: ‘in Thailand, they are very rich, they have freedom to sell [while you do not].’”³⁰ Translating and sharing political books, publishing pamphlets, and presenting the Buddha himself as a nascent democrat makes this particular civil society space ripe for further pedagogy (cf. also Jordt 2010).

Politicizing CS

With these particular monastic organizations we observe how groups initially focused on non-political tasks (religious service provision) phase-change into hybrid organizations that do politics *through* and *beneath the protection of* their non-political role. Will this be a common move, something that can spontaneously occur internally in many other CS?

It is unlikely. Whether CS aggregate local funds from below or redistribute patrons’ largesse from above, it appears that when these groups constitute

²⁸Burmese monks’ robes are maroon, not saffron....

²⁹January 7, 2010, interview and access of site <http://www.gwave-network.co.cc> for street graffiti (jpg also with author).

³⁰January 9, 2010, interview with exiled monks, Mae Sot.

themselves and begin to take on both obligation and dependents, there is a move away from the political and adversarial. This is not to argue that CS suppress otherwise politicized people; evidence above suggests that most Burmese are preoccupied with survival and trained to avoid “big-P” politics. That said, CS may stand as a buffer between the state and the masses, preventing abusive policies from affecting people, but simultaneously preventing real political demands from metastasizing into broad-based social movements. And yet, because both mass-based movements and traditional opposition politics have ended in imprisonment and enervation, citizen politicization must be channeled through the extant conduits of the CS, connecting potential demands with levers within the state bureaucracy.

Therefore, for CS to play this role, they need to make a *second* move: after the initial move away from politics (by establishing credibility as a non-political service provider), there would need to be a move *back*. As noted above, some monks have been able to do this, but monks can marshal their powerful religious role as cover (which itself has limits, as witnessed during the 2007 crackdown). Most other CS cannot, and hence may retain their role as acquiescent service providers.

Political opposition hence becomes essential, as a politics of the daily must be communicated more *broadly* (to people across the entire country), and *intentionally to CS*. By developing a central narrative surrounding daily struggles, opposition groups can build an oppositional repertoire, both mining the local challenges, but also transcending the local—allowing Burmese to see their struggles as shared. Political opposition hence must *reach down* to see the activities of CS, *interpret them* (imbuing the activities with political consequence), and then *project* these activities to citizens and back to CS. The resultant political consciousness can induce CS to deliver myriad demands (gentle ones, balancing against opposition rhetoric) at different levels of the state, thereby encompassing a sustained project rather than a set of isolated anomalies.

If these gentle demands emerge from thousands of different places, through multiple different idioms (Buddhist, human security, moral, pragmatic, etc.), the state may see them as symptomatic of systemic problems in Burma. This barrage can undermine the current equilibrium, forcing the state to respond with systemic reform (more on this below).

Mass rallies will not be allowed by the regime, but there are alternative ways to communicate this politics—canvassing, outreach, guerilla art, newspapers/periodicals,³¹ radio, and Internet. Despite its use by external agencies such as Democratic Voice of Burma and Voice of America, the radio still contains untapped potential: a program called “Everyday Burmese Lives” could note the real struggles of Burmese people, outline the ways that these struggles

³¹Cf. Kyaw (2009) on Myanmar’s robust print culture and the industry’s surprising ability to evade capture.

constitute governance failures on the part of the state, and then follow up with concrete policies in which an elected opposition would do things differently: increase access to credit for farmers, allow community ownership of forests, make revenues of oil and gas projects transparent with proceeds funneled to health and education, etc.³²

This “politics of the daily” can simultaneously address ethnic and sectarian factionalism by recognizing the shared humanity of all in Burma: it can be used as a point of departure to mitigate and begin to resolve the contentious issues of cultural difference, historical animosity, and differential resource allocation and distribution amongst the ethnic and religious groups. This would not be to make *equivalent* all abuses suffered by the different peoples of Burma. Rather, the discourse of shared challenge and daily struggle can provide a forum for recognizing and learning about the different challenges that different groups have faced, while also allowing these peoples of diverse backgrounds to converse on a common civic identity.

