Journal of International and Global Studies

Volume 8 | Number 2 Article 3

4-1-2017

On Pathways That Changed Myanmar: A Précis

Matthew Mullen Ph.D.
Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University, matthew.john.mullen@gmail.com

On Pathways That Changed Myanmar: A Précis

Matthew Mullen PhD
Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies
Mahidol University
matthew.john.mullen@gmail.com

Abstract

Change in Myanmar came from above, below, within, abroad, and the fore. This précis of *Pathways That Changed Myanmar* explains how a multidimensional understanding of change in Myanmar can help to explain the military junta's decision to move towards a pacted transition. Subversion and creation at the grassroots level transformed the distribution of opportunities, leverage, power, incentives, and influences, as did the global effort to name, shame, and sanction the regime. Decades of contention from the National League for Democracy and many ethnic political groups, in combination with the impact of the Third Force, a network that sought to engage the regime even at the highest ranks, made space for a civilian parliament. At the grassroots level and in elite political circles, the efforts of those seeking change in Myanmar combined to transform the environment and conditions of governance, culminating a situation in which junta leadership in Naypyidaw had to make a move.

Keywords: Myanmar, resistance, change, strategy, morality, marginalization

Myanmar's pivot towards a new era of governance provides an apt opportunity to pause and reflect on how this change came about. Beyond simply recounting stories of oppression, resistance, and overcoming shared by over 500 informants from throughout Myanmar during the pivotal window from 2009 to the November 2015 elections, *Pathways That Changed Myanmar* extracts lessons from the multiple, contrasting struggles that brought about the transition. *Pathways That Changed Myanmar* (hereafter *Pathway*s), thus, adds to an expanding body of literature on the events leading up to and surrounding the dissolution of the Myanmar military junta. Using select works for comparison, this précis attempts to position *Pathways* in the field and elaborate on what *Pathways* contributes to ongoing debates. In doing so, this précis highlights a number of unique attributes. Firstly, while many scholars focus on the manifestation of change at the highest ranks of government, lending to a view of change in Myanmar as emanating from above, *Pathways* argues for a multidimensional understanding. While change did manifest as the military strategically opening certain doors for democratic forces, this pacted transition is the product of cumulative pressures and influences that came from above, below, within, abroad, and the fore. Subversion and creation at the grassroots level transformed the distribution of opportunities, leverage, power, incentives, and influences, as did the global effort to name, shame, and sanction the regime. Decades of contention from the National League for Democracy and many ethnic political groups, in combination with the impact of the Third Force, a network that sought to engage the regime even at the highest ranks, made space for a civilian parliament. At the grassroots level and in elite political circles, the efforts of those seeking change in Myanmar combined to transform the environment and conditions of governance, culminating a situation in which junta leadership in Naypyidaw had to make a move.

Related to the assertion that change in Myanmar emanated from diverse sources, *Pathways* illustrates the contrasts between the different strategies, sacrifices, and struggles that were underway in the country. Mullen (2016) notes that "[m]etaphorical pathways to change converged, intersected, diverged, and collided, creating a grid that was both mighty and messy" (p. 111). Indeed, a central argument in *Pathways* is that positioning certain forces or struggles as inherently more righteous and meaningful than others is often subjective and misguided and exacerbates tensions. To illustrate this point, the précis surveys various debates and dynamics, including a deconstruction of contrasting histories of sanctions against Myanmar. Lastly, this précis asks what the findings and discussions in *Pathways* mean in the context of Myanmar's ongoing transition, warning that the current wave of xenophobia and the momentum behind formalizing efforts is foreclosing on space for Myanmar to adequately account for its predatory past. The current transitional course may be quickly heading towards lost land and lost hope for those in desperate need of protection and mobility.

Locating the Source(s) of Change

Renaud Egreteau's (2016) work in *Caretaking Democratization: The Military and Political Change in Myanmar* provides a thorough appraisal of the pacted nature of Myanmar's transition, showing how careful and strategic the military was in retaining an autonomous command, with much clout over the actions of the state. Egreteau shows the way in which the military simultaneously invited and corralled democratic forces, protecting military power and ranking personnel in the process. Similarly, in *Democratisation of Myanmar*, Nehginpao Kipgen (2016) presents a convincing argument that while democratic forces in Myanmar chose to come to the negotiating table, processes and reforms closely align with the former jutna's seven step road map towards a disciplined democracy. Kipgen's

work raises important questions about whose vision of Myanmar is taking shape. In an earlier effort, Jones (2014a) notes the peace process as an important variable motivating the junta's decision to liberalize:

> Far from suddenly liberalizing in 2010, the regime sought to create a "disciplined democracy" to safeguard its preferred social and political order twice before, but was thwarted by societal opposition. Its success in 2010 stemmed from a strategy of coercive state-building and economic incorporation via "ceasefire capitalism," which weakened and co-opted much of the opposition. Having altered the balance of forces in its [favor], the regime felt sufficiently confident to impose its preferred settlement.

