

Myanmar: the country that ‘has it all’

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Abstract

For scholars of Southeast Asia interested in human rights, Myanmar is a country that ‘has it all.’ I use this tongue-in-cheek expression to suggest the myriad ways that the country remains mired in structural challenges that inform its current human rights problems. In this paper, I point out the country’s most glaring structural challenges and link these to its most pressing human rights problems. A brief section about Myanmar in the context of COVID-19 offers the same conclusion as the rest of the article: while there is variance in the actors targeted and the degree of suppression, the underlying patterns of oppression remain unchanged over time.

Acknowledgements:

The author would like to thank Nyi Nyi Kyaw for reviewing a draft of this paper and offering helpful comments.

I. INTRODUCTION

From its independence to the present day, one can look to Myanmar to observe multiple human rights trajectories, which today play out in myriad violations and responses in nearly all regions of the country. With natural resources of jade and teak, a rich cultural heritage with associated physical sites, and a central, if sandwiched, geopolitical location, one might imagine that the moniker I have given the country, ‘The country that has it all’ is a positive one. But viewing the country through a human rights lens instead foregrounds how an (im)perfect storm of historical and geopolitical forces has mired the country in structural challenges that remain trenchant, notwithstanding a discourse of reform. In this paper, I point out the country’s most glaring structural challenges and link these to its most pressing human rights problems. A brief section about Myanmar in the context of COVID-19 offers the same conclusion as the rest of the article: while there is variance in the actors targeted and the degree of suppression, the underlying patterns of oppression remain unchanged over time.

II. MIRED IN STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES

As a teacher who relies on inductive reasoning, I illuminate concepts for my students based on specific examples – the more compelling and confronting, the better. I came to think of Myanmar as a country that ‘has it all’ because no matter how varied the social science topic I was covering, I could look to Myanmar to provide examples of the phenomenon. The structural challenges of the country allow students and scholars ample opportunity to consider the effects on human rights of colonialism, civil-military relations, geopolitics, ethnonationalist conflict, and resource extraction.

First, Myanmar’s colonial past easily links to both ethnic division and suppression of expression, as these were actions taken by the country’s colonial rulers, and then the country’s military, and now the government in power. There has been abundant analysis of Britain’s preferential treatment of some ethnic groups over others, sowing the seeds for ethnonationalist division and distrust.¹ Its governing strategies were of the colonial type, created less to truly empower its subjects and more to create administrative channels that would enrich the throne. These paved the way, post-World War 2, for the emergence of a state rife with governance problems and ethnic division, just out of the post-independence gate.²

Second, the country has an enduring military presence, from 60 years of direct rule and now, somewhat indirectly, through continued representation in parliament and heavy-handed pressure on its erstwhile opposition leaders. Seen by themselves and others as the best actors to respond to rising conflict and engage in state-building from the time of independence³, the Myanmar military, the Tatmadaw, appears in practice to have ceded no power in the supposed transition to civilian rule. The military’s continued dominance can be explained by an acceptance in the populace (even if a resigned, fearful or begrudging one) of the need to maintain order, a belief that continues to hold water today.⁴

Third, Myanmar is a political terrarium for the intersection of domestic human rights violations and geopolitics. Geopolitical influences largely concern the country’s proximity to and relationship with China, from its Communist and Kuomintang border troublemakers in the mid-century (until 1989) to ASEAN’s eagerness to engage the country in light of China’s power.⁵ Today, geopolitics takes the form of geo-business, as China’s leaders embrace political stability for economic gain and avoid human rights discussions as a matter of practice, while its businessmen seek out new opportunities

1 Hazel J Lang, *Fear and Sanctuary: Burmese Refugees in Thailand* (SEAP Publications, 2002).

2 Andrew Selth, “Race and Resistance in Burma, 1942-1945” (1986) 20:3 *Modern Asian Studies* 483-507.

3 Mary Patricia Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Cornell University Press, 2005), Google-Books-ID: NrCK8a6tcEgC.

4 Khin Zaw Win, “Twin authoritarianisms in Myanmar”, (13 September 2019), online: *New Mandala* <<https://www.newmandala.org/twin-authoritarianisms/>>.

5 Bertil Lintner, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency Since 1948* (Silkworm Books, 1999); Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Zed Books, 1991).

with whichever actors can assist them in gaining footholds on the ground, with little regard for labour and environmental concerns.