Will CS Listen?

Returning to the second question posed above: Why will CS respond to these political messages? Indeed, the middle part of this paper was devoted to explaining the bargains made between CS and state—how can we assume CS will risk undermining these deals? We cannot, and hence the task would become twofold: first, to begin implicitly challenging CS, imbuing these associations with a new way of seeing conditions and their potential role in upending the current equilibrium. Second, to demonstrate that participants can pursue this strategy without ending up in Insein prison.

Political messages must insist that CS process and respond to the politics of their own local situations. CS must be asked to ask themselves, “Whose responsibility is it to deliver health services?” “What is our relationship with the state?” CS must be asked, “Can this system maintain without your work? If not, then you have a responsibility to use that as leverage.” The very action of asking these questions taps into a community’s normative groundings—its collective values of justice, fairness, decency, the proper relationship between society and state—and insists that citizens put these values into politics (Brockett 1994, 120–24). From there a tactical discussion could emerge: “How can you begin pushing for better state involvement while retaining the ability to deliver crucial services?”

It is here that the “democracy” instantiated in 2011 can provide space for such political processes. A model example emerged around the election: a Yangon NGO used the campaign period as an opportunity to hold civic education sessions for local CBOs; when authorities inquired about the content of the sessions, NGO members replied that it was their *responsibility* to educate the

³²A serial fictional program could address similar issues, but filter these issues through a set of characters with whom listeners could emotively identify.

people about the democracy the authorities *themselves* endorsed.³³ (Here we have a final version of the recurring “plausible deniability” theme: the NGO *knows* the authorities find these sessions anathema, but traps the state in its own endorsement of “disciplined democracy.”) It must be added that the group made no pretense that the new government had suddenly transformed political subjectivity, turning Burmese into full “rights-bearing” subjects; the NGO rather encouraged citizens to know their *ostensible* rights. I read this as mining the gap between “rights” and reality, thereby planting seeds for a growing consciousness and evolving political subjectivity. The very discussion constitutes a victory in that regard by saying “you may not have ‘rights,’ but you have the opportunity to be involved in politics.”

Such an approach is certainly not entirely without risk, but every additional entrant lowers the barrier for the next. Hence, disparate and discrete groups can *create* and stimulate reinforcing mini-political cycles: small enough to not constitute a threat, substantive enough to upend existing bargains. And with a dynamic, endogenous energy that drives the next mini-break of current status quo.

Reform through Advocacy

Throughout its history, the military-state has crushed opposition when it can but has also been willing to evolve when necessary. Evolution is more likely when a painless move is available. Because CS demands will be both diffuse and gentle, they are unlikely to precipitate a crisis (and hence a violent response). Rather they may produce moments of compromise as the regime seeks a new balance to ensure stability. At this point, elite-level CS advocates who have been articulating technical-administrative policy solutions will become vital to the cycle.

Sometimes called the Third Force (TF)—putatively rejecting both opposition and military politics—many elite NGOs have developed trust and even influence with authorities. These groups, comprised of business leaders, academics, and former political activists weary of deadlock, not only are able to offer more resources in exchange for a modicum of government capitulation (measured in policy change or state resources committed), but also are able to tap alternative sources of influence. The obvious sources are international donors, but perhaps more common are their own upper-class connections: many of the powerful NGOs are run by former military members, middle-class businesspeople, or members of elite families (recall Badgley’s observation about these linkages, above). These actors know the right people to call; more fundamentally, they all speak a similar upper-class language. Said one elite-NGO founder: “My cousin is the head of [another NGO]. There are connections between elite families at top levels. The groups on the ground are of a different social class.”³⁴ These elite

³³Interview, Yangon, January 14, 2010.

