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**Falling Back on Populism in Post-Ideology Myanmar**

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## Falling Back on Populism in Post-Ideology Myanmar

*Khin Zaw Win*

### Introduction

At the same time as a democratic system is being revived in Myanmar after half-a-century of military dictatorship, so have strong challenges re-emerged, threatening not only the administration and the economy, but also more importantly, social and ethnic cohesion. While admitting that these challenges would tax any government and state, the weaknesses and inadequacies at the core have been revealed.

Ideologically, there had been a half-hearted attempt at socialism under the military-controlled one-party state that went under the name of “The Burmese Way to Socialism”. When this was unseated by a bloody public uprising in 1988, straight military junta rule was re-instated till 2010. The leading pro-democracy party, the National League for Democracy, contested the by-elections of April 2012, won most of the seats, and entered parliament. This victory was repeated and enlarged in November 2015, with the result that a democratically-elected civilian government has been installed.

After five decades of junta or one-party rule, there is now a multi-party system. However, two-thirds of the 93 parties registered are ethnic-based parties, and almost exclusively single-ethnic. Twenty three political parties won seats in the bicameral parliament, but the picture is dominated by just two parties – the military-linked Union Solidarity and Development Party and the National League for Democracy.

With ideological decline, rudimentary election campaign platforms and minimal policy contestation, the stage was set for recourse to populism. Besides the Myanmar public’s widespread ejection of military government, populism played a large part in the NLD’s electoral successes. To fan or court this populism, or to deploy parallel ‘brands’ of it, use was made of what has been called nationalism. But this may be too polite a term, since the impetus came from inciting latent racist phobias and demonizing the ‘other’. The brunt of this wave fell upon a vulnerable ‘foreign’ community – the Muslims and particularly the Muslim Rohingya. 2017 saw the most extreme and brutal manifestation of this: a horrific campaign which the UN has described as amounting to genocide.

At independence Myanmar had started off a little unsure of itself ideologically, while threatened by a far-left armed rebellion. With the collapse of the left in 1989, the swerve in the opposite direction began with a vengeance. With the right firmly in place now, one could say the presence of the left is called for, if only for the sake of balance. It is noteworthy however that the political left has virtually disappeared. This is not a case for a return to ideology of what stripe, but for the backstopping to look after the detritus that has been abandoned – the poor, the old, minorities and the marginalized.

Democracy in Myanmar did not begin in 2010 – this country had enjoyed limited democracy since the late 1930s (which is quite early for Asia). The majority of the people are therefore no strangers to a democratic system – at least the electoral variety.

In a recent paper Mukhand and Rodrik have put forward a closer classification of democracy -

....many democracies allow political competition and generally fair elections, but do not protect the civil rights of minority and other groups not in power. We shall call regimes such as these -- that hold regular elections but routinely violate rights -- “electoral democracies.”<sup>2</sup> We distinguish these from “liberal democracies” where rights are protected more comprehensively.

In the 2015 elections the electorate came out with an emphatic statement to bring down the curtain on the military dictatorship. The means they had was to propel the NLD to power. Despite certain reservations (shared by myself for instance), there was the hope that things could be worked out. The

year and a half that followed was an ebullient time for Myanmar internationally. The rosiness of the ambience managed to hide many of the missteps that were being made. What were once seen as Aung San Su Kyi's strengths became weaknesses, and at the same time once-hidden weaknesses emerged with a vengeance.

Both the Myanmar military and NLD government are scrambling to garner as much public support as they can. In the absence of any political ideology, it is a falling-back upon primitivism.

Of added relevance is the country's move to the right – entrenched military, big business with tentacles everywhere, ethnic assertiveness, and the resurgence of militant religion.

It has to be underscored in a sober manner that despite the Myanmar public's longing for the resumption of a democratic system, it implies a majoritarian democracy again and it will not be a cure-all for what afflicts them; a genuinely plural system that presages a plural nation has to be the goal from the outset. Contrary to most popular assumptions, a nation shall *not* ensue with the re-advent of democracy.