Pathways concurs with the framing of this transition as strategically pacted in a way that favors the military. Beyond this, however, *Pathways* brings the focus to how the circumstances around the regime changed. Why would the junta bother with a pact in the first place? *Pathways* argues that the answer lies in the change in circumstances around the regime. The regime's moves represent more than a shift in mindset. The pivot to transition also represents more than a game of elite politics. The junta's calculated dissolution represents a change in the milieu. *Pathways* argues that new dynamics and circumstances left the junta with little or no choice but to change. Interests, priorities, capabilities, leverage, and power were shifting, leading to a new governance climate. Surveying the many forces of change that *Pathways* brings into focus and illustrating the way which they were able to shift relations, leverage, expectations, and capacities, one can begin to imagine a scenario in which the junta is scrambling for control.

In seemingly every community under military-ruled Myanmar, grassroots organizers began local enterprises, schools, trainings, and projects to mobilize local resources and create new opportunities. These community efforts lent to new orbits of protection, resiliency, and empowerment that had an untold impact on local power relations. Such grassroots change was often made possible by an influx of remittances pouring in from the millions of migrant workers from Myanmar, many of whom were taking on some of the toughest jobs the world has on offer. When speaking with analysts in and around Myanmar, remittances repeatedly gained praise as one of the force multipliers that began winds of change in Myanmar. On the global stage, foreign governments and global campaigns rallied around the democracy movement and the National League for Democracy's most notable figure, Aung San Suu Kyi. She and others stood up, spoke out, and took to the streets against the junta, even when it meant certain harm at the hands of the military dictatorship. Their actions were a constant reminder of how brutal, devastating, and unsustainable military rule was. While the clash between the democracy movement and the junta continued, a network known as the Third Force chose engagement and avoidance to change the conversation, deliver new services and opportunities, and create space for new ideas and initiatives to flourish.

The framing of change presented in *Pathways* does not necessarily contradict or challenge those of others. Rather *Pathways* simply offers a distinct focus and explanation of what brought about the transition. Indeed, while *Pathways* highlights all of the pressures and shifts that transformed the environment around the junta, Egreteau's (2016) work brings the focus back to the strategic pact that has left the military with an autonomous command and much clout. Both frames point to a transitioning state that remains substantively praetorian. And both have their own utility for understanding Myanmar's current transition and other struggles against authoritarianism throughout the world.

Contention, Subversion and Creation: Interwoven Impact

Contrasting forces of change had contrasting visions of what Myanmar should look like and how to get there. Moral or strategic high grounds were not easy to find in military-ruled Myanmar. Disagreements on priorities, strategy, morality, and sacrifice were compounded by competition for limited attention and resources. The junta's repression of speech and movement made it difficult for disparate forces of change to communicate. The story of how many strategies and struggles ultimately brought Myanmar into transition is complex, and often messy. It is a story that is very human, featuring intense emotions, resiliency, brutality, overcoming, setbacks, and inconvenient realities. *Pathways* attempts to tell the story of change in Myanmar with the complexity it deserves. In doing so, *Pathways* is careful not to imply that any struggles were more important or righteous than others. Rather, *Pathways* positions disparate strategies and struggles as irreplaceable parts of an interwoven grid of transformative action and impact.

Distinct networks, strategies, worldviews, interests, and capabilities translated to contrasting roles in the struggle to change Myanmar, none of which should be demoted or written out of the story of change in Myanmar. There is no way of knowing or proving whether one particular force was more important than another. One might assume that a certain approach, namely confronting and speaking truth to tyranny, is inherently more righteous and effective than more unconventional or quiet pursuits of change. But the story of change in Myanmar brings this into question. This section explains the way in which subversion had an immeasurable impact by undermining the junta's system and providing a foundation for further action. The moral or strategic high ground was a matter of perspective. Forging degree of importance or merit, even implicitly, misrepresents the multiplicity of action and impact that became interwoven to the point that tracing causation became impossible.

Mapping different strategies and actions illustrates divergence, creating a Linnaean grid of disparate efforts or pathways. Each pathway had a particular purpose and function. Struggles were not, however, separate from one another. The grid of pathways was interwoven in a way that was both complicated and mighty. And in this grid, three broad pathways stood out: contention, subversion and creation. Contention, known more formally as contentious politics, entails people organizing and publicly challenging political targets. This pathway was familiar to anyone following military-ruled Myanmar. In fact, contentious politics is familiar to anyone who watches the news. Audiences have an important role in contentious politics, which is why this pathway is interchangeably called contentious performances. McAdams et al. provide perhaps the most complete summation of what contentious politics entails, namely the "public, collective making of consequential claims by connected clusters of persons on other clusters of persons or on major political actors, when at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a third party to the claims" (2007, p. 2). Tilly follows up, asserting, "Contentious politics . . . brings together three familiar features of social life: contention, collective action, and politics" (2008, p. 5). These three fixed properties define the scope of interest. For an action to be of interest, it must first be contentious.