³⁴Interview, telephone, April 15, 2010.

groups are able to observe particularly successful strategies on the ground, refining their approaches and models based on these data, giving them a unique credibility to then advocate to the government.

In fact, however mutually contemptuous,³⁵ the established opposition and the TF are interdependent: on the one hand, the opposition *benefits* from the TF's advocacy, as reforms present alternative governance avenues, driving wedges into the state apparatus. For its part, the TF accesses the military leaders and pushes forward limited reforms *only* because the opposition exists to highlight the military-state's failures and abuses. For example, Myanmar Egress, the most influential of the TF organizations, gained much of its credibility with the regime by predicting the 2007 protests: as the regime de-subsidized fuel, Egress economists warned their contacts in the military that this would likely lead to a protest. After the state ignored this advice and protests materialized, Egress members reported that state members at the highest levels—"perhaps even Number 1"—began requesting input from Egress.³⁶ To the extent that the elite CS do not recognize the importance of the opposition, they may undermine their own ability to achieve reform.

There are risks in the TF, though. Promulgating a different mechanism for change, the TF subtly asserts that the entire oppositional political project should be abandoned and that a broad civil society sector (comprised of grassroots and elite groups) should fill the void, collaborating with the state. This is short-sighted. The size and rapacity of the regime will likely continue to stifle economic activities led by entrepreneurs, the state's regressive policies (from military spending to monetary expansion) undermining grassroots CS gains. A likely outcome of this approach is not amelioration led by CS, but instead authoritarian neoliberalism, where the military state "privatizes" the spoils of the state, patrons become obscenely wealthy, land is appropriated from peasants and given to agribusinesses, traditional skills are lost as workers are forced to toil in low-skilled manufacturing, the environment gets destroyed in the process, and CS are left to fight for scraps and help the masses cope.

The other risk is that such a system will produce CS networks that are overly hierarchical, slavish to the bureaucratic procedures that groups like the United Nations implement, or parasitic on the resources that these elite groups provide. Interviewees have suggested that this is already becoming the case: larger civil societies can mimic the authoritarian forms of military rule, dominating local groups or creating their own corporatist on-the-ground groups that do not reflect citizen will. Instead of creating horizontal networks of service providers, international and large Burmese NGOs alike can create hierarchal, vertical networks that are managed at the center and radiate outwards, creating hub-and-spoke systems where the spokes are only connected to the hub, not

³⁵See "The 'Third Force' in Burmese Politics," *Irrawaddy Magazine*, April 30, 2008.

³⁶Interview, January 16, 2010. "Number 1" refers to senior general Than Shwe.

to one another.³⁷ Ironically, this is almost identical to the way that the military-state administers its commanders, and hence its subjects. Therefore, the Burmese TF can continue to push for reforms, but must reconceptualize its role to include support for authentic grassroots groups as well, and understand the importance of the opposition.

CONCLUSION

Finally, against the dominance in discourse about what the West “should do” about Burma, encapsulated by the still-raging debate over sanctions (Prasse-Freeman 2011a), the role of external actors has been intentionally excluded from this analysis; the West’s generally counterproductive effects are deferred to other work.³⁸ But to the extent the “international community” will play a role, this analysis suggests that resources and energies should be devoted to both strengthening the range of *opposition* voices and supporting CS, from the *grassroots* to the *policy advocates*. Each must play a role, reinforcing the others, to upend the set of bargains currently making lives miserable for millions of Burmese.

Indeed, the current apparent political liberalization in Myanmar provides an ideal opportunity for the politics of the daily to be implemented. If the changes appear substantive and irreversible, civil society can play an essential role in voicing, asserting, and articulating social needs and values to ensure they are incorporated. If they are cynical half-measures, CS can impel new political change cycles as outlined above.

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³⁷Interview, telephone, April 15, 2010.

³⁸The question of external influence is taken up in an ethnography of the transnational “Free Burma” movement, outlined here: <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/cchrp/hrsm/projects/burmasurvey.php> (accessed August 1, 2011).

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