

PROMISES, PROSPECTS, AND PROGNOSTICATIONS FOR A CIVIL SOCIETY IN BURMA

THE PROSPECT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY IN ASIA has been the subject of considerable debate. Civil society is predominately a Western concept that, according to Timothy Brook and Michael Frolic, “emerged in the eighteenth century in Europe at a time when a new relationship between the society and the state was evolving, as those who controlled capitalist production were seeking access to political power.”¹ After the Solidarity movement triumphed in Poland, successfully introducing civil society and helping to create and shape democratic reform, the concept of civil society amassed substantial weight in Asia. Could this phenomenon be applicable in Burma, and is it a precursor to pluralism and democracy?

After the fervor of civil society in the post-communist and post-totalitarian regimes of Eastern Europe and Russia, the prospect and enthusiasm for vibrant civil societies diminished globally. Following the initial thrust of civil society and the dismantling of authoritarian regimes, the strength of autonomous organizations has ebbed.² Nonetheless, there remain “weak ties” or loose associations that still operate within these regimes. As a result of the mistrust of authority engendered by totalitarian regimes, people, sheltered from the public sphere, developed extensive close personal ties and social networks.³ These personal networks, albeit tight interpersonally, remained socially weak, not extending beyond close friendships and kinships. Although these weak ties are not a substitute for an active civil society, they bode well for the future of civil society and democratization provided the necessary institutions develop sustaining interaction and dialogue in the public arena.

Post-communist regimes are culturally unique from Asian societ-

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ies; however, Burma shares their totalitarian legacy. Therefore, parallels can be drawn about the impact of totalitarian rule on the populace and the likelihood for autonomous organization in the public realm. Burma's totalitarian government permits no autonomous organization. Could a Burmese civil society flourish, if given the opportunity? Or would the mistrust engendered by the current regime thwart the organization of a civil society? Moreover, would a civil society in Burma be a necessary step to democratization? Some scholars argue that civil society is not the panacea it was originally assumed, and could actually foster authoritarian rather than democratic rule.⁴ Given Burma's unique culture and history, could civil society actually promote democratization, or would it only condemn Burma to perpetual subjugation?

Before assessing the prospect for civil society and its impact on democratization in Burma, it is necessary to define civil society for the purposes of this paper. Some scholars acknowledge that civil society is not a concept that travels neatly; in order to apply civil society to Asia, we must acknowledge certain concessions.⁵ For example, in many Asian nations the concept of civil society is intimately tied to marketization and the economic sphere, and is rather limited in its political activity.⁶ Therefore, distinctions between economic, civic, or political organizations are not addressed. A more nuanced description of civil society might be necessary to address the type of transition or democratization that would transpire, given the opportunity, but the primary aim here is to explore the prospects for civil society in general. Also, by applying a broad definition of civil society we can attempt to escape the conceptual stretching that may hinder a more detailed analysis of civil society in non-Western environments.⁷

The contention of this analysis is that, similar to the post-totalitarian regimes of Eastern Europe and Russia, Burma has the prospect for a weak civil society based on extensive social networks. This may not lead to spontaneous democratization, but it will assist in a liberal transition, given the opportunity. However, civil society is not a remedy for authoritarianism and will not, in and of itself, lead to democratization or political liberalization. Only after the proper opportunities arise will a weak civil society form to maintain or consolidate a liberal

transition. Given the Burmese regime's monopoly of force, a civil society will not form to oppose the regime unless there are indications of reform at the top, at which time this space can be wielded from below to create further organizational freedom. Until then, civil society in Burma remains latent, its potential untapped.

