



Chapter 12

Orientalisation and Manufacturing of 'Civil Society' in Contemporary Burma

Maung Zarni

Introduction

The late Michel Foucault forever changed the way we see expertise and knowledge, at least among the more critical members of the knowledge industry. Foucault exposed the capillary and incipient ways in which institutional powers (for instance, the paternalistic state) are encoded in knowledge, manufacturing 'governable' individuals or citizens/subjects out of 'raw human beings'. If knowledge about ourselves, our natural, political, cultural and economic environments, our ever-shifting relationships to these environments, is a product of social construction, then it is most crucial that we know who are the key players in the construction process, whose interests are being served, marginalised, undermined or diminished, within what justificatory frameworks and how.

In this chapter, I take a critical look at how expertise, donor funding, political power and the organisational influence of Western – and outside – entities operate in manufacturing perceptions of certain social realities in Burma and how the Burmese understand their own situation under the world's oldest military dictatorship (1962–present). Specifically, I examine the problematic application of such highly contested social science concepts as 'civil society' and 'middle class', within the totalising discourse of 'development', which have been in vogue within funding

and policy circles in influential capitals in Europe, North America and Asia. I look at some of the specific mechanisms which were set up and put into operation by powerful external players in order to mould their favourite civil society actors from among local elite circles in Burma whose voices resonate with outside interests. Finally, I make a critical analysis of the specific ways in which these outside interests pursue their respective national, organisational and personal agendas through symbioses with local elites who often serve as cultural and political intermediaries between foreign and local interests, that is, both the Burmese regime and society at large. My formal and informal conversations with this diverse group of interlocutors offer some fresh insights about a country that has been soaked in conflicts since independence in 1948.

A New ‘Civilising Mission’ and its Discourse

The main argument presented here is that the processes of ‘Orientalisation’ – note the plural – are still salient in Burma, long after formal colonial rule has passed into history. By Orientalisation I mean an intellectual/ ideological process whereby influential Western players (for instance, donor governments, politico-philanthropic foundations and experts, both institutionally based or independent) construct certain images, perceptions and understandings of the material realities of local communities. These processes conceal the nature and intent of important participants with regard to Burma as a new economic frontier and as a site for international non-governmental organisation (INGO) activity. Emphatically, I wish to state that I do not believe – nor do I suggest in the discussion – that there exists a vast conspiratorial global network of individuals and organisations that deliberately sets out to pursue its own interests to the detriment of the Burmese people. Nor do these players – often with good intentions – perceive themselves as potential exploiters of an impoverished population struggling to eke out their living under a military dictatorship. These players do not necessarily always cooperate among themselves, having disparate national policy agendas and analyses of the situation.

A central argument I advance here is that notwithstanding the divergence in strategies, priorities and modes of operation, these outside interests – who are themselves involved in Burma’s unfolding tragedy of conflicts,

poverty, and clash of interests and ideas – all share in a new multifaceted 'civilising mission'. For these interests invariably operate from a certain moral or normative standpoint. Almost all of these players – international donors, diplomats, consultants, in-country INGO expatriates – are convinced that they are bringing to the people of Burma the torch of a new modern, liberal civilisation, as well as tangible material benefits. They are all there to treat the sick (Three Diseases Fund), feed the poor (World Food Programme), provide livelihood opportunities (EU's Livelihood Fund), teach the locals about 'project management', grant proposals and report writing, or even save the tigers (New York Conservation Union). Among the all-too-familiar vocabularies in this discourse of liberal civilisation are poverty reduction, humanitarian assistance, free media, development projects and so on. Their new mission is to promote human rights and good governance, help build the capacity of local governmental institutions in order that they can become market friendly and, conversely, to ready local people – and their social relations – for an acceptance of the primacy of market in pursuit of their wants and needs, such as educational 'goods' (schooling, credentials, skills), health services and cultural activities. Couched in the language of the ubiquitous millennium development goals (MDGs), who in their right mind would object to reducing multidimensional poverty, improving life chances and expectancy, or promoting the basic and inalienable rights of human beings? Many of these goals are intrinsically worthwhile. Precisely because of the morally seductive nature of these new multifaceted 'civilising mission(s)' – which conceals undeclared foreign commercial and strategic interests being pursued alongside the rhetoric of human rights and democratisation – the unfolding dynamic of Orientalisation in and about Burma becomes extremely troublesome. For the missions conceal less-than-honourable agendas. These include building strategic ties with the dictatorship, quasi-electorally reconstituted with a more benign façade since November 2010, for commercial and strategic 'national' interests or expanding INGOs' organisational portfolios and agendas. They are being advanced in the guise of humanitarian concerns, 'civil society' development or long-term economic development (Kinzer, 2010). When it comes to various national interests in relation to Burma, as defined in ruling circles, the only discernible difference between the West's liberal democracies and emerging global powers such as China and India (or, for that matter,

countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, South Korea and Singapore) is that the former officially use the liberal rhetoric of emancipation (human rights, freedom, democratisation and empowerment) while the rest do not bother to sugar-coat their policies. This inevitably gives rise to the popular perception among the Burmese that Western policies are exclusively value-driven, overlooking the tangible, if divergent Western interests in Burma wrapped in the seductive moral and modernising discourses of good governance, the free market, human rights and democratisation.

