Myanmar’s tumultuous post-colonial history has been characterized by decades of direct and indirect military rule and corresponding political mobilizations that have ranged from armed ethnic and ideological insurgencies to mass protests, student movements, and non-violent pro-democracy uprisings. The nationalization and mismanagement of the economy, the militarization of the state, political surveillance and oppression, and the closure of universities are all factors that have triggered the flight from Burma of millions of Burmese. Several main waves of exit can be distinguished, following major political events—(1) the 1962 military coup; (2) the installation of direct rule by the Burma Socialist Programme Party in 1974 and the U Thant funeral crisis; (3) the 1988 mass uprisings; and (4) the 2007 “Saffron Revolution” protests, respectively. The largest
exodus occurred in the period from late 1988 until after the 1990 elections (held on 27 May 1990), when the military government indefinitely delayed the transfer of power to the elected opposition. The Burmese diaspora that formed as the result of these movements was comprised mostly of people who had fled repression and conflict, but it also included individuals who had left Burma for educational and professional purposes.

As a prerequisite to studying the nature of Burmese political activism and underlying domestic, transnational and international linkages, the concepts of “diaspora” and “political exiles” need to be revisited. The central defining feature of a diaspora consists in a shared identity that unites people living dispersed in transnational spaces (Soekefield 2006, p. 280) and in transnational “imagined communities” (Anderson 2001).

Political exiles “engage in political activity, directed against the policies of a home regime, the home regime itself or the political system as a whole, and aimed at creating circumstances favourable to their return” (Shain 1989, p. 15). Silenced at home, exiles exit in order to voice their discontent, but also struggle to return home, at least initially (Ma 1993). The central position of threat in the literature on exile and diaspora is paralleled in social movement theory by threat, opportunity, and the cost of contention (Goldstone and Tilly 2004, p. 179f).

Compared to classical diasporas, the Burmese diaspora of up to four millions in Thailand and smaller communities across the rest of the world is relatively large. It can be divided into two groups: one group consists of people who have become well established (perhaps over a long period) in a host country; the other includes the many unskilled and semi-skilled Burmese migrants who work (often illegally) in countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, India, and Singapore, as well as the refugees who live in official refugee camps or in other, unofficial, dwellings in those same countries and Bangladesh. These migrants and refugees form by far the largest segment of the diverse Burmese diaspora and are thus most noticeable to their respective host countries. Despite the size of the Burmese diaspora, it has possessed neither economic power vis-à-vis the home government nor has it generated real political cleavages in host countries (Zaw Oo 2006).

The first group mentioned above can be described as “rooted cosmopolitans”—that is, people who are nationally based both in their host and home countries while simultaneously engaging in transnational activities (Tarrow 2004; Della Porta and Tarrow 2005). Rooted cosmopolitans share “long-distance nationalism”, a nationalism that no longer depends on territorial location in a home country (Anderson 2001, p. 43.). Typically, they are well-established professionals, academics, or journalists in host countries; they are not necessarily politically active, but may be easily mobilized. Owing to their education and familiarity with the respective host countries, such rooted cosmopolitans may function as excellent intermediaries between their home country’s political opposition or marginalized groups and the international system.

Although, broadly speaking, the Burmese diaspora comprises all Burmese abroad, be they professionals, migrant workers, refugees, asylum seekers, or political exiles, this chapter focuses primarily on the small politically-active subset of the diaspora—the political exiles who led a transnational pro-democracy movement that sustained challenges against the powerful military regime for over twenty years.

The political exiles identified for this study met at least one of three criteria: first, the reason for their flight from Burma was fear of reprisal or experience of realized reprisal for expressing political opinions or participating in political activities; second, anticipation of acute threats to their safety should they go back to Burma prevented a return from exile; and third, they had participated in political activity against military rule in Burma while abroad.

**BURMESE OPPOSITION EXILES IN NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES, 1988–2008**

The 1988 uprisings against military dictatorship and economic mismanagement marked a watershed in Burmese political history and the beginning of the opposition movement exiled in Thailand, India, and Western countries. Military suppression of the nation-wide uprisings triggered an exodus of thousands of protestors to border areas controlled by armed ethnic nationality movements, or to neighbouring countries. Thus, the political opposition was effectively divided into those who remained in Burma, either in prison or underground, and those living outside the country, who were beyond Burmese government control and could engage in political action more openly but who were limited by constraints imposed by their respective hosts.

Prominent members of the diaspora, such as U Nu’s daughter Daw Than Than Nu in New Delhi, offered support to activists when they fled...
to neighbouring countries. Later, informal contacts and ties between the members of the diaspora and fleeing activists laid the foundation for an emerging transnational movement network, in which members of the diaspora soon became vital nodes. For instance, individuals like Maureen Aung-Thwin, director of the Open Society Institute’s Burma Project, or Dr Zarni, founder of the Free Burma Coalition in the United States, became active after 1988 and helped to publicize and establish the nascent Burmese movement abroad.

Student leaders and prominent individuals founded numerous social movement organizations (SMOs) that, in combination, made up the multi-faceted collective of the Burmese pro-democracy movement. Thailand and India became the countries where most activist organizations (and refugees) were based.

The exiled movement is here conceptualized as a network encompassing the 1988 activists, veteran politicians and 1990 members of parliament elect, the armed ethnic nationality movements (which had mostly been founded in the 1940s and 1950s), some of the politically-active Burmese diaspora or “rooted cosmopolitans” in Western countries, and some of the refugees who had become politicized abroad. Another “generation” of political activists went into exile after the 2007 protests, but these simply shifted their location and continued their activities from abroad, without founding new organizations or attracting new members; Generation Wave is one example.