A PROMISING HISTORY OF CIVIL SOCIETY

One prerequisite to the development of civil society is social capital.⁸ Social capital is almost synonymous with trust: an interpersonal trust among members of a society. In the post-totalitarian regimes of Eastern Europe and Russia, civil society may not be flourishing, but this does not necessarily imply a lack of social capital. Since public organiza-

tion was banned in these regimes, people developed extensive "friendship networks."⁹ Consisting of ties outside of the family, these networks were heterogeneous, rather than the homogeneous ties of the clan; such heterogeneity is a necessary corollary for civil society. Therefore, although these ties were private and underground,

they indicated a propensity for people in these societies to gather for political discussion and dialogue. These ties could eventually develop in the public realm, however. They could also condemn the development of public organization if there is no dynamic transition from the private to the public; social capital is strong in these private networks, but it has yet to extend to the public arena.¹⁰ Nonetheless, as James Gibson poignantly states, "People do not base their decisions to become active in organizational life on the basis of whether they believe strangers can be trusted. Organizations are not formed from strangers."¹¹

Some scholars argue that social capital is a non-existent cultural trait in Burma.¹² Without social capital, an important pillar of civil society, can civil society develop even if given the opportunity? Social capital may not be found in great abundance in Burma, but it is not a static trait. Social capital, like democratic values, can develop through repeated, voluntary interaction.¹³ Furthermore, it is possible that the lack of social capital in Burma is not a result of culture, but a reaction to the totalitarian regime that invaded private

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life to the extent that it made social capital a dangerous commodity, possession of which is criminalized.

Authoritarian regimes might engender a dearth of social capital, but a lack of social capital does not mean that citizens themselves do not have the means to adopt or incorporate it if given the opportunity. Moreover, historical analysis shows that in different eras of Burma's history, the people have exhibited a propensity for a nascent civil society, which presupposes some element of social capital, even if underdeveloped. For example, from Burma's independence in 1948 until the 1962 coup that established the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP, also called the *Lanzin* Party) ruled by the *tatmadaw* (the Burmese military), it could be argued that a weak form of civil society existed. Prior to the coup, voluntary and professional organizations were common throughout the country, especially in the urban arena.¹⁴ In addition to these organizations that operated autonomously from the state, the government sometimes afforded both the media and legal institutions an environment relatively free from state coercion.¹⁵ However, these freedoms were only transitory, established and abolished at the government's whim. For example, during the era after decolonization when outbreaks of civil war dotted the political terrain, tolerance for dissent waxed and waned. Mary Callahan states that the government "invoked emergency provisions and other legal devices to eliminate criticism of the shaky government by imprisoning critics, suspending habeas corpus, shutting down newspapers . . . and closing down student unions."¹⁶ Although the "civilian" government during the period between 1948 and 1962 may not have been a proponent of civil society, given the gravity of internal strife and factionalism demanding strict regulations, it is nonetheless apparent that autonomous organizations did flourish in the public arena in the eras when tranquility allowed them to prevail.

Since the 1962 coup, the Burmese government has remained a tool of the *tatmadaw*. The *tatmadaw* eliminated any vestiges of civil society or organization that are not directly under its authority. The military's stifling presence saturates all aspects of Burmese life. There was, however, one brief moment when fragmented elements of civil society once again became visible. In 1988, a student revolution, much like that of Tian'anmen in China, disrupted the *tatmadaw's* coerced public pacification. Despite the bloody suppression of the revolution, an open and untainted expression of dissatisfaction resonated throughout the country. Christina Fink illustrates the atmosphere:

After the soldiers retreated, independent organization sprang up everywhere. Artists, actors, civil servants and housewives organized unions and marched in the streets. . . . Several dozen newspapers, magazines and pamphlets appeared overnight. . . . In most towns, local committees were set up to handle daily affairs; in particular security and food distribution.¹⁷

The spontaneous emergence of these revolutionary groups may not necessarily have evinced a predisposition toward civil society; they may simply have joined forces, espousing a collective condemnation of repression. However, the continued presence throughout history of incipient organization would suggest otherwise. Regardless of the impetus of these collective actions, they were effective in creating a space between society and the state—a space that threatened the authoritarian institutions. General Khin Nyunt, the SPDC's third in command, wrote an article, "Movements of the Unlawful Bogus Student Organizations," in which he condemned the organizations that developed in 1988, obviously upset by what he must have perceived as a threat to the regime's totalitarian rule by the spontaneous organization of civilian groups.¹⁸ These pervasive organizations outlined by General Khin Nyunt underscore a latent civil society that continues to emerge in troubled times.