This process of the (re)Orientalisation of Burma as a brothel of raw materials and a sizeable market of 60-plus million consumers involves a multiplicity of foreign and Burmese players. These include powerful individuals, foreign governments, United Nations (UN) agencies, multilateral organisations and commercial players such as venture capitalists with an interest in 'emerging markets'. It is a complex phenomenon linking foreign interests – government, businesses and nongovernmental entities with global influences – to weak, but strategically placed, local players within the regime, the country's commercial sector and economic nationalists who have bought into the ideology of 'development'. Driven by the fear that Asian investors such as China, India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are raking in profits in Burma, unburdened by the liberal rhetoric of human rights, Western commercial interests have increasingly pressurised their governments and international financial institutions to ease the existing sanctions regime that delimits investment in that country. Local communities of resistance and their international supporters have in turn come under increasingly intense pressure from foreign and local interests to drop their opposition towards 'doing business with the Burmese dictatorship' in exchange for the promise of a better future.

The deal on offer can be summed up in the following terms: the Burmese get a more prosperous and open society and a more plural political system at some point in the future while outside commercial and INGO interests move in to set up shop now. However naked commercial interests may actually be, Western policymakers, advocates and advisers are only too cognisant of the need to present their deeper motives in moral or ethical terms, notwithstanding the reality that the business of Britain's Foreign Office is business, as its foreign secretary William Hague put it bluntly to the *Financial Times* last year. In particular, they make utilitarian use of a

concept such as 'civil society' while the real people are in effect left out of their calculations. Importantly, these interests share a common policy language which in turn gets amplified by their allies in the global media who share similar 'modernist' ideological predilections for the 'free' market, liberalisation and commodification as the ultimate solution for all economic and political ills. From this standpoint, the embedding of a liberal market and its prerequisites (such as privatisation, a dynamic middle class, social entrepreneurship, commercialism, social capital, civil society and so on) are all signs of progress.

Civil Society and its Place in Burma Studies

In the contemporary policy and media discourses on Burma no term has the greater currency than 'civil society'. Its almost universal use camouflages its categorically contested nature and a notable absence of definitional clarity. As Michael Edwards, director of the Ford Foundation's Civil Society Unit, points out civil society as a concept and a social construct means many things to many people with radically different ideological orientations. To the libertarians at the Cato Institute in Washington, civil society is about 'fundamentally reducing the role of politics in society by expanding free markets and individual liberty'. By contrast, for participants at the World Social Forum civil society is 'the single most viable alternative to the authoritarian state and the tyrannical market'. This by no means exhausts the plethora of meanings attributed to civil society. Here it is instructive to quote Edwards (2005) at length:

if you can't explain something, put it down to civil society! Adam Seligman, tongue firmly in cheek, calls civil society the 'new analytic key that will unlock the mysteries of the social order', Jeremy Rifkin calls it 'our last, best hope', the UN and the World Bank see it as the key to 'good governance' and poverty-reducing growth, and even the real reason for war against Iraq – to kick-start civil society in the Middle East, according to Administration officials in Washington DC.

Much scholarly ink has been spilt over the meanings and practices associated with civil society since it came back to prominence as a component of democratisation debates in relation to authoritarian states from the 1970s onwards, notably in central and eastern Europe but also in parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Here I confine my brief

discussion of civil society to the context of international Burma policy debates over the past 10 years.

The old knowledge/expertise about precolonial and later Burma under British colonial rule was largely produced by Christian missionaries, European mercenaries, adventurers, explorers and colonial administrators. And what they produced was typically Kiplingesque, littered with essentialising descriptors such as ‘lazy natives’, ‘backward cultures’, ‘martial tribes’, ‘incapable of independent judgment and rational thought’. Surprisingly perhaps, research on the ‘new’ Burma – under the encompassing rubric of ‘Burma studies’ – has remained recognisably neoOrientalist in its emphasis during the past six decades. It too constructs explanatory frameworks according to which the country and its people are perpetually plagued by their ‘inherent deficiencies’ of one kind or another. It is within this broader context of continuing neo-Orientalist practices in Burma studies that the introduction and subsequent discussions of civil society in the context of military rule needs to be understood.

Writing recently, David Keys (2011) holds the country’s ‘weak civil society’ at least partially responsible for the longevity of the world’s oldest surviving military dictatorship (the other is an abstract notion of the military’s nationalism). The analysis in his essay (‘Burma: why its military dictatorship still survives’) very obviously derives from what James Scott derisively calls ‘dynastic histories’ by Thant Myint-U (2001), Michael Charney (2006) and Victor Lieberman (1984), among others.¹ In Keys’s words, ‘the second source of military power is the historically weak nature of civil society’. His analysis of Burma’s most crucial contemporary challenge, namely the enduring dictatorship, is deficient in that it can only repeat a claim typical of Orientalist scholarship – that if the natives are oppressed and poor, there must be something wrong or weak about them and that only the Western-educated middle class can hold authoritarian rulers in check. Similar notions are at work elsewhere in the Burma studies field. David Steinberg, the author of *Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know* (2009), does not acknowledge that Burma even has a civil society, especially after General Ne Win’s onslaught that ushered in military rule in 1962. Earlier

¹ In his magisterial two-volume work on Southeast Asian histories Lieberman (2003/2009) has declared that he has moved away from the palace-centred approaches, including his own, to writing history where people had no place.