Fourth, the country also highlights the ways that the extraction of resources has implicated a range of actors in human rights violations; this includes: the ethnic armed groups, who made shady deals and relied on questionable extraction and trading processes to fund their armies; the military, who lined their deep pockets with the profits of state-owned enterprises, who are now the chairs of those same companies that have turned into private enterprises; and international corporations, who happily jumped in to become partners with those actors enriching themselves off the country's natural wealth and geostrategic position.

The legacy of these interlinked phenomena – colonialism, the military, ethnic suppression, and resource extraction – are with us today, in the aftermath of what has been called a 'turbulent transformation'.⁶ These legacies continue to pose challenges to human rights.

III. MYANMAR'S MOST PRESSING HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES TODAY

In this section, I identify the country's most pressing human rights issues, which are clearly linked to the structural issues that define them: the staying power of the military-state, the lack of media freedom, the perennial issue of resource grabs, and, often related, the ethnic minority struggle for representation and rights.

First, the military-state – the central organ of power in Myanmar, constituted by the military and powerholders (elites, businesspeople) with deep ties to the military – remains the dominant force in political and economic spheres. The most prominent example of this is the crisis of the 2008 Constitution. It has been noted by many actors that the 2008 Constitution, promulgated by the military and pushed through at the heights of Cyclone Nargis, assures that a minimum of 25% of seats in the legislature will be allocated directly to the military. Thanks to the military's discipline, not one of those 25% look promising to vote to amend the Constitution. And since the Constitution requires more than a 75% majority to push through amendments, this promises to be a stalemate topic for many years to come.⁷ Further, the Tatmadaw chief nominates ministers for home affairs, defence and border affairs. This trenchant hold on power means that even in the face of sweeping victories by politicians who (used to) represent opposition to the military's hold on power, it is not possible to govern today without heeding the voices of military and military-turned-politicians. This is of course by design; even assuming only the best of intentions when the authoritarian government

6 Nicholas Farrelly & Chit Win, "Inside Myanmar's Turbulent Transformation" (2016) 3:1 Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies 38–47.

7 Mon Myat Mon, "Discipline in Myanmar in the Time of Global Pandemic", (31 March 2020), online: *The Irrawaddy* <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/discipline-myanmar-time-global-pandemic.html>>.

moved in the direction of democratic reform, rapid progressive change was never among its goals. As Melissa Crouch has pointed out, the military engaged in pre-emptive protection of its hold on power through its Constitution-making process, in a unique-to-Myanmar form of military-state authoritarian constitutionalism.⁸

Second, despite great hopes for a freer press in the glorified days of exile media returning to Myanmar, the media remain hamstrung. True, there are a greater number of powerholders interviewed in order for reporters to substantiate their data, and gone are the days when reporters so feared retribution to themselves and their families that nearly all remained anonymous, as during the early years of the printing of the *Irrawaddy*, for example.⁹ And the diversity of media outlets has certainly increased.¹⁰ But as demonstrated by the notorious arrest of two Reuters reporters who tread on controversial ground, there is little tolerance of coverage of topics where the military in particular are framed negatively. While the two Reuters reporters, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, were released after 16 months, it is worth noting that the soldiers charged with the crimes that the two reporters covered spent even less time in prison,¹¹ demonstrating that it is riskier to report on military crimes than to commit them. The relative star power of the Reuters label made this example of a violation of press freedom the best-known media violation internationally, but myriad examples less well known in international circles exemplify the risks to journalist and media outlets and therefore, to freedom of the press. For interviewing the outlaw rebel group, the Arakan Army (AA), the editor-in-chief of Voice of Myanmar was charged under the country's new terrorism law with a potential life sentence.¹²

Third, the opening up of the country has only increased the ease with which the military-state has enacted resource grabs – that is, land confiscation and its equally nefarious sister, resource extraction. As previously inaccessible areas in remote regions are pried open, powerful actors with (even uncomfortable) ties to the military have rushed to capitalize on previously untapped resources by reallocating agricultural land, taking over local industries, and profiting from the exploitation and sale of natural

8 Melissa Crouch, “Pre-emptive Constitution-making” (2020) 52:2 SSRN (Law & Society Review), online: <<https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3584093>>.

9 Susan Banki & Ja Seng Ing, “Precarity and Risk in Myanmar’s Media: A Longitudinal Analysis of Natural Disaster Coverage by The Irrawaddy” in *Myanmar Media in Transition: Legacies, Challenges and Change* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019) at 177.

10 Yan Naung Oak & Lisa Brooten, “he Tea Shop Meets the 8 O’clock News: Facebook, Convergence and Online Public Spaces” in *Myanmar Media in Transition: Legacies, Challenges and Change* (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019) 325, Google-Books-ID: iEW_DwAAQBAJ.