The Burmese government allowed the 1990 elections, in part, because of the 1988 protests. Taken together with the overwhelming support for the National League for Democracy (NLD), the elections further signify a propensity of the Burmese people to organize and support institutions that would, in theory, promote both democracy and civil society. Shwe Lu Maung, however, argues that the Burmese are not necessarily predisposed toward democracy *per se*, but rather towards its basic maxims:

[The Burmese] have doubts and probably mixed feelings about democracy, especially about parliamentary democracy, which they recognize as a machinery of imperialism in the process of colonization. While they are not very sure about the goodness and credibility of democracy because it is an institution of imperialism they are also attracted to it because of its liberal attitudes such as freedom of expression, freedom of thought, freedom of action, in brief, the overall freedom of politics.¹⁹

Maung's argument suggests that the mantle of

democracy was not necessarily the driving force for the elections; the desire for a fundamental change away from military totalitarianism was the sole catalyst. Moreover, authentic civil society must be built on rule of law, not on the reputation of charismatic leaders such as the NLD's Aung San Suu Kyi. This does not portend that the NLD is incapable of implementing a transparent and hardy legal apparatus, but it does posit that the emergence of civil society and democracy cannot be estimated solely on the support of the alluring stature of a prominent figure or the vigorous support of free and fair democratic elections.

Prior to the 1990 elections, Burma experimented periodically with the ballot box. These rudimentary elections could be considered as indications of a natural Burmese penchant for democracy, pluralism, and possibly even civil society. However, such optimism is also a little premature. As a British colony, Burma's original intent in drafting a constitution and holding elections was to ensure freedom from imperialism.²⁰ After Burma gained freedom from the British, they held elections in 1947, 1951, and 1960. However, these elections could not be considered fair or free. Military operations were generally conducted in contentious areas prior to elections, suggesting manipulated outcomes.²¹ Moreover, these elections did not witness an enthusiastic turnout, constituting a feeble display of democratic values.²²

While the earlier elections neither championed democratic principles nor provided a formidable pilaster for a growing civil society, the support for the 1990 elections was unprecedented. That desire for freedom bespeaks a shift of the pendulum in a democratic direction. The 1988 uprising presaged these elections, and the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), under pressure to reform, permitted the elections to take place, confident that the council could sway the opinion and the vote.²³ The outcome of the elections, a landslide for the NLD, left the SLORC stupefied; it refused to abdicate its jurisdiction. Despite the SLORC's rejection of the election and the subsequent house arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi, the uprising and the election imply that there exists at least an elementary base on which a civil society could be built.

PROSPECTS FOR AN EMERGING CIVIL SOCIETY

Currently, no evident form of civil society exists in Burma that would fit even the most parsimonious definition. All public dialogue and organization are banned by the state unless given explicit permission. However, there are a few indications that a civil society could develop if reform were initiated from the top.²⁴ For example, the Buddhist *sangha* came forward during the student protests offering to start a dialogue between the state and society. Although the dialogue was unsuccessful, it still indicates that willing agents exist to move into a more open public arena. Also, the state has recently created its own civil society. Of course, state-led civil society is by definition the antithesis of a genuine Western-liberal civil society. Nonetheless, it is possible that these organizations could outgrow the state and slowly develop autonomy. This is highly unlikely in the

current environment, but if the government were to initiate some reform—even apolitical economic reform as happened in the East European and Russian Communist regimes—it may need to make concessions to entrepreneurs in exchange for their loyalty.²⁵ These concessions often entail some measure of freedom from the state, which, once initiated, may be difficult to control or renege.