Steinberg (1997) argued that Ne Win's military dictatorship effectively 'killed civil society in Burma', while opting not to mention that the entire Western bloc looked the other way when its anti-Communist proxy was killing off dissidents and other political opponents.

Another well-known American student of contemporary Burma, Mary P. Callahan (2007), asserts there is no word for 'state' in the Burmese language, apparently oblivious to the fact that there exists an ample body of politico-linguistic tools that adequately captures various technologies of the state – in both Weberian (that is, the state as the social organisation morally sanctioned to have monopoly over the use of violence and other coercive powers against its enemies) and Foucauldian (that is, the pastoral power of governing institutions by which 'raw human beings' are made docile or 'governable') senses. For instance, the Burmese notion of *hi-riau-tat-pa*, widely considered the most important code for social relations and individual behaviour, is both pastoral and regulatory (Maung Htin, 1992). It serves as a governing principle rooted in the inculcated selfawareness about one's own shameful conducts which are liable to be punished by the social (and political) order. In a similar vein, Robert H. Taylor, whose magnum opus *The State in Myanmar* (2009) is required reading for many undergraduate courses in Southeast Asian studies, writes elsewhere of precolonial Burma (and Thailand) in the following terms: 'notions of individual freedom and liberty, like the ideas of the public and the community, were essentially non-existent in Thailand and Burma two hundred years ago' (Taylor, 2002: 145). In these contemporary Orientalist constructions, that clearly echo works from the colonial era, Burma's communities and peoples – now or two centuries ago – are rendered stateless, community-less and without 'civil society'. These are merely samples of the new Orientalist discourses which have greatly influenced a new generation of Western (and non-Western) students. In skilful hands these tropes are passed off as 'authoritative' and 'balanced'.

If a place had no state, no community or public, no conception of freedom, what about those feudal rulers who lorded over these stateless 'unfree individuals' with no communal or public spirit? Colonel Henry Burney, the British resident at the Court of Ava from 1830 to 1838 during the reign of King Sagaing, described this Burmese monarch who fought and lost the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1824 as 'a weak man, incapable of having an independent judgment', while an American Baptist

missionary who lived and worked in Burma for forty years (from the 1810s onwards) observed that the same king had some interest in reforming his country along Western lines but also had an interest in alchemy ‘to make himself long-living and invincible’ (Than Tun, 2010: 17).

It would be infantile to reject in a kneejerk fashion any critical observations of various aspects of precolonial or contemporary political, social or economic relations. Some Burmese scholars, such as Than Tun, have no problem identifying some of the categorical weaknesses and failures of Burma’s feudal polities which had (limited) imperialist ambitions towards their neighbours, which succeeded militarily but failed administratively and economically. But when scholars assign to the country’s history, culture and society a disproportionate share of responsibility for its failures as a struggling community of peoples, then this analytical expertise becomes problematic for a simple reason. These ‘expert’ constructions of Burma and its problems profoundly influence crucial contemporary political and policy questions. While the inhabitants of feudal society may have lacked what we now call ‘nationalist or national political consciousness’, as Than Tun himself observes, they were certainly more than loose clusters of stateless individuals. In fact, they built cohesive social systems, not just palaces and armed bands of fighters, which were rooted in indigenous conceptions of justice, fairness, equality, and respect for law and order. According to Maung Htin (1992: 99–100), Burmese feudal society under the strong influence of Buddhism was certainly exposed to progressive ideals and ideas. Values and practices such as consensus building, deliberation, the rule of law, respect for the opinions and judgements of sages (the precursors of our latter-day experts?), restraints against gender violence and reverence for holy men (and women) were explicitly spelled out in *Apariharniya Dhamma, Mahaparinirvana Sutra* of Buddhist texts, dating from the second century CE.

To be sure the deficiency models which today diagnose Burmese people with three cardinal diseases – poverty, conflict and oppression – are rightly cognisant of contemporary geopolitical and economic environment in the region which has enabled the military regime to weather serious domestic challenges. However, when it comes to Burma studies scholarship, their deficiency models assign a disproportionately greater weight to domestic factors (for instance, the ‘character’ of the