Despite the movement’s heterogeneity, overarching political objectives were expressed publicly as:

- the establishment of a genuine federal union;
- the abolition of all types of dictatorship;
- the promotion of democratic governance; and
- the guarantee of human rights, political equality, and ethnic self-determination.

Privately though, political agendas diverged substantially, especially between armed ethnic leaders and Burman student activists, who had experienced vastly different realities.

Urban, educated, and predominantly ethnic Burmans came to dominate the movement in exile. The noticeable social stratification among its leaders derived from the fact that the movement emerged from the traditionally strongly-politicized student unions. The few ethnic-nationality members of the student and member of parliament organizations hence adhered to the mainstream democratic agenda, rather than explicitly propagating ethnic-nationality causes.

In contrast with exiles abroad, many of the influential ethnic-nationality leaders of opposition groups inside Burma had spent only their university years in cities, either Rangoon or Mandalay, and otherwise lived in their respective communities in remote areas. These differences in experience also conditioned the strategic orientation of different groups within the opposition movement on the question of using armed resistance versus non-violence. The ethnic nationality movements continued armed resistance against the Myanmar military while their political wings actively participated in mainstream SMOs. The Burman organizations, on the other hand, adhered mainly to non-violence, with the notable exception of the All Burma Students’ Democratic Front (ABSDF) student army (formed in 1988) and the small group Vigorous Burmese Student Warriors. The ABSDF split into two groups precisely due to conflicts over the non-violence paradigm. The student-based Democratic Party for a New Society (DPNS) did not join but supported armed resistance.

In exile, activists pursued various strategies to effect systemic change in Myanmar by creating pressure on the military regime both from within the country and from the international community. Key strategies included the lobbying of foreign governments and multilateral agencies to exert pressure on the military government, campaigns against human rights violations, boycotts of companies investing in Myanmar, and channelling training and other resources to activists inside the country.

Some SMOs also focused on giving political education to refugees and migrants, while publicizing their plight, both in their home and host countries. The majority of internationally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees, and migrants belonged to the uneducated, rural population and were unlikely to join SMOs, but their mere existence and experiences were living proof of the regime’s crimes, and gave activists further useful evidence for advocacy.

Opportunities and the Shift in Norms at Cold War End

Following the 1988 uprisings, the historic changes brought by the end of the Cold War—in terms of norms, resources, and the re-balancing of powers—had a significant influence on the overall trajectory of the
exiled opposition movement. In particular, an ideological shift towards normative-idealist discourses of democracy, non-violence, human rights, and the rights of ethnic minorities and of women, played a pivotal role in framing the opposition as a “pro-democracy movement”. Western policy instruments that promoted democratization, acting in tandem with new resources available to non-state actors pursuing these agendas, sustained the Burmese movement’s exceptionally long tenure of over twenty years (Tabori 1972, p. 38).

Transnational advocacy networks (TANs) were instrumental in internationalizing the Burmese cause and gathering worldwide support. TANs offer a major advantage: they can bypass a home government and amplify demands internationally until these demands echo back into the domestic arena. This triangular “boomerang effect” occurs when domestic actors convince third-party states and other international allies to pressure the activists’ home government (Keck and Sikkink 1997, p. 12; Klotz 1995). The use of transnational advocacy networks implies that activists perceive domestic political opportunity structures as closed, but international opportunities as open.

Burmese activists swiftly employed the political opportunities created by the increased attention being given to human rights and democracy, especially since the Myanmar government’s failure to respect human and civil rights provided ammunition for the movement, enabling it to generate international criticism and put pressure on the regime. The documentation of actual and structural violence, as well as, to a lesser extent, of psychological consequences, served for constructing images of injustice in order to mobilize support from international audiences. Activists framed grievances suffered in the home or neighbouring host countries in ways that resonated with their distant (mainly Western) target audiences, stressing the injustice, arbitrariness, and brutality of repression. Indeed, human rights became “the mother of all successful transnational framing efforts” (McCarthy 1997, p. 246). Consequently, SMOs that strongly embedded their agendas in this frame (for instance, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (rights of political prisoners); the Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC) and the Euro-Burma Office (ethnic minority rights); and the Women’s League of Burma (women’s rights)) attracted vital resources, including international endorsements, access to new political platforms, and training programmes.

Similarly, the Gandhi-inspired non-violent, Buddhist stance of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi matched the new zeitgeist at a time of peaceful revolutions and the lifting of the Iron Curtain, earning her the 1991 Nobel Prize for Peace. Charismatic leaders who appeal to both domestic and external audiences tend to play a pivotal role in “marketing” social movements (Bob 2005, p. 46; Brooten 2005). Aung San Suu Kyi rose to international prominence and came to embody the democratic arm of the Burmese opposition, while, in the absence of an overarching leader of their own, most of the diverse ethnic nationalities rallied behind her (at least for a time). The emergence of such an iconic opposition leader, however, further polarized—until now—the portrayal of conflict as being a simple struggle between Aung San Suu Kyi and the military, and between democracy and authoritarianism, while armed ethnic movements took a back seat.

In countries where the emphasis on human rights and democracy alienated ruling elites, activists stressed Myanmar’s instability and its deleterious effects on human, non-traditional, conventional security and, not least, on economic stability in the region.

The movement’s need for new resources was not the only reason behind its search for external assistance; historical and identity-related factors were also involved, but these are beyond the scope of this chapter.