Regardless of a latent or vibrant civil society, democratization will not be automatic; it is simplistic to link these two concepts too intimately. As we see in many Eastern European countries and in Russia, civil society has not always entailed democratization. Without the proper institutions, civil society decayed, but was not necessarily destroyed.²⁶ Given the cases in Eastern Europe and Russia, it is arguable that the original chain of causality—civil society then democratization—may actually be the inverse. Although civil society may erupt to foment change, that emergent civil society is only temporary, and could be dangerous unless there are institutions to advance and support such organization.²⁷ Democratic institutions do not exist in Burma, but certain elements of society such as the *sangha* and state-led civil society have the potential to develop into such institutions and concomitantly to promote a civil society. Given both Burma's totalitarian legacy and the evidence of a latent civil society, if the

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government allowed reform, a civil society could develop that would support democratization. It is possible, however, that it would not fully develop in a Western-liberal sense until democratic institutions were entrenched and the legacy of totalitarian suppression extinguished.

THE BUDDHIST SANGHA

One of the only groups afforded limited autonomy in Burma is the Buddhist *sangha*—monks organized in their respective temples. Although their autonomy is dependent on non-interference in the political sphere, there still exists a space where civil society could emerge. Michael Frolic suggests that the separation of the church and state in Europe was an antecedent to the emergence of a society distinct from the state: “The separation of church and state created a space for multiple loyalties, for the separation of state and society, and for the evolution of the idea of a private sphere for individuals.”²⁸ In Burma, the *sangha* is separated from the government only in its relative autonomy, but there is no legal separation of the church and state. Therefore, it is probably overly optimistic to suggest that the *sangha* will incite the rise of civil society, yet it may provide an option for those who seek to find a space for interaction that has some distance from the state. However, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC—same leadership as under the SLORC) in Burma created a foundation for its legitimacy by utilizing Buddhist doctrine, convoluting any true separation between the church and the state, and making it unlikely that even a growing divide between the two would mimic the effects of a similar occurrence in Europe.

The state not only manipulates religion to buttress their continued reign, but they also use Buddhist rhetoric both in the media and in their slogans to further indoctrinate the public. For example, they commonly use the term *centana*—goodwill—in describing their role within society; *centana* is such an important concept in the Burmese Buddhist doctrine that to object to actions taken with *centana* is akin to blasphemy, even when the term is exploited to serve despotic means.²⁹ The Buddhist *sangha*, although relatively autonomous, cannot counter the state. It

is restricted by its own code not to oppose moves that are taken with *centana*. Therefore, it provides an unstable pedestal to support the growth or even emergence of civil society.

Nonetheless, there have been instances in Burma where Buddhist monks have encouraged, and even participated in, protests against the state. For example, during the 1988 uprising, the monks tried to deter the military from its massacre while simultaneously promoting dissent and equating the struggle against the regime as “spiritual purification.”³⁰ Moreover, the monks supported the protestors “by giving them protective charms and tattoos.”³¹

However, the fear of state repercussion keeps the defiance of both the secular citizenry and the Buddhist monks at a minimum. Furthermore, after the 1988 uprising, the SPDC heightened its infiltration of society and control of the *sangha*. Military agents deterred further rebellion by “planting monks” in monasteries, effectively closing the space between the church and the state.³² Although there is a modicum of autonomy, most evident at the local level, the *sangha*

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is unlikely to be the engine of civil society. But it is important to note that the *sangha* could be instrumental in negotiating a compromise with the SPDC that may result in the development of a future civil society. Given the *sangha*'s record of political approbation in Burma, it could be a requisite agent fueling the emergence of a civil society. Despite Buddhist values that seem to deter active condemnation of state activity that is disguised in Buddhist semantics, the Buddhist value of detachment may actually help to institutionalize democracy. This attitude of worldly detachment may prevent ideological stagnation, as nothing is seen as permanent and reality is always malleable and contingent on the observer.³³ Therefore, if the *sangha* is able to philosophically address the contradiction in its inaction—the contradiction in the state using Buddhist rhetoric to forward un-Buddhist action—then they will recognize that their inaction is contingent on a flawed principle. As within a democracy, constitutional rules are amenable to change if new situations render old rules inappropriate or inflexible.