people, fractious social and ethnic dynamics) than extremely powerful external factors. These external reasons are numerous and overlapping: the increasingly expansive economic base of the regime (thanks to the huge amounts of foreign direct investment in the oil, gas and mining sectors); the ability of the generals to accumulate great personal wealth with impunity in offshore accounts in Singaporean banks; the unflinching international protection of an autocratic China and oligarchic Russia (for instance, a double veto at the UN Security Council against even a non-binding resolution on Burma in 2007); democratic India's political, economic and military support; ASEAN acting as the regime's international mouthpiece; and the global extractive industries' unconditional embrace of the regime in exchange for access to its considerable mineral wealth. But neither should we forget the role of Western scholarship in providing more sophisticated justifications for dictatorship and foreign and international commercial interests while, at the same time, attempting to gloss over the regime's heinous and irredeemable character. It would certainly be unfair to say that all those who produce new expertise through the prism of Burma studies are uninformed about the deeply Orientalist nature of their particular branch of the knowledge industry. In fact, a recent issue of the flagship *Journal of Burma Studies* (2010) does provide 'a set of articles in conversation that expand our understanding of workings of colonial discourse and local response'. One can only hope that this portends a new self-critical approach within the community of professional Burma scholars, one that can reflect on how the new Orientalism manifests itself in both academic and popular works.

Civil Society as a Venue for the Localisation of New Orientalism

It is commonly observed in many postcolonial societies and communities that indigenous people themselves absorb certain Orientalist constructions in terms of their own group self-perceptions. Certain ethnic minority or ethnic nationalities, derisively referred to as 'hill tribes', which were the exclusive recruits in the ethnically-based colonial expeditionary forces or local security forces, cling onto the colonial discourses which portrayed them as 'martial and honest people' vis-à-vis 'cowardly and untrustworthy other ethnic groups'. Here then emerges an

ideal type of the Burmese ‘native’ who has internalised certain Orientalist worldviews, unreconstructed and unproblematised, by virtue of interacting with Orientalists who continue to populate foreign ministries, INGOs and other influential organisations with a global reach. These ‘natives’ espouse views which, needless to say, serve their own personal and organisational interests, and therefore become integral to the country’s problems. Many interesting historic examples serve to illustrate the point. The British-trained nurse Khin May Than (Kitty Ba Than) was said to have remarked during a state visit to the USA with her husband, Ne Win, in the 1960s that even American children have to learn to eat hamburgers properly. She argued that by the same token the Burmese will need to be taught how to be ‘democratic’ before they could be allowed to have such luxuries as a democracy or human rights.² Of course it was her husband who had ousted the democratically-elected government of U Nu in a coup, disbanded parliament, abolished the independent judiciary and killed off a vibrant free media. Three decades later Ne Win’s physician, Kyaw Win, a British-trained medical doctor and malaria specialist, talked on camera about the ‘political immaturity’ of the Burmese people (who therefore needed the military’s stick) and the alienness of democratic ideals in the Burmese context. As Steinberg correctly points out, the exposure of Burma’s soldiers and other elites to the West does not necessarily guarantee the spread of Western liberal ideals and ideas. Perhaps the most invidious example was Maung Maung, who received his legal training at Lincoln’s Inn, London, gained an LLD from Utrecht University in the Netherlands and spent two years at Yale University before becoming the most illiberal chief justice, as well as a leading architect of the 1974 constitution and subsequent changes to the judicial system, exercising power at the very heart of Ne Win’s dictatorship.

There seems to be no shortage of Burmese willing to use their talents and abilities to articulate new, localised Orientalisms, and claim at the same time to constitute the progressive elements of civil society. In fact there is a new generation of this ilk who view the country’s proverbial masses through the paternalistic lenses of their Western funders, political patrons and their intelligence protectors within the military regime. Their

² Personal communication with the retired professor, U Kyaw Win, who was at the Burmese embassy reception in Washington when Khin May Than expressed her views, Laguna Hills, California, 1991.

concepts of democratisation and civil society provide no role for ordinary citizens. A rather typical *modus operandi* is to create a well-funded local NGO that 'promotes' civil society in isolation from other political changes. The justification for this kind of gradualism usually comes in a rather mealy-mouthed form of words: 'we are not talking about democracy in Burma. We are just trying to expand a policy space for one inch or two'.³ It is evident that such a self-limiting understanding denies *a priori* that the growth of civil society and policy space is categorically part and parcel of any democratisation process.

It is only to be expected that local disciples of those policy 'experts' who impart their knowledge about civil society, democracy and state building through their short-term 'capacity-building' courses, only parrot the terminology which is in vogue in funding circles. For example, an English language textbook, *Myanmar Perceptions of Myanmar Economics*, compiled by Hans-Bernd Zöllner (2010), a German 'expert' on Burma, contains numerous instances of how the 'deficiency model of the natives' is perpetuated within the donor-funded discourses of self- and communityempowerment and 'civil society for democracy'. The following quotation from a trainee of the capacity-building NGO, Myanmar Egress, typifies the attitudes of these disciples:

From government's side, the supportive (social) measures are only on paper and not for real. And therefore, civil societies, NGOs, INGOs had been coming in our country. But there had been some misunderstanding and barriers that prevent politics and nature of those organisations to be known by beneficiaries openly. Those barriers are coming from insufficiency of knowledge, nature and ability of citizens.... What exactly need to do is to build the bridge between donors and recipients. This will be sympathy, empathy and sound institutions (*Ibid.*: 16–17).