The 8/8/88 uprising,[1] the ethnic armed movements, the 2007 Saffron Revolution,[2] and the struggle of Aung San Suu Kyi and thousands of other prisoners of conscience demonstrated a clear commitment to contention and, as a result, captured and inspired international audiences. Sentiments around taking to the streets, standing up, fighting back, galvanize those watching and act as a catalyst for solidarity and action. Yet when traveling throughout military-ruled Myanmar, very few displays of contentious politics could be found. Instead, one readily found more subtle, constant methods of resistance: everyday resistance. Scott and Kerkvliet describe this second pathway, everyday forms of resistance, as "a vast and relatively unexplored middle-ground of peasant politics between passivity and open,

collective defiance," which entails the use of "the ordinary weapons of subordinate groups" for purposes of "self-help" (1986, p. 1). More specifically, everyday resistance entails tactics ranging from "foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, feigned ignorance, desertion, pilfering, smuggling, poaching, arson, slander, sabotage, surreptitious assault and murder, anonymous threats, and so on" (Scott, 1989, p. 5). Subversion was a part of everyday life in military-ruled Myanmar to the point that everyday resistance seemingly became subconscious. Subversive techniques allowed even the most marginalized and threatened communities to constantly avoid, undercut, and, when possible, disrupt the system. Narratives of millions of ordinary citizens all over Myanmar undermining the junta's machine day in and day out through subversion did not make headlines, but the cumulative meaning and impact was immeasurable. This is a point of disagreement between scholars and practitioners who study struggles against oppression from different angles. Scott and Kerkvliet, who focus on everyday resistance and argue against the notion that subversion is inherently less meaningful than contention, summarize a common critique of everyday forms of resistance:

> Although Christine White never says explicitly what constitutes resistance, we infer what she says it is not, and from her examples, that her criteria are more limiting than those of others. She seems to distinguish 'resistance' in quotes, from real resistance, at least in a colonial or capitalistic system. Real resistance decisively alters colonial or capitalistic state policies or contributes to transforming the system, not just delaying the advance of exploitative policies of, say, the state and landlords. Similarly, 'resistance' is only a safety valve and contributes to a false-consciousness, giving peasants temporary relief and thus obscuring the extent of their powerlessness and exploitation. (1986, p. 2)

Pathways weighs in on two elements of this debate. On the question of whether everyday resistance should be seen as political and meaningful, distinct but not necessarily subordinate to traditional contention, *Pathways* illustrates how everyday resistance fed into not only local but systemic change:

> …[P]lacing everyday resistance as part of a broader struggle for change, this pathway was not only meaningful but foundational. Everyday resistance was foundational in that it neutralized attempts to dominate and made it possible for the struggle, for pursuits of change, to endure. Everyday resistance allowed people to constantly push back and sustain their struggle. It was a pathway in and of itself, because this type of action affects relations and the system itself. Everyday resistance made the imposition of tyranny an exhausting exercise. It was constant, lurking, everywhere. In this sense, everyday resistance made the struggle for change in military-ruled Myanmar exhausting for those governing and sustainable for those defying such governance. (Mullen, 2016, p 76)

Indeed, Myanmar is a case study in the how the political muscles of grassroots communities and individuals can flex and create ripples, even in the absence of formal organization and protest.

On the second element of this debate, there was debate in and around military-ruled Myanmar about what separates resistance from survival or simply everyday life. Some took the position that to survive under the junta's systems was in and of itself resistance. Others emphasized the distinction between resistance and simply living. Drawing such boundaries around resistance was seen as a way to avoid trivializing resistance by seeing everything that happens in an oppressive environment as resistance. On this point, *Pathways* makes the following observation:

> Not all farming is resistance. But farming that directly challenges directives from officials or occurs as part of broader efforts to undermine the status quo should absolutely be seen as resistance. In other words, when farming feeds resistance, it is

> part of the resistance equation. Beyond farming, people pursued and held on to a satisfaction in self, family, and community, allowing them to pursue change when the time was right. Trivializing the action that makes resistance and change possible produces a narrow understanding of how change behavior comes to fruition. (Mullen, 2016, p. 84).

Creation, the third broad pathway that changed Myanmar, was a realm of action that did not have a theory or academic study to help give it meaning. Contentious politics capture contention. Everyday resistance explains and provides a framework for subversion. But creation was a separate field of political action in need of its own theoretical framing. To better explain and understand how creation contributed to change in Myanmar, *Pathways* offers reconstructive politics. Developed while in the field and observing the transformative nature of creation, this theory captures the creation of change via the creation of new space, opportunities, and relationships. 'Reconstructors' throughout Myanmar disguised their intent and embarked in a brick-by-brick process of creation and recreation. Anyone could use this pathway to change, including those in the junta chain of command. This is because anyone could engage in calculated compliance, negotiation, relationship building, concealed capacity building, avoidance, or bribery. These techniques were meant to avoid, disorient, and persuade, allowing people to sideline, soften, or penetrate the state. It is in the how that the art of reconstructive politics lies. Reconstructors did not use contention, claims, or non-compliance. Their efforts blended in with business as usual, as everyday efforts to make life a little bit better. Knowing whom to approach and how to do so, whom to avoid, what they had to offer, what they could exploit, and what they could get away with, individuals were able to reconstruct the status quo around them.