**Resources and Donors**

The new resources that the movement obtained included access to networks and to important policy-makers as well as funding. Transnational advocacy networks played a pivotal role in enabling Burmese activists to convince most Western countries to impose sanctions on the Myanmar government, while extending financial, moral, and diplomatic support to activists. Some SMOs appropriated existing solidarity networks; for example, the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU) linked up with international student movements, the Federation of Trade Unions-Burma (FTUB) with the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), while the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) and the Members of Parliament Union (MPU) linked up with regional and global parliamentarians’ networks, such as the International Parliamentary Union. The 1990 members of parliament elect, for instance, lobbied the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the European Parliament, and the Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus of the Association of Southeast Asian
Nations for parliamentary action. Over time, a sophisticated transnational pro-democracy movement emerged in both neighbouring and Western countries. As the mobilization of tangible and intangible resources provided the movement’s lifeline, funding became a core concern. Donor constraints and funding flows therefore began to bear heavily on the movement’s leadership, cohesion, strategies, and overall trajectory.

The movement’s principal donors of funds, training, and travel grants were the American National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the Soros Foundation’s Open Society Institute (OSI), and the International Republican Institute (IRI), but there were also many other significant donors.7

Major governmental donors (principally the development agencies but also the foreign ministries) included the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA), Sweden (SIDA), and the Netherlands’ National Committee for International Cooperation and Sustainable Development (NCDO). In contrast, and despite the presence of vocal advocacy groups, the British and Australian governments gave humanitarian assistance to Myanmar but no resources to the opposition-in-exile. Likewise, no resources came from Southern Europe or France.

Two principal donors, NED and OSI, took a lead in the Burma Donors Forum (BDF), a coordinating body for the movement’s core donors that met periodically. The BDF membership did not include countries outside North America and Europe. The organization lacked definitions to assess whether a potential grantee organization was “committed to democratic development” or “working towards democracy”.8 In other words, in the absence of clear criteria, the process of selecting recipient organizations was left to the discretion of the respective donor organizations and the few decision-making individuals therein.

However, the multiple agendas of the diverse supporters strongly impacted the movement’s priorities, strategies, and overall direction (Duell 2011). In particular, discourse about democracy, ideological rifts over non-violence versus armed struggle, and discussion over whether to support sanctions or favour engagement with the Myanmar government were all issues that provoked disagreement. Competition for funding and the broader politics of resource distribution within transnational advocacy networks fuelled the existing tendency for factionalism and splintering. Finally, disunity and conflict among the various pro-democracy groups became an overarching characteristic of the entire movement (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007).

THE ONSET OF POLITICAL CHANGE

By the mid-2000s, a process of self-reflection was well under way among prominent exiled activists. They criticized the movement’s policies of exclusion and overprotection, its lack of freedom of expression, transparency, accountability and gender equality; they also pointed at burnt-out elders who clung to their positions for reasons of livelihood or identity, but who blocked younger leaders (Aung Naing Oo 2002; Dictatorwatch 2006). Allegedly, exiled dissidents, in-country opposition, and even some Western and Asian governments, practised political orthodoxy in much the same way as the Myanmar regime (Steinberg 2010, p. 9). Repeated calls were made for an open debate, honest assessment of failures, constructive criticism, and general discipline in place of the usual “highly polarized emotions and often slanderous attacks”.9 Other exiles, however, cautioned that self-criticism would undermine the unity of the movement and embolden the regime (Htet Aung Kyaw 2008). In short, activists grappled with implementing within their own ranks the very ideals they were striving for—democratic rights and practices. They were compelled to do so because movements striving for democracy in their home country are particularly likely to be scrutinized for (any lack of) democracy within their own organizations (Ma 1993, p. 379). Frustration with Myanmar’s political stalemate increased in January 2007 when China and Russia blocked—with a historic double veto—a discussion in the UN Security Council of Myanmar’s political repression and human rights violations. Exiles felt that another mass movement was necessary.

Inside the country, prominent dissident “students” of 1988, including Paw Oo Htun (alias Min Ko Naing), Ko Ko Gyi, Htay Kywe, Pone Cho, and Min Zeya, as well as students arrested in the 1996 and 1999 protests, were released in the mid-2000s.10 They formed the “88 Generation Students” group, a movement deliberately without formal leadership or organizational structure in order to minimize repression from the authorities. In 2006, the group reaffirmed Aung San Suu Kyi’s leadership qualities as “the one person that can bring about reconciliation and lead us into a new, democratic future” (Lintner 2007, p. 78). Despite re-arrest
on several occasions, 88 Generation Students group leaders succeeded in broadening and strengthening the in-country opposition’s informal connection with local civil society organizations, lawyers, journalists, and the intelligentsia (Min Zin 2010).

From late 2006 on, the 88 Generation Students group initiated some of the most significant acts of political defiance since 1988, such as the “White Expression Campaign”, during which supporters dressed in white, the symbol of Burma’s many martyrs, to demand the release of political prisoners. The “Multiple Religious Prayer Campaign” sent worshippers dressed in white to Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, and Muslim holy sites. During the “Signature Campaign”, 535,580 signatures demanding the immediate release of political prisoners and the initiation of genuine national reconciliation were collected and sent to the Burmese government and the UN headquarters in New York. This was followed by the “Open Heart Campaign”, when over 25,000 letters expressing hardship and grievances were collected and sent to Senior General Than Shwe in January 2007, and the “Sunday White Campaign”, when supporters dressed in white visited families of political prisoners on Sundays during April 2007 (88 Generation Students 2008). In addition, remnants of the communist underground provided a key network for mobilizing participants for political action. Activists inside the country also downloaded information from the Internet and received illegal publications from the exiles (for example, material published by the ABSDF); nonetheless, the flow of information was much stronger towards the exiles outside Myanmar than into the country.