By contrast to the ordinary Burmese citizens the self-appointed representatives of civil society view themselves as 'strategists', 'key players', 'interlocutors', 'mediators' and the nation's 'gurus', and passionately espouse what they call 'democracy through soft-authoritarianism', that is, a developmental authoritarianism of the East and Southeast Asian variety. Many of them indeed congregate around Myanmar Egress, the best-known and perhaps most controversial local

³ This statement was articulated at a Chulalongkorn University public forum on democratisation in Burma in 2010 where I was one of the panellists.

NGO, managed and supported by regime cronies, the army bred and international scholars like Taylor. They share well-known sympathies for the dictatorship and, conversely, considerable hostility towards Aung San Suu Kyi and the democratic opposition at large (Wai Moe, 2010; Maung Shwe, 2010). Some are well-known writers and former regime advisers, such as Kyaw Win and Chan Aye, and their views are published in the Burmese language weekly *The Voice*. The Friedrich Ebert Foundation, associated with the Social

Democratic Party of Germany, funds Myanmar Egress.⁴

Responses from Western diplomats, donors and media personnel to the deeply disturbing exposés of what this ‘civil society’ group really is – that is, a regime’s propaganda proxy with below-the-radar commercial, intelligence and familial ties to the generals – have been typically defensive and neo-Orientalist in character. Criticisms of Myanmar Egress are dismissed as more or less ‘slanders’ and ‘rumours’ based on ‘personal jealousy, personality conflicts and organisational rivalries’. Public political discussion and contestations between Burmese are routinely constructed in Western commentaries as emotionally and political immature ‘natives’ fighting over ‘civil society’ and its spoils, once again reviving ideas of the ‘flawed character’ of a people. A personal example illustrates the point. In response to an article I published on what I termed the ‘sham elections’ (Zarni, 2010), where I was openly critical of the extent to which German funders had colluded with the military regime, Zöllner declared himself ‘personally affected’ by the article. He rejected the validity of the article on the grounds that ‘Zarni’s main attitude towards the ruling generals and their alleged Western “cheerleaders” is one of contempt not one of rational discourse which can be regarded as one basic element of (Western) democratic culture’. He went on to lay the blame for the last twenty years of conflict on ‘the lack of a culture of compromise’ of the Burmese people. These debates are in effect about what constitutes ‘legitimate’ scholarship or expertise on Burma. Today’s leading Burma scholars in London, Berlin, Washington and Bangkok are

⁴ The Friedrich Ebert Foundation, which operates in over 100 countries, has acquired a bad name for itself among some Southeast Asian pro-democracy intellectuals such as James Gomez of Singapore (now at Monash University) and Giles Ji Ungpakorn of Thailand. They argue that the Foundation betrays its own mission of promoting democratisation when in reality it works only with groups in power and individuals with access to ruling cliques in places like Thailand, Singapore and Burma.

called upon to give strategic and policy input on 'how to best help Burmese people', so that what passes for Burma studies can and does have direct implications for people on the ground. I want to stress here that my argument is not in opposition to the idea or reality of non-Burmese scholars and experts producing specialised knowledge about Burma but against Orientalism in the production of knowledge, whoever produces it.

Civil Society's Donor-patrons in the New Orientalist Discourse

If civil society is an all-purpose policy mantra then it begs the question as to whether civil society organisations can ever break free of the dictatorship. Civil society in Burma is already being made to dance to the tune of its international donors and micromanaged by the in-country INGOs and representatives, project evaluators and consultants from official governmental such as Britain's Department for International Development (DfID), USAID, AusAID and so on. Here I look at how donor funding, power and institutional prestige are used as effective instruments in 'resurrecting' civil society while deploying some highly contested assumptions and concepts. If the regime in power is widely reviled both in and outside the country, and if the resistance movements are not expected to replace it partly or wholly in the foreseeable future, then it is of course *rational* for outside actors to create their own local proxies through which they plan to promote their own interests, however defined.

Initial attempts to resurrect 'civil society as an existing reality' – which survived the onslaught of Ne Win first military dictatorship – came from a young scholar, Jasmine Lorch, who was incubated within the Institute for International and Security Affairs (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, SWP), Germany's most influential think tank whose mission is to advise the German government and parliament through 'research-based policy advice'. Lorch's publications began to appear at a time when Germany was looking to establish a policy rationale behind its attempts to push for commercial engagement with the dictatorship (specifically, a niche market for its heavy machinery). The German government's attempts ran counter to the prevailing policy wisdom within the EU, which was to isolate the Burmese regime through selective sanctions (Shuessler, 2011). Germany (and other interests who shared this pro-commercial

engagement stance) needed to find something an alternative partner to the repressive state and reviled generals. Civil society was supposed to be the answer. The subtitle of Lorch's (2007) essay – 'locating gaps in the authoritarian system' – is suggestive of the potential for resistance and subversion within civil society. And yet German political foundations – from the left-leaning Heinrich Böll Foundation of the Green Party to the officially justiceminded Friedrich Ebert Foundation of the Social Democratic Party – have not always been supportive of Burmese resistance and opposition movements.⁵ In the policy and scholarly debates, the louder the call for commercial engagement the stronger 'civil society' has become, or so it has been made to seem. However, Lorch's argument that civil society in Burma remained alive throughout the dictatorships did not make inroads with donor circles until two significant developments took place – the 2007 pro-democracy protests dubbed the 'saffron revolt' and Cyclone Nargis the following year.