Combined, these three pathways changed Myanmar. The contrasts between these three pathways are obvious. Even in theory, confrontation and engagement clash. Visible, declared, and confrontational, contentious politics juxtaposes the hidden, disguised, and disorienting nature of everyday resistance and reconstructive politics. Contentious politics is about capturing attention, while the latter two pathways favor elusiveness. Contention, by definition, confronts authority, whereas the latter pathways seek to subvert, soften, infiltrate, and make irrelevant. Reconstructive politics and everyday forms of resistance focus on the everyday, making their politic of interest 'everyday politics.' This is distinct from contentious politics' interest in the performative aspects of politics, including formal, public claim-making, and institutional responses.

Moving from theory to practice, things get all the more complicated. Personalities, priorities, experiences, and policy measures come into the mix. Some people clearly chose their pathway to change. Others may have been more reactive. Either way, behind each pathway was a will. When people felt as though their struggles and efforts were being questioned or brushed aside, frustrations and tensions intensified. Even in a situation in which impact is difficult if not impossible to measure—and so multiple forces are contributing to a cumulative impact—there is a propensity to search for that one group or force multiplier that deserves particular recognition. *Pathways* does this when bringing attention to the role of remittances and the importance of creation in the story of change. This is not meant to elevate remittances and creation as topics that are more important or deserving than others. Rather, this is meant to highlight elements of the struggle for change in Myanmar that had not previously been adequately brought into focus. Even when emphasizing remittances and creation, *Pathways* pulls back and positions these efforts as part of contrasting strategies and contributions, all of which are irreplaceable and deserving parts of the same formula or grid.

Pathways challenges tendencies to position groups and strategies in a hierarchy of importance and merit. Around military-ruled Myanmar, narratives would regularly position Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD as the source of all that was righteous that would

independently catalyze change. Claims about degrees of importance can be explicit. Popham (2012) states: "In Myanmar, which was ruled for half a century by its army, more than two decades of sanctions finally seem to be doing the trick. That is a good reason to keep the pressure on until the Burmese people are truly free." Lall (2012) takes an alternative stance: "Activist lobbies located in the West or on the border have increasingly been claiming that it was their isolationist policies and the sanctions regime that have brought about these changes . . . But in fact it is in-country civil society organizations, both ethnic and Bama [Burmese], which have worked tirelessly over the last five years to bring about change." Marie Lall's (2016) recent book, *Understanding Reform in Myanmar* provides a thorough analysis of the role of Myanmar's civil society in bringing about change. While concurring with Egreteau's assessment that this transition has been strategically pacted, Lall's thesis is more specifically about the role of the Third Force as the key source of change in Myanmar. Ashley South's (2016) review of Lall (2016) provides a useful observation:

> For Lall, Nay Win Maung and his colleagues at the Myanmar Egress deserve much of the credit for spurring this change before and after the 2010 elections. According to this reading, the transition in Burma is primarily indigenous, driven by a need for an escape ("egress") from decades of military (mis)rule and by the passion and vision of a small group of Burmese society activists.
>
> One might question whether the Myanmar Egress guys (and they are mostly men) can really be described as a part of civil society, given their cozy business and government connections. For me, Lall somewhat overplays the role of Myanmar Egress, which later gave birth to the Myanmar Peace Center, [which] opened in late 2012. Both institutions have been hugely influential in the country's transition. Yet other factors should also be taken into account.

In line with Lall, *Pathways* asserts that the Third Force had an important and unique impact on the change in Myanmar. However, *Pathways* again pulls back to the position that seeing the Third Force's footprint as somehow more important than other factors falls into the trap of hierarchical or overly exclusive explanations of what brought about change in Myanmar. At the point that stories of change in Myanmar propose an overly exclusive or hierarchical understanding, they risk misrepresenting the situation and marginalizing the struggles and contributions of deserving parties.

Frustration, Fractures and Recognition

Contention juxtaposing engagement, claims juxtaposing avoidance, performance juxtaposing subversion, all of these apparent contradictions overlaid a context within which forces of change had to vie for limited international attention and resources. Tensions went beyond competition to confrontation. Hostilities among different networks working towards change were palpable, and everyone seemed to take interest in the drama. Things escalated to the point that the movement "turned on itself," to borrow the assessment of a local analyst (Mullen, 2016, p. 111). Tensions between contrasting forces had complex sources. Frustration and fractures would develop amongst those pushing for change, even though their common target or nemesis was the junta. Everyone was clear that the junta was ultimately responsible for suffering. Yet while the Generals in Naypyidaw felt out of reach, networks would take aim at one another. This may have been cathartic (and in this sense, it may have been healthy). Further, the junta's system disrupted expression, movement, and communication generally. Rather than sitting down and speaking about differences of opinions, contrasting forces of change went after each other on different public media platforms, and things often became personal and accusatory straight away. Hence,

disagreements on things like different ideas and approaches could quickly devolve into apparently adversarial relations. Whether the expression of frustrations was cathartic or simply the product of an oppressive environment, hostilities were a notable part of the story of change in Myanmar.