Some individuals from the younger “2007 Generation” received training in community organization, political defiance, the use of Internet communications technology, and capacity-building from exile groups. Others were trained not by exiles but in the American Centre and the British Council in Yangon. However, it seems that only individuals who were already putative leaders succeeded in receiving additional training. The “Saffron Revolution” demonstrations between 19 August and early November 2007 became the next watershed in terms of mass mobilization against the regime. Burmese activists inside and outside the country have since claimed responsibility for preparing the ground for the uprising. People interviewed inside the country tended to downplay the role of the exiles. Some observers consider the 2007 protests as unplanned, as a cycle of contention generated at home, with very limited involvement of exiled activists and other external players (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2008, p. 141; Selth 2008, p. 284). Exiles, on the contrary, argue that the clandestine nature of training and other activities prevented people on the inside from realizing the scale of assistance given by exiles.

Such ambiguity regarding the role of exiles in domestic political contention is symptomatic of the difficulty of assessing the diaspora’s contribution to ending the military dictatorship. It seems that neither activists in exile nor activists at home are ready to objectively assess the results and achievements of over twenty years of Burmese transnational activism.

**Mobilization of Civil Society During the Saffron Revolution and Cyclone Nargis**

Although the Saffron Revolution failed to bring about political change, it nonetheless saw a new generation of activists come to the fore. The year 2007 was an eye-opener for the younger generation, who had not experienced the events of 1988. Discouraged from engaging in politics by their parents, this generation was considered by some to be neither interested in, nor informed about, politics (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2004). Nonetheless, “Generation Wave” and other groups emerged during that year. They did not join established political parties but engaged in political action, and continued to do so even after the military crackdown on the protests. As in 1988, there was not one protest leadership but many small groups led by various activists according to participants interviewed.

A number of networks linking civil society and political groups emerged or were revived during the events of 2007, and these were further strengthened during the response to Cyclone Nargis in May 2008. The unparalleled damage caused by the natural disaster was severely aggravated by weeks of delay on the part of the regime followed by arbitrary distribution of international aid. The absence of immediate help from the government catalyzed a strong response from youth, civil society, and opposition groups to mobilize charity drives for the affected areas. This response opened up space for humanitarian assistance, which led to an increasing number of local and international organizations becoming active.

The killing of at least dozens (but possibly hundreds) of Buddhist monks
and unarmed protestors in 2007,\(^{18}\) and the refusal of humanitarian aid that could have saved thousands of lives in 2008, demonstrated dramatically the regime’s intransigence and disregard for the population. International condemnation, including from Asian states usually reluctant to “interfere in internal affairs”, further reduced the military’s diminished legitimacy.

2008 Election Announcement Divides Regime Opponents

In February 2008, the regime announced that there would be a referendum on a new constitution and that general elections would be held. The referendum on the constitution was held according to plan on 10 May 2008, the government showing total disregard of the destruction wreaked by Cyclone Nargis only eight days before (Jagan 2008), not to mention of demonstrations that had been held in several cities in April 2008.

The prospect that the government planned to hold elections effectively split the opposition movement both inside Myanmar and in exile into pro- and anti-elections camps. Various exile groups began anti-election campaigns in early 2009.\(^ {19}\) Groups such as the NCGUB, which had primarily engaged in lobbying foreign countries while rarely experiencing the realities in the country, opposed the elections. Conversely, groups such as the Ethnic Nationalities Council that were in touch with people at the grassroots level inside the country or at the borders saw the elections—however flawed—as the first prospect for change in decades. Keenly aware of the people’s daily struggle, these groups worked towards seizing this opportunity.

Within Myanmar, the National League for Democracy (NLD) announced it would boycott the 2010 elections, and eventually those NLD members willing to stand for election formed a new party, the National Democratic Force (NDF).

The multi-party elections in November 2010 fell short of international standards in terms of free and fair process and were highly criticized by exiles. However, the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi a week later and the inauguration of the new administration in March 2011 triggered a flurry of visits by high-profile foreigners. The influx of international journalists as well as other new international players, and, later, the relaxing of media censorship, all offered opportunities for activists to regroup. President Thein Sein announced a programme of reform in his inaugural address on 30 March 2011, but for many exiles the reforms only gained credibility with the by-elections that were held in April the following year.

Could Exiles Return Without Legal Guarantees or Binding Policies?

In August 2011 at an economic forum, and again in May 2012, President Thein Sein publicly invited exiles who had not committed “serious crimes” to return to the country. Inviting regime critics back could have been motivated by the desire to mitigate further criticism while also using the well-educated members of the Burmese diaspora as an asset in dealing with the challenges that would come with moves to transform Myanmar. In any case, no further explanations, formal procedures, or laws were issued and it was left to individual exiles and Myanmar embassies in the respective countries to proceed. Moreover, instead of introducing a nation-wide policy applicable to all exiles wishing to return, the central government delegated responsibility for returnees to the new regional governments, which were to decide on a case-by-case basis (Mizzima 2011).