Since these two events the parameters of civil society have changed, rather conveniently for Western donors searching for business opportunities and local proxies to channel funds through. The saffron revolt protests, led by thousands of Buddhist monks, failed to bring about substantive political change. Nonetheless it can justifiably be considered one of the defining moments in the country's recent history. It has helped shape a renewed discourse within international Burma policy circles – at the UN, the EU, national capitals with serious concerns and interests, INGO headquarters and local and global Burmese networks. One immediate outcome of the saffron revolt's failure was a decisive paradigmatic shift among policymakers, advisers and international Burma experts – from considering the country's oppositional movements as a venue for meaningful social change to identifying the type of civil society organisations that will enable the 'pragmatic embrace' of the regime.

The devastation wrought by Cyclone Nargis, which killed around 145,000 people and made some two million economically struggling residents in the delta region homeless, enabled the 'humanitarian industry' to force its way into the country on the back of the generals'

⁵ For documentation of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation's quiet and not-so-quiet funding and other institutional and political support for organisations and individuals considered the Burmese dictatorship's proxies and official organs (for instance, Myanmar Institute of International and Strategic Studies) see: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/37995772/FES-and-EU-s-Danger-in-Burma>.

indifference and ineptitude. In the prevailing development discourse 'humanitarian space' – presumed as emerging in the post-Cyclone Nargis period – was declared to be the next best thing to successful popular uprisings. This space supposedly contained the potential for political change by building the capacity of civil society to hold the state in check. The extravagant promotion of humanitarian work as a strategic venue for deeper political change is precisely what David Reiff (2002) had already railed against in his authoritative *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis*.

While immediate humanitarian relief after the cyclone case was very much needed, disasters present opportunities for the aid industry to expand their international operations, increase their budgets, maintain their international profiles and further spread their influence and name recognition (Chomsky, 2008). Needless to say the impact of this humanitarian space on democratic transition has not been evident. On the contrary, the military regime effectively reined in INGOs and local NGOs working in the devastated delta region, declaring that the humanitarian relief phase was over and the new development phase has begun. Because of the dictatorship's refusal to allow emergency relief aid, and denying INGOs access to operate in the disaster area, local secular organisations, Buddhist monastic and other religious communities, and individuals from across the country rushed to help the cyclone victims. The INGOs already in residence in country used these existing local networks and communities to carry out their work, from data collection to aid distribution to writing reports, while those INGOs which did not have official licences to operate in Burma, but wished to have a foot in the door, made use of local organisations with dubious ties with the dictatorship. All of a sudden, Burmese society was no longer 'deficient'. It had all the elements of a plausible civil society. All they needed, it was argued, was more funding, more INGO presence, more programmes to upgrade their skills in coping with life under dictatorship, more national-level schemes in microfinance, education, nutrition, food aid and so on. In the hands of new Orientalists, not only the small ruling clique of senior generals but also the nature and attributes of entire social order could be reconstructed overnight. Without having to change their ruling behaviour or reform their governing institutions, the generals were now ready for engagement while the Burmese people – who had been considered completely atomised and lacking in so-called social capital – were now

local heroes who had kept a vibrant civil society alive despite half-century of dictatorship (for a critique of the uses of social capital as a concept see Harriss, 2001). Such is the elastic nature of Orientalist discourses on Burma.

In fact the manufacturing of elite 'civil society voices' has been in train for some years. Several European entities – such as the European Commission, Britain's DfID and the FCO, Oxfam, Novib, Action Aid and a cluster of German political foundations, to name just a few – have played paymasters in the creation and promotion of a small but influential pool of civil society actors. In so doing, they have primed their proxies for the marketisation of the economy and the NGO-isation of local politics, at the expense of the opposition in particular and the public in general. They have sometimes promoted a deeply troublesome perspective. Incredibly, they have in the past claimed that it was the 2,000 Burmese dissidents in captivity, including Suu Kyi, and their supporters in exile, who constituted the real obstacle to economic development.

Having taken some 13 years to draft a new constitution the generals eventually held elections in November 2010. These turned out to be a sham even by ASEAN's illiberal standards. Prior to the election the term civil society began to circulate widely like some kind of mantra. Seeking ways to withdraw their solidarity with political or armed resistance to the dictatorship Western donor-patrons of civil society carefully crafted their 'cautious welcome' of the announcement of the election, while quietly encouraging local organisations to form parties and contest the elections, lobbying influential National League for Democracy (NLD) members not to boycott the elections (against the decision of its central executive committee), and propping up pro-election organisations under the banner of civil society. When the NLD leadership, the country's undisputed foremost opposition network and party, announced its decision to boycott the generals' elections the donors, especially those from Britain and Germany, intensified their support for those who went against the avowed stance of NLD and ethnic armed resistance groups. They sought out Burmese or Burma experts who advocated 'pragmatism' in the face of uncompromising and ruthless power, framing them as 'intelligent', 'rational' and 'forward-thinking'. In private, some Burma-based diplomats criticised jailed dissidents and their 'incapacity to bring about pragmatic and practical changes'.