Contrasting networks had different priorities, strategies, interests, and visions of change in Myanmar. Contrasting forces also carried different moral compasses. Right and wrong, moral, and immoral were far from black and white in military-ruled Myanmar. What one saw as clearly immoral, say bribery, brokering, or gaming with state officials, others saw as entirely fitting. Those who took a stand and confronted the regime often spoke in deontological terms. Deontology assesses the merit of the act and asks if the means or deed is itself the moral move. By contrast, members of the Third Force often spoke in consequentialist terms, where the morality of an effort is assessed in its outcome or consequence.

Pathways challenges the positioning of people or groups as inherently righteous. Even those who are waging valiant struggles against oppression can have their flaws and should remain subject to question and critique. This lesson became front and center during the transition in Myanmar. The status of those who stood up and spoke out against the junta was regularly elevated to that of "savior," radiating goodness and all that was right. The problem is that a sort of lethargy can develop wherein flaws or contradictions are dismissed. Perceived inherent goodness can transform into saviorism (Mutua, 2001), prompting simplistic moral responses where nuanced political responses are required (Mamdani, 2009). All of these points became increasingly pertinent when Myanmar's democracy and human rights networks went silent or even took part in the wave of anti-Muslim sentiment, aimed especially but not exclusively at the Rohingya.[3] Pertinently, Egreteau (2016) critiques the iconification of Aung San Suu kyi and dissuades readers from "assuming that civil society always acts as a force for political liberalization" (Rhoden). In the struggle for change under junta-ruled Myanmar, it was never as easy as supporting those who were fighting the good fight. Disparate viewpoints on strategy, sacrifice, and morality led to a situation in which one had to consciously probe and reflect on questions like whose priorities deserve priority.

Strategic and moral disagreements can be enough to cause fractures. But it was the allocation of attention, symbolic support, and resources—in other words the allocation of recognition—that seemed to deepen divides. Matelski (2016) outlines such fault lines within civil society and analyzes how foreign supporters can contribute not only support and agency but also new divisions and hostilities. Recognition was a valuable commodity for those struggling for change. Tilly notes that for social movements, "success rests at least as much on outside recognition as on internal consensus" (2002, p. 97). Recognition led to legitimacy, and legitimacy led to resources and a voice in policymaking circles. From this position, one could influence the present, future, and past, as one could immediately push certain policies, have a significant say in the agenda for transitioning Myanmar, and have a place in Myanmar's history books. Indeed, numerous informants spoke of the concern that the story of change in Myanmar could have a very narrow scope that might leave out the massive networks and efforts that did not grab global headlines.

Recognition, measured in the allocation of attention, symbolic support, and resources, was and still remains a nerve in multiple ways. Why were some forces of change given so much more recognition than others? Why did some forces of change gain seemingly no recognition at all? The answer is bound up in discourse. Those who stood up and spoke out against the regime were sure to gain the lion's share of recognition because this is what the world wants to see. Subversion and creation is taken less seriously due to a bias in the discourse towards contention. In the end, those who took subtle or unfamiliar pathways to change tended to gain peripheral recognition or none at all.

Beyond frustration around the allocation of recognition, there was the issue of what forces of change did with their spotlight and influence. Informants regularly noted their frustrations with being spoken for without being spoken with, as noted above. There was a feeling that those with recognition were not adequately reaching out or mobilizing the voices and priorities of those outside their networks. As the forthcoming section will explain, sanctions against the junta in Myanmar were sold as fulfilling the will of the people when many forces of change saw sanctions as stifling change and harming their cause. Beyond feeling left out of the conversation or even spoken for, people felt as though their contributions and sacrifices were being written off. Challenging the trend of seeing sacrifice only in blood spilt, living in exile, or punishment endured for refusing to go quiet, all of which deserve the commendation, *Pathways* dedicates effort to bringing forward the sacrifice of ordinary people who accepted a constant struggle to change the situation around them:

> In military-ruled Myanmar, those who attempted to forge a better life for their families and communities weathered risks and suffering on a daily basis. They put their health on the line. Individuals worked days at a time, in terrible conditions. They put themselves in harm's way when working with and around the authorities. They endured verbal and physical abuse from officials, including forced [labor]. They faced constant insecurity. They lost family members. Their houses were burned. They faced warfare with few [defenses]. They faced the fear of reprisal and the constant mental pressure of oppression. These were the sacrifices of those who committed to a quiet, everyday struggle for change. (pp. 140-141)

Lastly, taking recognition forward into the opening of early 2012, the dissolution of the military government and the current transition, there are a range of questions that are currently up for debate: Who should be taking credit for the change in Myanmar? How should those networks be rewarded? Who is setting the transitional agenda? Might the transition be leaving certain groups behind? Are the groups who are being spoken for actually being spoken with? Whose priorities deserve priority and why?