11 Shoon Naing & Simon Lewis, “Exclusive: Myanmar soldiers jailed for Rohingya killings freed after less than a year”, *Reuters* (27 May 2019), online: <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-soldiers-exclusive-idUSKCN1SX007>>.

12 Al Jazeera, “Myanmar charges journalist under terrorism law, blocks news site”, *Al Jazeera* (1 April 2020), online: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/myanmar-charges-journalist-terrorism-law-blocks-news-site-200401055032109.html?utm_source=website&utm_medium=article_page&utm_campaign=read_more_links>.

resources.¹³ There are no lack of examples in Southeast Asia of (shall we say, euphemistically) *eager* parties that take advantage of former authoritarian governments by rushing into the post-authoritarian gap to grab lands and resources. Indonesia¹⁴ and Cambodia¹⁵, for example, provide salient examples. In Myanmar, these practices are part of a deep-seated centre-periphery dynamic in which ethnic groups are caught between a rock and a hard place: either in direct conflict with military forces, or, under the guise of ceasefires, forced to give up local autonomy and funding. This second phenomenon has been labelled 'ceasefire capitalism,' in which ceasefires made with the ethnic armed groups have now led to their disempowerment and defunding, as the military takes over local industries and builds roads that destroys towns and roots out spaces formerly safe for ethnic leaders.¹⁶

Fourth, ethnic minorities remain in various stages of opposition to Myanmar's central powerholders. The issues here are legion, from severe economic inequality in some regions of the country (like Chin state) that most certainly violates the right to development¹⁷ to the military's extrajudicial tussles with ethnic armed groups. One enduring pattern in Myanmar in relation to ethnic groups is the dizzying about-faces that characterise minority-majority power relations. The best-known example of this is the Kachin Independence Army, whose 17-year ceasefire with the military spectacularly imploded and exploded in 2011. Decades-old divide-and-rule tactics explain this collapse, where 'military support for the domination of another has long term effects upon the development of infrastructure and local economies, which never entirely lose their conflict orientation'.¹⁸

The 2011 Kachin rupture, however, is one of many. The Kachin themselves experienced an earlier, lesser-known period of uneasy agreement to refrain from fighting with the Tatmadaw.¹⁹ All three members of the Northern Alliance (a trio of ethnic minority ethnic armed groups that remain active) can relay similar narratives, in which the promises that were supposed to come with the laying down of arms never

13 Kevin Woods, "Ceasefire Capitalism: Military-Private Partnerships, Resource Concessions and Military-State Building in the Burma-China Borderlands" (2011) 38 *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 747-770; Giuseppe Gabusi, "Change and Continuity: Capacity, Coordination and Natural Resources in Myanmar's Periphery" in *Myanmar transformed? people, places, and politics* Myanmar update series (Singapore: ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018) 137.

14 Asian Human Rights Commission, "INDONESIA: Mining operations in Tumpang Pitu result in environmental damage and fabricated charges", online: *Asian Human Rights Commission* <<http://www.humanrights.asia/news/urgent-appeals/AHRC-UAC-101-2017/>>.

15 Alice Beban, Sokbunthoeun So & Kheang Un, "From Force to Legitimation: Rethinking Land Grabs in Cambodia" (2017) 48:3 *Development and Change* 590-612.

16 Woods, "Ceasefire Capitalism", *supra* note 13.

17 Chin Human Rights Organization, "*Threats to our existence": persecution of ethnic Chin Christians in Burma* (Nepean: Chin Human Rights Organization, 2012).

18 Mandy Sadan & R Anderson, "War and Peace in the Borderlands of Myanmar: The Kachin Ceasefire" in *War and Peace in the Borderlands of Myanmar: The Kachin Ceasefire* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2016) 29.

19 *Ibid.*

materialized. The Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army's 1989 ceasefire dissolved when it resisted becoming a border force lackey of the Tatmadaw. Both the Ta'ang National Liberation Army and the AA emerged from the ashes of disillusioned armed groups (the Palaung State Liberation Army and the Arakan Liberation Army, respectively) who discovered too late that they gained little benefit from laying down arms.²⁰

About-faces have moved in the opposite direction as well, most famously in the case of the Karen National Union, whose steadfast refusal to enter into a ceasefire agreement with the Tatmadaw was finally reversed in 2012 with a bilateral agreement and in 2015 with its participation in the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement. That ceasefire has held, but uneasily, as land confiscation continues²¹ and splinter groups complain of Tatmadaw presence²², demonstrating that dissatisfaction runs deep in this periphery of the country.