STATE-LED CIVIL SOCIETY

The current debates on civil society and Asia focus on the Western implications inherent in civil society and whether these ideals could translate into an Asian model. The Asian realm is characterized largely by authoritarian regimes that do not allow room for the Western archetype of civil society. One of the most salient discussions revolves around the question of whether state-led civil society—civil society cultivated by a government—can still be considered a genuine and prolific civil society. In a Western context, it is imperative that civil society be devoid of any coercion from the state. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that a civil society generated by the state retains some element of coercion or influence from the state. However, it is possible that a weak civil society can exist in Asia if there is some flexibility with regard to the relationship between the state and civil society. Brook and Frolic promote this elastic definition of civil society in their discussion of civil society in China:

State and society are densely interactive realms everywhere, as much in the West as in China. Civil society might better be thought of, therefore, as a formation that exists by virtue of state-society interaction, not as something between, separate from, or autonomous from either.³⁴

It may be a stretch to deviate from the original definition of civil society to such an extent, but entertaining this supposition can advance the application of civil society in Asia generally and in Burma specifically. Moreover, it is plausible that state-sponsored civil society could sow the seeds for more autonomous organization in the future. States generally undergo reform and introduce civil society as a legitimizing instrument, but regardless of the specific impetus, it underlines a tension between the state and society and the state's endeavor to placate the public.

State-led civil society in Burma is generally seen as another schema for the SPDC to completely infiltrate society. Nearly all of these organizations are politicized by the government, are instruments of the military, and are used to quell the pressure for autonomous, non-state organization.³⁵ Although the SPDC uses state-run civil society as a way to propagate its jurisdiction, it may eventually create a space for authentic, "bottom-up" or grass-roots civil society to emerge by allowing society greater access to the state.

The Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA) displays the SLORC's (and it continues

today under the SPDC) most recent attempt to establish a "civil society." This organization is directed primarily at mobilizing the youth in Burma to do the bidding of the state. It formed in 1993, not long after the 1990 election fiasco, in an effort to mitigate the ramifications of the state's brutal suppression of the 1988 uprising and the 1990 democratic elections.³⁶ Taking cues from the Indonesian GOLKAR (the military regime under Suharto), the SLORC formed the USDA as a way to maintain power and to forward its ideology and orthodoxy.³⁷ The organization's main purpose is to bolster the state, but it does so through local initiatives in education and development.³⁸ Membership is reported to be anywhere between 5 and 11 million, which would mean that 12 to 30 percent of the population is involved.³⁹ The membership reflects the dearth of opportunities outside of the sphere of the military.

Without the support of the state, the options for the youth in Burma are slim, especially in a country where even private businesses need a seal of approval from the government before commencing operations. Even though the government denies that it compels membership in the USDA, in a sense it is the only plausible option for those growing up under the reign of the SPDC.⁴⁰ Moreover, for many high school and college students, academic honors and educational advancement are generally "linked to membership." Farmers in rural areas joined the movement when they were informed that their membership would exempt them from conscripted labor.⁴¹

The USDA is not the only organization that the SPDC promotes, although it is the most omnipresent. Private organizations like the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association (MMCWA), spearheaded by General Khin Nyunt's wife, operate under the influence of the government but have many local chapters that do not answer directly to it.⁴² Another organization, the Myanmar Women's Entrepreneurial Association (MWEA), was chartered in 1995 but not allowed to register with the Home Ministry until the participants signed a contract stating that their organization would not become involved in political affairs and that its members all belonged to the USDA.⁴³ The Myanmar Red Cross's (MRC) president "halted meaningful programming on HIV / AIDS and insisted that staff participate in pro-SLORC USDA rallies."⁴⁴ These examples illustrate that the SPDC undeniably stifles the capacities of state-sponsored organizations (termed GONGOs—government-organized NGOs) making their potential for autonomy enigmatic.