A few prominent exiles visited during 2011—for instance, members of the Chiangmai-based Vahu Development Institute group and Shan exile Harn Yawnghe—but without making permanent arrangements or bringing their families along (Sai Zom Hseng 2011; Murayama 2011). The arrest in August 2012 of a returning lawyer who had defended NLD members in 2007 was taken by the diaspora as an indication that security for returnee exiles was not guaranteed (Zarni Mann 2012).

In September 2012 the president’s office published online a list of some two thousand Burmese and foreign activists, journalists, scholars, diplomats, UN staff, and others whose names were to be removed from the immigration blacklist.\(^ {20}\) However, over four thousand names remained on the blacklist, which also included Burmese who are prevented from leaving the country. The government imposed a one-year travel ban on former political prisoners before it would issue them with passports (Weng 2012). In addition, some returning exiles had to sign a five-point statement to give assurance that they would refrain from political activities (Sai Zom Hseng 2011).

In general, the lack of systematic, transparent policies applied to exiles and in-country activists alike.\(^ {21}\) The 88 Generation Students group, for instance, was not registered as a group at all, and therefore needed the assistance of registered local NGOs to hold training programs funded by third parties.\(^ {22}\) The best-known student organization, the ABFSU, did not even maintain membership lists or cards, since university rules
stipulate that students must not be part of any organization. The ABFSU complained about being watched by the authorities, and campaigned to be given legal status and for the passing of a new university law to replace the law of 1917. In 2012, NGOs were still required to register under the 1988 Law relating to Forming of Organizations, which meant fees and lengthy registration processes at several administrative levels for all local and international organizations.

In the meantime, President Thein Sein’s verbal invitations did not translate into legal assurances, and the absence of an official amnesty discouraged the majority of exiles from returning home permanently. In the enduring legal limbo, members of the Asia-based diaspora found it unproblematic to commute to Myanmar, whereas many members of the diaspora in Western countries resolved to undertake fewer visits and otherwise engage in long-distance politics towards their homeland. However, all encountered similar obstacles in considering whether or not to settle back home after decades abroad, including the risk of giving up secure careers, incomes, and homes that could not be matched by opportunities, least of all salaries, in Myanmar. Families also considered the dearth of international schools for their children, who had never attended classes given in the Burmese language.

THE ROLE OF EXILED ACTIVISTS IN THE POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION

Previously, exiles filled the crucial role of intermediaries for relaying political messages from imprisoned leaders to the exiled movement and the outside world, and vice versa, and also acted as brokers between foreign donors and in-country activists. Various interlocutors became important channels through which transnational and international players learned about the opposition movement inside the country. In the process, power inequalities between Burmese exiles on the one hand and their donors, coalition and network partners within transnational advocacy networks in the global North on the other, were reproduced to some extent in interactions between Burmese exiled and domestic activists. With the opening of political space in Myanmar, including increased freedom for the media and improved access to the government, exiles may only play this role a little longer, until local activists have acquired similar skills and connections and have no further need of their help.

Exiles watched closely the events that unfolded after the 2010 elections, and especially the authorities’ treatment of different social movement organizations, political parties, and protesters. They approached the government through local intermediaries, such as the civil society organization Myanmar Egress. U Aung Min and other government representatives went to Chiangmai to meet with exiles. U Tin Maung Than from the exile Vahu Development Institute based in Chiangmai was among the first to return. He faced strong criticism in 2011 from exile groups that opposed engagement with the government’s reform agenda, but others such as U Zaw Oo, also from Vahu, soon followed his example. One of the president’s advisors, economist Dr U Myint, proposed the establishment of an “independent, non-political, and legal institute of excellence … the Myanmar Development Resource Institute (MDRI)” (U Myint 2011). Several Vahu members and prominent exile leaders soon joined MDRI.

Following the NLD’s strong showing in the April 2012 by-elections and Aung San Suu Kyi’s entry into parliament, the number of visiting exiles increased. The leading exile media—The Irrawaddy, Mizzima News, and Democratic Voice of Burma—started to openly report from the country again. Some activists began to shift some or most activities of their organizations to Myanmar.

Exiles have so far focused on building the capacities of the main political actors in the country—the government and parliament, leaders of political parties, and groups associated with the opposition movement. As a result, well-known dissidents are represented on the MDRI and presidential advisory boards, as well as in special commissions—for instance, to investigate the Buddhist-Muslim communal violence or the security forces’ treatment of the protestors at the Letpadaung copper mine. The executive committee members of the government-founded Myanmar Peace Centre, which oversees peace negotiations with the ethnic armies, includes a returned political exile and a scholar from the diaspora. Another scholar from the diaspora and contributor to this book, U Winston Set Aung, became Deputy Minister for National Planning and Economic Development.

Exiles from ethnic minorities, by contrast, focus on building the capacities of their respective communities but are less involved with government initiatives at the centre.

The area of human rights offers another focus for exile expertise. Due
to the extreme sensitivity surrounding this subject, in the past very few organizations inside Myanmar were able to operate openly on human rights issues. Exile organizations based in Thailand and India are widening the scope of their existing capacity-building initiatives for the documentation of local human rights issues and improving the knowledge and skills of those who defend human rights, while also expanding their (underground and above-ground) networks across the country.

For political exiles who needed to continue voicing dissent in order to maintain their identity over a period of twenty years, recent pragmatic cooperation with what is a new but also a partially-old leadership in Myanmar must feel like a major compromise (Ma 1993, p. 383).