Contrasting Histories of Sanctions

Was Myanmar a sanctioning success story? It depends on whose history of sanctions comes to the fore. For the Free Burma lobbies and campaigns throughout the world, and many of the opposition groups in Myanmar and along its borders, sanctions may be seen as the catalyst or force multiplier that led to the eventual dissolution of the military regime. By contrast, informants throughout military-ruled Myanmar brought a range of criticisms against sanctions. There was the narrative that sanctions were fulfilling the will of the people, when many in the field saw the sanctioning attitude as problematic, counterproductive, even harmful. There was also the perception that sanctions emboldened the regime and further isolated the population from the world and each other. Beyond these more specific critiques were general feelings that sanctions were not contributing to the political muscles of the grassroots organizers, to borrow from Prasse-Freeman (2010). Beyond field informant feedback was the broader Third Force position that saw engagement as preferential to sanctions, as their pathway was about creating new opportunities, relationships, and ideas. For some forces of change in military ruled Myanmar, sanctions were a cure. For others, sanctions were a disease. And this is where the debate was left when sanctioning governments began to lift and roll back their measures in early 2012.

Reviewing the sanctions debate around Myanmar, nothing jumps out as definitively new or unfamiliar. Supporters of sanctions will now point to the cumulative impact of constant pressure on the regime; the way in which sanctions sent a message to the regime, the

opposition, and the world; and how the lifting of sanctions became a leverage point when the junta began to dissolve into a democratically elected parliament. Skeptics and critics of sanctions will offer quite the opposite assessment: that sanctions had minimal impact on the regime's dissolution and actually slowed change. Critics of sanctions will point to the way in which the Myanmar junta used sanctions in their propaganda and question whether sanctions actually did harm. Supporters of sanctioning will reiterate that the sanctions were targeted exclusively at the junta and its cronies, and repeat that some of the most notable opposition figures in Myanmar and abroad led the rally cry for sanctions. Both camps are able to put together a compelling case backed by evidence of success or lack thereof. As in many sanctioning episodes, the debate ends in a sort of stalemate, lending to a feeling of "... watching a re-run on television; subconsciously we already know how it's going to end" (Prasse-Freeman, 2011). In this sense, there may be nothing unique about the history of sanctions against the junta in Myanmar.

In turning the focus to the way in which forces of change who chose unconventional pathways spoke about sanctions, Myanmar may hold important lessons for the broader sanctioning discourse. For those committing to protest and contentious politics, sanctions can be a boon for action. Indeed, there were a number of field informants throughout military-ruled Myanmar who saw sanctions as crucial both in their purpose and function. More palpable, however, was the extent of frustration with the international sanctions regime. As noted above, field informants spoke about the perceived emboldening effect of sanctions. To illustrate this, one young man spoke of feeling as though the sanctions were cornering the junta like a dog, placing the young man—and indeed the whole population—in that same corner to fend for themselves. From this perspective, sanctions may have made subversion more difficult by acting as a reason for callousness. While it may be too much to say that sanctions definitively undermine subversion, if sanctions in any way complicate everyday resistance, the mode of resistance most accessible to people pushing back against authoritarian regimes, there seems cause for pause. Less subjective than the impact of sanctions on subversion was the impact of sanctions on creation as a pathway to change.

Community organizations all over the country were striving constantly to create new opportunities, find new resources and networks, and forge relationships with local officials that were less adversarial and even mutually beneficial. Despite the authoritarian climate, people were finding ways to build their political muscles, create new orbits of protection, create new skills, and gain sources of leverage, and thus shift the needle in terms of control, dependency, and power. They sought every avenue for new resources, opportunities, interactions, conversations, ideas, information, space, and capabilities. Sanctions offered them confrontation and deprivation. Creation as a pathway to change in military-ruled Myanmar was the product of a refusal to wait for change from the government, and influxes of resources through remittances, clandestine community endowment, and above ground investments. These local injections lent to new capacities to navigate and overcome junta rule. Sanctions were not an investment in local creation. Sanctions are part of a game to pressure regimes from above, to punish those in command. They are a tool of deprivation. Sanctions were an additional obstacle to overcome. Sanctions were thus seen by those working to create in military-ruled Myanmar as cutting off rather than facilitating avenues of new resources, opportunities, interactions, conversations, information, and space, thus limiting possibilities and stifling change.

Histories of sanctions against military Myanmar are going to differ greatly. Rather than resist this or pursue a more reconciliatory narrative, there seems utility in allowing the contrasting histories to speak for themselves. This is an example of telling the story of change in Myanmar with the candor it deserves. At the same time, there may be an important lesson in the histories of sanctions in Myanmar. Creation made change happen at the personal,

community, and systemic levels. That those who were striving to create new opportunities, space, and leverage saw sanctions as an impediment seems reason enough to reflect on other situations in which the sanctioning paradigm may be foreclosing on unconventional pathways to change.