While the future autonomy of such organizations could promote a civil society, a state-led civil society

could also further engender a distrust of the government, which would hamper the development of civil society even in the face of reform. Therefore, the existence of a state-led civil society is ambiguous for a future of genuine civil society. Nonetheless, the possibility is worth mentioning as a potential fount for autonomous public organization, and it is possible that, coupled with other elements of a latent civil society in Burma, a state-led civil society would have a liberal development.

PROGNOSTICATIONS OF DEMOCRACY AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN BURMA

The firm grip of Burma's authoritarian rule is unlikely to relax in the short-term. However, as Burma slowly creates links to the international realm both economically and politically, some reform will be necessary to accommodate these new relationships. To date, the Burmese government has adroitly managed its hegemony over society. Ever since the 1990 elections it has kept a tight lid on any autonomous or individual expression that does not uphold the state. The situation became so severe as of late that even its neighbors in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), who are staunch supporters of political non-interference, have started to grumble. Indonesian President Susilo Yudhoyono is the most recent political emissary to visit Burma and entreat them to democratize. The political environment has not changed since 1990, and ASEAN recently decided to do its part to attempt some forced political liberalization in Burma. However, Yodhoyono's visit in early 2006 has yet to prove any more fruitful than the envoys of other foreign dignitaries.

The government is stagnant, but civil society in Burma is not—even if change is slow and barely perceptible. Every time an opportunity arises for public organization, the Burmese people have quickly maneuvered within this new space. As history highlights, when civil society does emerge, it does so with more force each time; whereas elections were once merely formal exercises lacking in substance, the 1990 elections exuded a clear demonstration of the desire for change and the pressure for some element of democracy. There have been no other opportunities since 1990 for the population to join together to form a civil society, but the close interpersonal ties defining the society continue to suggest that once another opportunity arises a powerful social force could emerge.

The displays of spontaneous public organization

in 1990 and prior, coupled with sensitivity toward the precepts of civil society, have positive implications for the future of democracy and civil society in Burma. Although the change is slow and incremental, it should not be dismissed as trivial.⁴⁵ This type of change is important to instill and stimulate strong democratic values and institutions. Since Burma has had no real experience with democracy, a spontaneous change is unlikely, but the potential exists within Burmese society for a civil society to grow without the proper prerequisites and adjustments.⁴⁶

The totalitarian legacy and the government's censure of democratic values and civil society has left an indelible imprint on the lives of the Burmese, shaping how they are able to operate within society. Despite this subjugation, social networks persist in Burma, most predominately in the Buddhist *sangha*. Although these social networks endure without the support of democratic institutions, the rise of civil society and democracy will be closely intertwined in Burma. It is not a general precondition that the two work concurrently, and often they do not.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, civil society will not be tolerated by the Burmese regime unless there is reform from the top. While this reform will not necessarily lead to a democracy, any retreat of the Burmese government from society will be a move along the political continuum toward more democratic values. Furthermore, the overwhelming legitimacy garnered by the NLD supports the supposition that the public actively seeks democratic values, even if only in opposition to the current authoritarian norm. The question remains: If the NLD gains power or some power-sharing arrangement is negotiated, would this new regime foster a civil society, especially a Western-liberal civil society? The terms of a civil society under these conditions are unclear, but state-society relations would definitely be altered to an extent allowing greater public interaction. Even if a Western-liberal civil society is not on the horizon under a new, more democratic government, the social networks apparent in Burma will continue to operate and generate a space for at least a weak civil society, if not for something more robust and vibrant.

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NOTES

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