**Differing Attitudes of In-Country and Exile Activists**

Many activists in Myanmar are acutely aware of their lack of formal education, theoretical knowledge, international exposure, and organizational capacity that has been the result of decades of censorship, the undermining of the education system, and in recent times a lack of Internet access. They also lament the fact that no one in the country has ever experienced the democratic freedoms and practices that are envisioned for Myanmar’s future (Hkun Htun Oo 2012). Representatives of youth organizations have, therefore, stressed that the primary contribution of returning exiles should consist of bringing know-how, international experience, and organizational skills for the development of the country.

Another important area of exile experience has been interaction with people from minority ethnic groups, and hence they have an understanding of ethnic relations that differs from that of people within Myanmar. In exile, Burmans were in regular contact with ethnic movement organizations as well as with the armed groups. Not least, key organizations such as the NCGUB, Democratic Alliance of Burma, and the National Coalition of the Union of Burma (NCUB) were founded in Manerplaw, the former Karen National Union headquarters, at the inception of the pro-democracy movement between 1988 and 1990. During the exodus into territories controlled by the respective rebel armies, minority groups provided vital help for the activists’ survival in the jungle and eventual crossing to neighbouring countries. Although Burman-ethnic relations were far from smooth, identifying common goals, as well as exposure to international perspectives on ethnic rights, increased mutual acceptance.

Beyond politics, many activists living in Myanmar believe diverse fields could benefit from the valuable expertise and skills of foreign-educated Burmese returnees, whereas a minority seems to think that returnees would be too out of touch to make valuable contributions to the country’s development. To the external observer, it seems obvious that exile media organizations could become catalysts for media development, through training young journalists, setting standards for journalistic ethics, connecting local and international media, and otherwise contributing to putting Myanmar indigenous media outlets on the global news network map. While the government appears to encourage returning exile media organizations, these organizations still need to struggle with cronies who own some of the private media, as well as with local journalists who oppose this new competition.

In-country activist leaders are proud of the sacrifices they made over many years to maintain, at great personal risk, underground networks across the country and contacts with the people at the grassroots level. A common criticism voiced by youth activists among the 1988 exiles is that they remain close to their peers from the 88 Generation Students group and to political prisoners but are not close to ordinary people in the Myanmar population; accordingly, exiles work mostly with the political leaders and stakeholders but hardly at all with the broader civil society that does not focus on strictly political issues. There is a perception that exiles fail to approach and to understand the general population’s needs and aspirations. Yet, considering the circumstances of their previous transnational or in-country clandestine work, it is no surprise that exiles have had limited exposure at best to people at the grassroots level. However, such criticism contradicts the claims of exile organizations such as the ABSDF, DPNS, and FTUB to have worked extensively at the grassroots during the years of dictatorship (Duell 2011). Whatever the case, as 88 Generation Students group leader Ko Ko Gyi has pointed out, returning exiles need to intensify their approach to the grassroots in order to work efficiently with the population and use funds wisely.

Incongruent expectations pose another point of contention between activists living in Myanmar and exiles. Local activists are well aware that decades of pent-up frustration and grievances fuel the extremely high expectations of ordinary people to see immediate improvements in matters of daily survival such as food, housing, electricity, transport, land issues,
and other matters. Exiles seem to hold equally unrealistic expectations, but in terms of fundamental institutional changes rather than in relation to daily hardships. With education and experience often acquired in established democracies and industrialized countries, exiles tend to measure Myanmar against the political freedoms of their host countries. On the one hand, such comparisons imply how removed from current local conditions some exiles may have become. On the other hand, the vision of a fully-fledged federal democracy will drive the country’s reform ahead and prevent it from stagnating at an early stage.

Resentments that have built up over a twenty-year history of activism continue to affect relations between the in-country and exile opposition movements. Activists in Myanmar have tended to perceive themselves to be the real martyrs and crucial players, while to varying degrees portraying exiles as hypocrites who lead their lives in security and material comfort. Beyond the issue of who shows real dedication to the country’s political progress, what lies at the core of the matter is the question of power. In 2007, for instance, some former political prisoners of the 88 Generation Students group stressed their unwillingness to grant political positions to returning exiles in the event of transition. In 2012, in-country activists were still questioning whether returnees are driven by concern for their country or by personal gain. As a member of the Myanmar Youth Union explained, “We need to call the exiles back to see their attitudes—whether they return for their own interests or to really help the country.” Others, in contrast, believe the returnees to be very committed to broad-based reform and therefore actively working with many different groups and parties.

There is also conflict over past exile activities—focusing on the exact nature and effectiveness of programmes and the use of funds. Exiles account for any lack of transparency in the use of aid money as being due to the clandestine nature of their previous work. Despite this, it appears that some activists inside Myanmar continue to doubt the exiles’ honesty. It is ironic that the competition for funding that exacerbated some of the internal problems of the exiled opposition movement now causes friction between exiles and activists inside Myanmar.

**Changes in Donor Agendas since 2011**

The reform process has had substantial ramifications for donors. In the last two years the flow of people, capital, and information into Myanmar has greatly increased. The suspension of most international sanctions has paved the way for formal bilateral and multilateral engagement by foreign governments and other international bodies with the new administration. International non-governmental organizations (some of which have a long history of supporting Burmese refugees, IDPs, and migrant workers in the region as well as a number of political exiles) are increasingly entering Myanmar to carry out their humanitarian programmes. Several trends can be observed.

First, some organizations that traditionally donated to the exile movement have shifted their focus to supporting projects inside Myanmar, projects that are run by newly-established organizations or returning exiles. Even regime critic George Soros visited Myanmar in January 2012, underscoring how circumstances and priorities have changed.