Lost in Transition

> *The military took everything from us for decades. Now they act like they own it. Their land, their money, their houses, none of it belongs to them. They stole everything from us. More than anything, we need our things back. We could lose our things forever. (Mullen, 2016, p. 219)*

In early 2014, a Karen man from Shan State, Myanmar spoke of an encroaching transition that was formalizing the distribution of land, wealth, and benefits that took shape over decades of pillaging under junta rule. Outreach efforts discerning what people want out of this transition and whose priorities deserve priority have yet to begin, beyond sporadic and heavily critiqued initiatives. Nonetheless, Myanmar is well on its way down a pacted transitional path, and the vehicle is a still predatory adaptation of the junta's regulatory system. For the Karen man and those viewing the transition from a similar vantage point, this could very well mean that what was stolen, confiscated, and extracted during the decades of junta pillage may be lost forever under the rubric of the rule of law, progress, and transition more broadly. To be clear, this is about more than lost land and leverage. There is the risk of lost opportunities to imagine a different type of transition in Myanmar. There is a risk of lost hope for groups throughout Myanmar. While Myanmar's transitional course is not set in stone, there seems an absence of space to push pause, audit, and address the past and calibrate towards a transition that does not leave behind the people who need it most.

Managing expectations and responses to the range of needs and interests in transitioning Myanmar is a formidable task. The pace of transformation alone makes it difficult to ask questions like: Whose priorities deserve priority and why? Who should be piloting this transition? How should the country balance the imperative of moving forward and the imperative of dealing with the past? What does justice mean for different groups in this transition? Where might there be alignment in contrasting visions of Myanmar's future? Still, the pace of transition alone does not explain the apparent absence of space to reckon with the past.

The concluding chapter of *Pathways* brings into focus two dynamics that have led to the embedding of predatory power in Myanmar's transition. Firstly, the wave of violent xenophobia came to the surface and spread throughout transitioning Myanmar, making dealing with ongoing inhumanity and atrocities all consuming:

> An old man outside a mosque in Yangon felt that while Rohingyas faced the most intense threats, all Muslims in Myanmar were under attack. He went on to explain how debates about citizenship, passports, and voting were all masking desires to expel Muslims. This was not an exaggeration of the climate. It was and is an environment where genocidal attitudes feature in public. Many individuals named driving Muslims out of Myanmar as a priority of the transition. Muslims had no illusions about the scale and intensity of the threat. They faced it every day. Unsurprisingly, in interactions with members of the Muslim community they were observably guarded, displaying many signs of self-protection. (Mullen, 2016, pp. 193-194)

With calls for the international intervention to prevent further digression towards genocide, the focus of the transition necessarily remains in the here and now. During the scramble to

figure out how to protect Rohingyas and other Muslim groups in Myanmar, the transition carries on. The focus remains on dealing with the here and now. All the while, the transition continues, and the predatory power that was built under decades of junta rule becomes further embedded.

As triage focuses attention on the rise of violent xenophobia in transitioning Myanmar, the push to formalize and invigorate the state may be legitimizing and entrenching, rather than dislodging, predatory power. Rule of law advocacy and state-building more generally has played out in a way that asks the people of Myanmar to accept their fates and the distribution of privilege in the name of normalizing governance. An empirical illustration of this dynamic played out around the Letpadaung struggle:

> Perhaps the most unpredictable but telling transitional scene played out around the Letpadaung copper mine protests, where protesting villagers turned their frustration on Aung San Suu Kyi. Coverage of Letpadaung showed villagers waving signs saying "No Daw Aung San Suu Kyi," "No Commission Report" and "No More Investigation Committee." After experiencing land confiscations, environmental damage with possible health ramifications, and violent crackdowns around November 2012, the protesting villagers were told by Aung San Suu Kyi "to take their protest in accordance with the law to the parliament in Nay Pyi Taw" (Ei Toe Lwin, 2013). With the mine being under partner ownership of the military-owned Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Company (UMEHL) and Wanbao Mining, a Chinese company, and the laws likely to legitimize the suffering of the villagers, this was not a fate protesters would accept. In this scene, one can see the interweaving of new freedoms and predations, as well as new opportunities and threats. (Mullen, 2016, p. 210)

Invigorating the state and promoting good governance in transitions requires surgical precision, as this often means empowering and enabling the very institutions that delivered oppression and protected predatory behavior. This level of precision has not been present in Myanmar. As a result, efforts to formalize and strengthen governance in transitioning Myanmar have had the unintended consequence of legitimating and solidifying a still predatory system and status quo. In the early years of the transition, Jones (2014b) warned:

> These dynamics, which have empowered a narrow oligarchy, are less likely to be undone by the reform process than to fundamentally shape the contours of reform. Consequently, Myanmar's future may not be unlike those of other Southeast Asian states that have experienced similar developmental trajectories.

There was no panacea for military-ruled Myanmar, and there is no panacea for transitioning Myanmar. As transitioning Myanmar attempts to find its way, *Pathways* urges a search for a multiplicity of force and action, unforeseen trailblazers, new visions of politics, and power in pursuit. In doing so, new pathways may manifest from below, from within, from the fore, from above, and from unforeseen sources. Such disaggregation or proliferation can decrease the likelihood of people or issues being left behind. Such a transition may be hard to envision or even imagine at this difficult moment of transition, and this would be fitting for the ongoing story of change in Myanmar.