Examined side by side, one can try to understand the diverging trajectories of the groups who have signed ceasefire agreements versus those who have eschewed them. But the divergence of these groups is not nearly as important as their convergences. There are clear patterns that suggest sobering instances of *déjà vu* – what we have seen before in cycles of active resistance and disempowered quiescence, we will see again. David Brenner offers a fine-grained analysis of the Karen and the Kachin that identifies these patterns: compromised leadership from the elite, increasing internal fragmentation, and further resistance. The factors that determine when these phases play out straddle three layers of the rebel social network—current leaders, those who are eager to get a piece of the elite pie – what Brenner calls ‘aspirant elites’, and grassroots actors.²³

On the ethnic minority issue, Rakhine state deserves specific mention for its most prominent problem and for its rising one: the Rohingya in the first instance and the Rakhine in the second. To start with the second, the ethnic Rakhine have become embroiled in the latest conflict that pits an ethnic army (the AA) fighting for self-determination against a government very unwilling to entertain it. With even more moving parts than the ordinarily bewildering ethnic conflicts that characterize Myanmar's borderlands, the rising ethnonationalist army of the AA sees threats on the one hand from the country's dominant ethnic majority (the Bamar) and the region's

20 Sithu Aung Myint, “The Tatmadaw, the Northern Alliance trio and the peace process”, online: *Frontier Myanmar* <<https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-tatmadaw-the-northern-alliance-trio-and-the-peace-process>>.

21 *Doo Tha Htoo District Situation Update: Land confiscation by private companies and tensions between armed actors, February to July 2019*, Situation Updates, khrg.org, Situation Updates (Thaton (Doo Tha Htoo) District: Karen Human Rights Group, 2020).

22 The Nation, “Karen call on Myanmar to honour ceasefire agreement”, (28 April 2018), online: <<https://www.nationthailand.com/asean-plus/30343881>>.

23 David Brenner, *Rebel Politics: A Political Sociology of Armed Struggle in Myanmar's Borderlands* (Cornell University Press, 2019), Google-Books-ID: eA2QDwAAQBAJ.

significant minority population, the Rohingya.²⁴ Civilians have been caught in the literal and metaphorical crossfire of AA’s increasing presence in Rakhine state, with approximately 100 combatants killed, 200 civilians fingered for their association with the AA, now labelled as a terrorist group, and 100,000 internally displaced as a result of AA-Tatmadaw conflict. The AA’s latest insistence that it oversee the 2020 elections promises to bring further strife to the troubled region.

The Rohingya issue can neither be ignored nor forgotten. The Rohingya situation has declined from ‘merely’ having a hard time obtaining citizenship – a human rights violation itself – to a horrifying spiral of no citizenship, no legal rights to marry or move, and, since 2012 and more recently 2017, forced evictions and demolitions. Since the attacks of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army on the Tatmadaw, retaliation against civilians has come in massively disproportionate form, resulting in profoundly disturbing acts of military and civilian mobs against Rohingya villagers: mass killings, rape, mutilation, arson.²⁵ Ken Maclean²⁶ identifies the joint processes of lawfare and spaciocide at work against this population, but more directly, since the Republic of the Gambia brought Myanmar to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in November 2019, many international observers as well as the ICJ are considering if the word ‘genocide’ is apt to describe Rohingya treatment – a term that has never, in Myanmar’s more than 70 year history, been used before. Despite international condemnation, Myanmar’s erstwhile opposition-hero-turned-defacto-leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, has incurred tremendous political capital within Myanmar by personally defending the military at the courts of the ICJ in the Hague. Despite exceptionally difficult living conditions for the estimated population of one million Rohingya refugees in the world’s largest refugee camp in Bangladesh today, Rohingya are unwilling to return to Myanmar without safety and citizenship guarantees, which have been notably unforthcoming.

IV. CONCLUSION

As I write this, we are in the midst of a pandemic that has led to a rise, worldwide, in nationalism, xenophobia, and government justifications for imposing strict restrictions on its citizens. In this context, much has already been written on the risks to human rights.²⁷ It is difficult to know exactly what influence COVID-19 will have on human

24 Nyi Nyi Kyaw, “Myanmar in 2019: Rakhine Issue, Constitutional Reform and Election Fever” in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2020* (ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020) 235.

25 *They Gave Them Long Swords”: Preparations for Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity Against Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State, Myanmar*, by Fortify Rights (Bangkok: Fortify Rights, 2018).