Second, a different set of donors—international and multilateral agencies that support political parties, parliaments, and multi-party platforms—are setting up or expanding Myanmar-specific programmes and staff.

Third, funds for exile and cross-border projects are drying up. The major donors to the opposition movement—the Soros Foundation, the National Endowment for Democracy, the International Republican Institute (IRI)—continue to support some initiatives, but grants will be phased out before 2015. Donors may also feel compelled by their respective governments to officially enter Myanmar. Yet this quick shift combined with “donor fatigue” has had detrimental effects on humanitarian assistance to IDPs and refugee communities in border areas and neighbouring countries.

As a result of these changes, exile organizations will need to re-invent themselves in order to stay relevant. The political opening-up of Myanmar undermines arguments to “stay behind” in exile. The government in exile, the NCGUB, was dissolved in September 2012 after twenty-one years. With Aung San Suu Kyi in parliament and progress being made in other areas, the NCGUB had lost its raison d’être, in addition to which the group’s budget was reduced to a quarter of what it was five years ago (interview with Dr Sein Win, 2012).

At the same time, human rights groups working in exile continue to publicize repression by the government, restriction of freedoms, and Myanmar’s many unchanged problems. Perhaps the last role for exile organizations would be, over the next few years, to keep a check on whether progress is being made towards true democratization, rule of law, and respect for human rights.
Myanmar’s lack of development, its desperate need for humanitarian aid, and the changes in its political system have together engendered a “gold rush” of investors as well as donors of political, humanitarian, and technical assistance. International firms have been seeking skilled members of the Burmese diaspora in Asia to staff their new offices in Yangon. As a result, non-political members of the diaspora have met with a comparatively better situation for return than members who had been politically active.

For their part, what activists have mainly requested from international organizations and donors has been training and capacity-building. These requests have brought a flood of training programmes, offered by a multitude of international and exile organizations, which has resulted in some duplication of effort and lack of transparency. Attempts to increase transparency and minimize such duplication have led to the establishment of various informal donor working groups, none of which seems to be particularly influential. While several donor forums that focus on political education alone have emerged, plans to share information on programmes, strategies, and recipients of funds have not been realized, and links to local NGO forums such as the Local Resource Centre or Paung Ku remain limited at best.

Furthermore, power asymmetries between donors and recipients, between exiles and insiders, and between local well-established and newcomer organizations, have created a difficult web of relationships and dependencies. In addition, the sudden availability of resources as well as more political space has also motivated Burmese groups to do more projects and work more openly, especially since everyone is preparing for the next general election in 2015. Genuine efforts notwithstanding, some organizations also appear to have been set up hastily in order to siphon off some funds without actually offering useful programmes.

**CONCLUSION**

While the tangible results of exile transnational activism are not highly visible, a path for exiles to contribute to the current reforms can be discerned. The politically-active members of the diaspora can be credited with having influenced international attitudes and responses to their homeland, as well as its domestic politics. Transnational activism influenced world opinion towards according the status of international pariah to Myanmar’s military regime, with resulting limitation on international investment, economic assistance, and diplomatic standing. The latter certainly counted among the multiple factors that induced top-down political reform.

As for the present situation, local activists express clear expectations about the roles that returning exile activists will be able to play in the transition to democracy, and about the potential role of the broader diaspora in Myanmar’s overall development. Exiles in turn demonstrate commitment to positive change and are making their skills and experience available to their respective peers as well as to the president and other state actors. The extent to which returning exiles have political ambitions remains unclear, but more than one former exile has openly declared an intention to run for election in 2015. It is likely that such ambitions will fuel competition over power among a greatly increased spectrum of stakeholders in Myanmar politics that now includes the government, the national and regional parliaments, opposition parties, ethnic leaders, returned exiles and other members of the diaspora, and international players. Many of these have already started to position themselves strategically for the 2015 general elections and various post-election scenarios.

How things will balance out for former exiles will hinge in part on the will of local activists to integrate them into existing organizations, and in part on the government’s willingness to embrace its former critics with a full amnesty.

A pivotal external factor affecting local politics will be the agendas of international donors, changes in which may cause shifts in programme priorities; and funding flows from donors may engender competition instead of cooperation, increasing the proverbial tendency among Burmese activists to establish ever more organizations. So far it seems that the transfer of know-how is perceived as a one-sided process from “outside” to “inside”, but missing in this perception are the issues about which the returning members of the diaspora could learn from peers in the country. Returning exiles will only be able to engage in a sustained and effective way with Myanmar’s political process if they are able to cooperate closely with local activists and people at the grassroots level. It is not surprising that conflicts exist among dissident groups in a movement that was split between home and exile over twenty years ago. Now, however, these different realities and experiences need to be forged into one combined effort directed towards a transformation in Myanmar that will prevent a return of dictatorship.
Notes

1 Although some flagship SMOs such as the Burma Campaign UK, Free Burma Coalition US, and its splinter group US Campaign for Burma, operated from Europe, the United States, Canada, and Australia, core SMOs had their headquarters in Thailand, with branches in India. Information exchange, cross-border and grassroots work was carried out there and information about activities was distributed within the transnational network (Duell 2011).

2 The 88 Generation Students group continues to be referred to as “students”, since shared experiences of the 1988 uprisings and opposition to military dictatorship defined activist identity in exile even more than in Myanmar. Yet decades in exile have altered the notions of “exile” and “home”, especially for younger generations born in exile.