Notes

[1] 8/8/88 refers to a series of country-wide strikes against the failing governance of the Burma Socialist Party Programme around the date of 8 August 1988. These demonstrations were the stage where Aung San Suu Kyi became the iconic leader of the democracy movement. After prolonged clashes between soldiers and demonstrators, the junta launched a relentless attack – a crackdown that lives on as a legacy of the juntas cruelty.

[2] A march in early September 2007 led to a brutal crackdown on innocent civilians and monks, giving way to larger demonstrations. With a global audience watching, the junta launched a larger scale crackdown on 26 September, leading to outrage locally and globally.

[3] Referring to the work of Jennifer Leehey, Elliott Prasse-Freeman (2013) provides a useful summation of the dynamics surrounding the discrimination against Rohingya: "[T]he Rohingya have increasingly been stripped of that name; more and more they have become only 'Bengalis'. And so, killing in the name of Buddhism, killing in the name of the legitimate nation, this rhetoric is trying to kill the name Rohingya itself. For while the 'Rooinga' were recognized already in 1799 well before the First Anglo-Burmese War, and the Burmese state has recognized them on numerous occasions in the past the 2013 government report examining the violence, referred to the Rohingya in every instance as 'Bengalis' (Stout 2013), and security forces have forced Rohingya to refer to themselves that way (Ferrie 2013)".

References

Egreteau, R (2016) impressive work in *Caretaking Democratization: The Military and Political Change in Myanmar.* UK: Hurst Publishers.

Jones, L. (2014a) "Explaining Myanmar's regime transition: the periphery is central." *Democratization,* 2014 Vol. 21, No. 5, 780 – 802.

Jones, L. (2014b) "The Political Economy of Myanmar's Transition." *Journal of Contemporary Asia 44*, (1), 144–170.

Lall, M. (2012) "More milestones in Burma," *BBC News Asia*, 24 January, www. bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16695353.

Lall, M. (2016) *Understanding Reform in Myanmar*. UK: Hurst Publisher.

McAdam, D., Tarrow S. & Tilly, C. (2007)."Comparative Perspectives on Contentious Politics." *Online Revision for Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture, and Structure: Advancing Theory in Comparative Politics* In Lichbach, M. & Zuckerman, A. (Eds.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Accessible at: http://www.socialsciences.cornell.edu/0609/McAdamTarrowTilly07.pdf

Mamdani, M. (2009). *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror*. New York: DoubleDay.

Matelski, M. (2016) *Constructing Civil Society in Myanmar: Struggles for Local Change and Global Recognition.* PhD Dissertation. Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Mullen, M. (2015) "Managing expectations in NLD-led Myanmar," *E-International Relations*, 18 December.

Mullen, M. (2016) *Pathways that Changed Myanmar*. UK: Zed Books.

Mutua, M. (2001). "Savages, Victims, and Saviors: The Metaphor of Human Rights." *Harvard International Law Journal 42*, (1), Winter 2001, pp. 201-245.

Prasse-Freeman, E. (2010) "Retaking power in Burma," Democratic Voice of Burma, 27 July, www.dvb.no/analysis/retaking-power-in- burma-pt-2/10941.

Prasse-Freeman, E. (2011) "Progress is stifled by a stale debate," *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 11 March, www.dvb.no/analysis/progress-is-stifled-by-a-stale- debate/14700.

Prasse-Freeman, E. (2013) (2013) "Scapegoating in Burma: guest editorial," *Anthropology Today*, *29* (4), 2–3.

Popham, P. (2012) "Keep up the pressure on Myanmar's generals," Opinion page, *New York Times*, 5 March, www.nytimes.com/2012/03/06/ opinion/keep-up-the-pressure-on-myanmars-generals.html?_r=2.

Rhoden, T. F. (2017) Caretaking Democratization: The Military and Political Change in Myanmar In Egreteau, R. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016, 193 Pages. Tea Circle. 6 February 2017, https://teacircleoxford.com/2017/02/06/caretaking-democratization-the-military-and-political-change-in-myanmar-by-renaud-egreteau-oxford-university-press-oxford-2016-193-pages/.

Scott, J. (1989)."Everyday Forms of Resistance." *Copenhagen Papers.* Vol. 4. Accessible at: rauli.cbs.dk/index.php/cjas/article/download/1765/1785

Scott, J. & Kerkvliet, B.T. (1986)."Some Issue in 'Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance' in South-East Asia." *Journal of Peasant Studies 13,* (2), January 1986.

South, A. (2016) "Book Review—'Understanding Reform in Myanmar'." The Irrawaddy. 23 March 2016. Accessible at: https://www.irrawaddy.com/culture/books/book-review-understanding-reform-myanmar.html

Tilly, C. (2002). *Stories, Identities and Political Change.* Rowman and Littlefield: Maryland.

Tilly, C. (2008).*Contentious Performances.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.