What is especially disconcerting is that such views appear to deviate sharply from the firm pro-democracy stance of their own governments' official policies. In October 2010, for example, Britain's deputy prime minister, Nick Clegg (2010) wrote that '[t]hese elections will be little more than a sham to perpetuate military rule. So when Asian and European leaders meet ... in Brussels, the U.K. will be calling for us to speak with one voice against the gross mistreatment of the Burmese people'. That same month Britain's former prime minister, Gordon Brown (2010), called the election a 'travesty'. He went on:

But the time has come for us all to do more. We must ensure there is no reduction in sanctions against the regime and think how we can each contribute to raising the profile of this gravest of injustices. Aung San Suu Kyi should be released immediately but while she is denied a voice, we must each give ours.

Despite these unequivocal statements it is equally clear that the call for 'one voice against the gross mistreatment of the Burmese people' was not heeded by many of Britain's own civil servants in the FCO and DfID in Rangoon, let alone by Asian leaders.

Western promotion of the election brought rewards for the chosen civil society actors. The greatest paradox in advancing civil society as the main game changer in Burma is the fact that it makes no place for the masses. This is the case even while the Burmese public itself has refused to buy into the paternalistic view that economic prosperity, political freedoms and ethnic equality can be delivered by an externally manufactured civil society. The question is whose interests are served by such a self-evidently artificial civil society. Today civil society appears as a new Orientalist paradise. Of course, liberally educated policymakers, politicians and international experts in Western and Asian capitals are going to feel the need to construct a moral discourse and develop a conceptual framework for change in order to justify this significant policy shift, which amounts to embracing the dictatorship with few if any conditionalities attached. Therefore support for civil society is seen as the only viable policy tool to advance foreign interests. The following extract from a US embassy cable (signed by chief of the US mission in Rangoon, dated Monday, 14 July 2008, with the subject line 'Continuing the Pursuit of Democracy in Burma') sent to the State Department in Washington three months after Cyclone Nargis struck illustrates precisely the

rationale behind using civil society and the utility of ‘humanitarian assistance’ in pursuit of US interests:

We should seek every opportunity to support and increase the capacity of Burma’s nascent civil society by expanding humanitarian assistance inside the country that promotes self-reliance, conflict resolution, and respect for human rights. Such a policy will have the added benefit of expanding our influence and increasing our access throughout the country. Not only will this approach increase our knowledge of the subtle changes occurring inside Burma, but it will strengthen our position and influence inside when change does come, so we can assist the Burmese to reform their political and economic systems in a manner that best promotes U.S. economic and strategic interests.

The Middle Class as the Great Emancipator

Within the context of international development and the new Orientalist discourses, contemporary Burma policy discussions harness notions of civil society to the middle class. This is a very old assumption in political development theory. From the claims of modernisation theory in the 1950s and 1960s, through to the ‘third wave’ democratisation literature of the 1970s and 1980s, the middle class has held a privileged position as the harbingers of political liberalisation and associational life. In particular a correlation was made between the opening up of market conditions and the creation of a consumption-oriented economy, on the one hand, and the demand for greater social, ideological and political freedoms, on the other. For a massively agrarian society this trajectory is uncharted territory. It is obviously not enough simply for people to demand freedoms for a fundamentally different social order to emerge. It is in this sense that the middle class is presented as the vanguard of a highly voluntaristic notion of democratisation. The emerging civil society will thus need to be oriented along a particular set of subjective interests before the population as a whole can ‘realistically’ expect to enjoy the benefits of a more liberal political system. A new class of Western-educated individuals, with greater purchasing power who, as new global consumers, can participate in and contribute to the expanding market relations is considered to be a precondition before any liberal institutions can be expected to emerge out of the current order. According to U Myint (2006), who now serves as a key economic adviser to President Thein

Sein, the country's economic structure remains unchanged since the 1930s. The agriculture sector's share of GDP is higher than comparably impoverished neighbours such as Cambodia and Laos while the overwhelming majority of the population is rural. In this discourse of middle class-led modernisation agrarian communities need to be commercialised – brought within the structures of the market – before they can be democratised. 'The poor can't eat ballots' is one of the most common catchphrases of those who subscribe to this development-before-democratisation thesis.