3 Young activists formed “Generation Wave” after the “Saffron Revolution” because they felt that nothing had been achieved. Between 2008 and 2010, Generation Wave activists provided training for Burmese youth aged 17-35 from a safe house in Mae Sot at the Thai border (Interview with Generation Wave, Yangon 2012).

4 These objectives were stated prior to 2010 in various wordings by the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), National Coalition of the Union of Burma (NCUB), Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC), Federation of Trade Unions-Burma (FTUB), All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABSDF), and others.

5 Interviews with the Chin National Front (CNF) 2007, at Mizoram; with Mahn Sha of KNU, 2007, at Mae Sot; and with Sao Seng Suk of the Shan State Army (SSA) 2007, Chiangmai.

6 According to an interview with Burmese journalists and activists, Aung San, the leader of the anti-colonial student movement and the independence movement—and the founding father of both the nation and the military—continues to serve as a role model for young activists today, as he did in 1988 for the All Burma Students’ Democratic Front. Aung San was never imprisoned, but went underground and ultimately travelled to Japan to receive support and military training. In 1988 when fleeing students arrived at the borders of Burma, they expected to get military training from the ethnic armies in border areas, as well as from neighbouring India and Thailand. Of similar significance for historical reasons is the fact that, since the time of the anti-colonial Dobama Asiayone movement (founded in 1930), Burmese activists have employed a two-pronged strategy of underground activism and above-ground political party work, and this was also the strategy adopted in 1988 by the All Burma Federation of Student Unions and the Democratic Party for a New Society respectively. Exile activism and in-country underground activism cannot be treated as completely separate matters, since exiles frequently entered the country using the underground networks of the student movement.

7 Key donors included the International Republican Institute, National Democratic Institute, Albert Einstein Institution, Rockefeller Foundation, American Jewish World Service, Danish Burma Committee, Danish Church Aid, Norwegian Burma Committee, Norwegian Church Aid, Norwegian Peoples Aid, Oxfam-Novib, Swedish Burma Committee, Olaf Palme International Centre, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) (Sweden), Trocaire (the Catholic Church of Ireland’s official overseas development agency), Prospect Burma (UK), Canadian Friends of Burma, Canadian Lutheran World Relief, Rights and Democracy (Canada), Inter Pares (Canada), and some of the German political foundations. In addition, a number of medium-sized Christian donor organizations focussed on the Christian minorities.

8 Conversations during the BDF, 2007.

9 Email correspondence with exiled Burman leaders, August 2007.

10 Min Ko Naing, for instance, was imprisoned from March 1989 to November 2004, September 2006 to January 2007, and August 2007 to January 2012 (88 Generation Students 2008).

11 Interview with former 1988 student activist, Yangon, February 2013.

12 Interviews with various youth activists, Yangon, October 2013.

13 Interview with ABFSU, Yangon, October 2012.

14 Interview with ABFSU, Yangon, October 2012.

15 Hundreds of thousands of monks, nuns, and citizens staged at least 227 distinct protests in 66 towns across all states and divisions (Human Rights Documentation Unit, NCGUB 2008, p. 9).

16 Interviews with several activists, Yangon, April 2012–April 2013.

17 Most interviewees stressed this point. See also, South and others 2011, pp. 31–33.

18 None of the interviewed Burmese seems to believe the official figures, which were far below 100.


20 The blacklist included prominent dissidents such as Dr Sein Win, president of the government in exile; Aung Din, US Campaign for Burma; Zipporah Sein, secretary of the Karen National Union; Moe Thee Zun and Dr Naing Aung, former leaders of the ABSDF; Aung Moe Zaw of the Democratic Party for a New Society; Maung Maung, of the FTUB; Khin Ohmar, from the Network for Democracy and Development; Naw Lay Dee, of the Burmese Women’s Union; Dr Cynthia Maung, director of the Mae Tao Clinic in Thailand; Bo Kyi, Tate Naing, and other members of the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners;
Aung Htoo, from the Burma Lawyers Council; as well as the two sons of Aung San Suu Kyi, well-known authors Bertil Lintner, and John Pilger, and some diplomats (Nyein Nyein 2012).

Numerous laws needed to be passed or amended at this point to transform state and society. Nonetheless, the Thein Sein administration gave priority to, for example, passing the Foreign Investment Law, while leaving seemingly more pressing political issues unlegislated.

Interview with Ko Ko Gyi, Yangon, October 2012.

Interview with ABFSU, Yangon, December 2012.

Interview with returned exile, Yangon, October 2012.

Interview with activist, Yangon, October 2012.

Interview with former 1988 activists, Yangon, February 2013.

Interview with youth activists, Yangon, October 2013.

Interview with youth activists, Yangon, October 2012.

Interview with Ko Ko Gyi, Yangon, January 2013.

Interview with peace movement organizer, Yangon, December 2012.

Interviews with former political prisoners, Yangon, March 2007.

Interview with Myanmar Youth Union, Yangon, December 2012.

Interview with Generation Wave, Yangon, December 2012.

Interview with NLD Youth, Yangon, December 2012.

The organizations include IDEA, International Foundation for Electoral Systems, Inter-Parliamentary Union, Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy, Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy, Commonwealth Local Government Forum, Canadian Parliamentary Centre, National Democratic Institute, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Friederich Ebert Foundation, Friedrich Naumann Foundation, Asia Foundation, and the Burma Centre Netherland / Transnational Institute.

Interview with activist, Yangon, January 2013.

Many exiles have said in interviews over the years that where there are two Burmese, there will be three organizations.

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