26 Ken MacLean, “The Rohingya Crisis and the Practices of Erasure” (2019) 21:1 *Journal of Genocide Research* 83-95.

27 *Covid-19 and Human Rights: we are all in this together*, by UN (United Nations, 2020).

rights in the long run in Myanmar specifically, but it is impossible to ignore the question entirely.

One would like to believe that this crisis might have the potential to provide the kind of shock to the system that a civilian government needs to build trust with the populace. This is certainly the view of a KNU Central Executive committee member interviewed by *Dateline Irrawaddy*, who suggested that the pandemic could be an opportunity to bring parties together.²⁸ Certainly, compared with Cyclone Nargis, when the junta wilfully ignored the scope of the crisis, initially rejected humanitarian aid, and appeared so out of touch with its citizens that it pushed through a constitution that no one was thinking about, the response of this current government is laudable. The establishment of a coordinating committee to work with Ethnic Armed Organisations to respond to COVID-19 communicates a ‘no one left behind’ approach that could signal a trust-building exercise.

The reality seems less optimistic. There are fears that the limited freedoms that currently exist for the press will be sacrificed. An author (who chose to remain anonymous, a telling fact that reveals deep fears about media suppression) pointed to the forced closure of several news sites, the raiding of news offices, and the banning of observers from trials against journalists since the pandemic.²⁹ The coming elections are likely to rely more on social media than past ones, where social distancing will bleed into ‘political distancing.’³⁰ There are also fears that in the absence or reduced presence of international observers, the elections may be marred, although that might be said of other, more powerful countries whose presidents with dictatorial tendencies may seek to use the pandemic to retain power in an election year. A downturn in the economy, assured given China’s contracting economy and the closure of factories³¹ has the potential to aggravate inequalities and spur conflict. Thant Myint-U’s post-colonial read of Myanmar’s political DNA suggests that in times of inequality, economic exploitation derision of ethnic minorities will grow worse.³² And COVID-19 is of great concern for

28 The Irrawaddy, “What Does COVID-19 Mean for Myanmar’s Peace Process?”, (2 May 2020), online: *The Irrawaddy* <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/dateline/covid-19-mean-myanmars-peace-process.html>>.

29 Anonymous, “COVID-19 gives cover for threats to freedom of information and expression in Myanmar”, (9 April 2020), online: *New Mandala* <<https://www.newmandala.org/covid-19-gives-cover-for-threats-to-freedom-of-information-and-expression-in-myanmar/>>.

30 Nyi Nyi Kyaw, “Covid-19 in Myanmar: From Social Distancing to Political Distancing?”, (11 May 2020), online: *ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute* </media/commentaries/covid-19-in-myanmar-from-social-distancing-to-political-distancing/>.

31 Su-Ann Oh, “Myanmar’s Garment Industry: Hanging by a Thread”, (4 May 2020), online: *ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute* </media/commentaries/myanmars-garment-industry-hanging-by-a-thread/>.

32 Thant Myint-U, *The Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism, and the Crisis of Democracy in the 21st Century* (Atlantic Books, 2020), Google-Books-ID: sX6lDwAAQBAJ.

displaced populations, the 350,000 internally displaced and the more than 1 million in Bangladesh.³³

Myanmar’s sobering human rights violations, and the inability to confront them, has no easy answers, even during the COVID crisis. This country that ‘has it all’ offers one more thing to readers of this article: a Burmese proverb, ခွေးမြီးကောက် ကျည်တောက်စွပ် (*kway me gow, jī dow sou*). Its meaning offers a less-than-hopeful message about the possibilities for improvements in human rights in the near future: a dog’s crooked tail will always stay crooked, even after attempts are made to straighten it.³⁴ In other words, while we may be on the precipice of vast changes in the global order, at this moment, the story of Myanmar is the story of intransigence and inertia. The underlying patterns that dictate how the country is governed and how the people of Myanmar experience life are following similar waves of openness and oppression that the country has witnessed many times before. The scale of openness and the targets of oppression may have altered but the underlying patterns of power assertion remain the same.

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33 Kyaw Lin Htoon, “IDPs being left behind in the response to COVID-19, say relief workers”, (11 May 2020), online: *Frontier Myanmar* <<https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/idps-being-left-behind-in-the-response-to-covid-19-say-relief-workers>>.

34 More precisely, the meaning is, ‘When a dog’s curly tail is slipped into a bamboo tube, it stays straight. But as soon as a bamboo tube is removed, the tail resumes its original shape.’ I thank David Tun for help with this exact translation.

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