In a perceptive essay on Southeast Asian middle classes, Clive Kessler (2001) highlights the problematic character and role of the new middle classes who owe their emergence as standard bearers for political change to the autocratic, paternalistic states and their ruling elites. In drawing an interesting historical contrast, Kessler notes that the middle class bourgeoisie in eighteenth and nineteenth century Western Europe overcame the feudal, absolutist state and its institutions in conjunction with deep-seated social changes (such as urbanisation and industrialisation) which helped spearhead the initial waves of democratisation across institutions of power, culture and knowledge. For their part, Southeast Asian middle classes display deep ambivalence about democratisation as a large-scale and profound transformative process and are 'schizophrenic' in their parasitical relations with the state. Kessler raises a pertinent question here. Are the members of today's Southeast Asian middle classes courageous advocates of reform and partisans of 'civil society ... or are they fearful, familistic, and materialistic conformists, unconcerned with the issues of the public good so long as they can enjoy the benefits of attractive share issues and access to the latest and most desired consumer goods?' Kessler concludes that the middle classes in Southeast Asia display 'a dual or divided consciousness', playing both 'courageous reform-minded citizens and selfish "amoral familists", unmindful of public issues' depending on the direction of the political wind (2001: 37).

If the best that middle class elements can do in other semi-democratic Southeast Asian polities such as Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore is to oscillate between public-spirited reformism and selfish 'parasitism' then the positioning of the emerging middle class as the only viable venue for democratic change in Burma is neither conceptually nor empirically convincing. Demographically, perhaps 10 per cent of the total population

estimated recently at over 60 million by the Asian Development Bank (2011) has left the country in search of opportunities elsewhere, as economic and political refugees, documented and undocumented migrant workers; in addition there are an estimated half million internally displaced people and another half million political refugees in neighbouring Thailand. Many of the 'voluntary' migrants and migrant workers are driven and self-disciplined with energy, initiative, connections and a degree of schooling, who wish to improve their own material conditions and provide for their families whom they left at home. They would recognisably be a part of the emergent middle class. What remains is a vast number of urban and rural poor who feel a general sense of hopelessness, a coterie of the super rich made up of powerful military families and their cronies, and relatively small intermediary classes.

The chances of a politically viable middle class emerging out of the current political and economic context appear remote. The realities on the ground are that the military retains not only a near monopoly of control over politics and policy, despite the recent appearance of greater openness, and is engaged in a large-scale transfer of public assets worth billions into the hands of a small number of military families and cronies under the banner of 'privatisation'. In simple material and institutional terms, then, it is inconceivable that the middle class is going to emerge out of these new arrangements as a force to challenge the status quo. At the same time the overwhelming majority of the population is systematically and structurally marginalised from this 'emerging market'.

Conclusion

Thomas Carothers (2002), one of the more astute students of democratisation, observes that the record of democratic change since the so-called 'third wave' began in 1974 reveals few successful cases of 'controlled reforms' or 'negotiated bargains' leading to democracy. Historically, the democratic transitions in countries like Poland, Chile, South Africa, Taiwan and South Korea actually point the other way. Here vigorous democrats with no fear of 'mass politics' successfully pushed for political opening, genuine multiparty competition, and free and fair elections. In light of the reality check provided by these actual historical examples the programme of liberation through the middle class activism and donor-sponsored civil society organisations seems highly

implausible. Why then are the supporters of this approach and international donors continuing to champion the middle class, calling for a lifting of sanctions and pressing for greater commercial engagement with the dictatorship? Just as nineteenth century Orientalism justified what was then the new imperialism and the white man's burden so the new Orientalisms are today manufacturing a policy trajectory that threatens to undermine the very democracy that so many have struggled for during the course of half a century.

Since Aung San Suu Kyi's announcement in early 2012 that she was prepared to work within the regime's framework for 'democratisation' and promote 'development', Burma has become the hottest destination for politicians, corporate executives and investors. The guest list includes nothing short of a who's who of the global business and political elites, including Ban Ki-Moon, Hilary Clinton, David Cameron, Catherine Ashton, Kevin Rudd and George Soros. Beneath the smokescreen of hyped-up reforms and progress lies the ugly political economy of an emerging symbiosis between the country's regime and the commercial and geostrategic interest groups. After two decades of post-Cold War hostilities between Burmese generals and their former Cold War 'friends' in London, Berlin, Washington and Tokyo, a *danse macabre* is set in motion. The backdrop this time is the West's need to contain an increasingly powerful China in Burma's eastern neighbourhood and the worsening economic decay in Europe and North America. In this new geopolitical drama both the generals in Naypyidaw and the liberals in Western capitals have found a new role for iconic Aung San Suu Kyi – a perfect cover for their dubious deals in gas and oil, timber, minerals and precious stones, resumption of military-to-military cooperation and intelligence sharing. The generals let Aung San Suu Kyi be the face of their bogus 'parliament', thereby securing a degree of electoral respectability in the jaundiced eyes of the West obsessed with forms of democracy, as opposed to its essence. The West, for its part, offers the generals and cronies seed capital, technologies of resource exploitation and new lines of credit and insurance in exchange for an unrestrained access to both Asia's most lusted-after 'frontier economy' and a sizeable market of 60 million consumers. In an Orwellian manner, this deal is widely hailed as 'democratising and developmental' by the UN, the IMF, the World Bank, the EU and so on. Here think tanks, international development consultants, Burma academics, corporate media, Western-

schooled local commercial and technocratic elements and ‘civil society’ leaders also play their part, producing, disseminating, internalising and enforcing new Burma Orientalisms. **References**

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