### **Many Shades of Populism**

Timothy Garton Ash alludes to “the poisonous legacy of a society behind the Berlin Wall that was anything but open and multicultural”. In Myanmar too, violence since 2012 forces us to look at what happened to society in the nearly five decades of military and one-party rule. Latent sentiments had been turned into populism, but that populism is hardly mentioned. It would be useful to dissect this further. In a line of regression, what was described as nationalism descends to populism, then to national parochialism, ending up in racial phobias and hatreds.

Cas Mudde writes -

If anything, 2017 was the year of nativism, or more correctly, yet another year of nativism, as we have had many of these years since the turn of the century. Nativism is an ideology that holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (“the nation”), and that non-native people and ideas are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state.

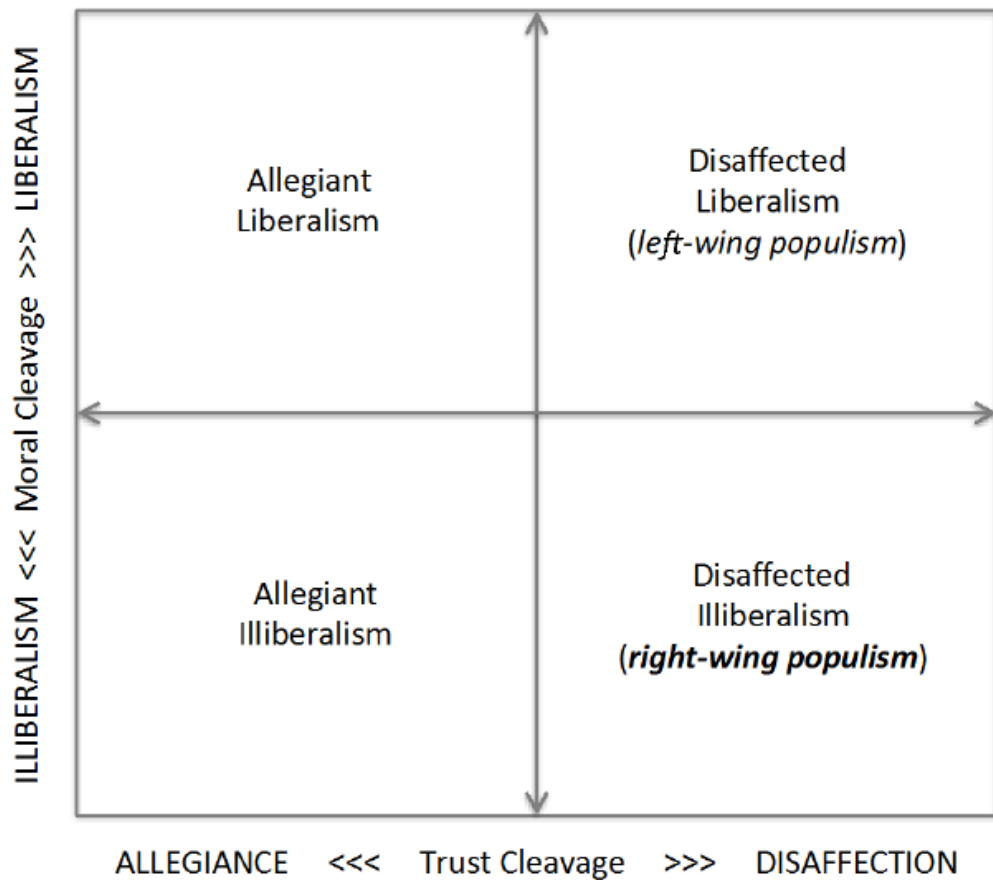
This year mainly stands out for the way in which nativism has been whitewashed as populism. This is not to say that populism is irrelevant to contemporary politics or to the populist radical right. But within the core ideology of the populist radical right, populism comes secondary to nativism, and within contemporary European and US politics, populism functions at best as a fuzzy blanket to camouflage the nastier nativism.

Sheri Berman writes in “The Pipe Dream of Undemocratic Liberalism” (Journal of Democracy 2017)

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Rather than being the norm, liberal democracy has been the exception, even in the West. Yet illiberal democracy has often proven to be a stage on the route to liberal democracy rather than the endpoint of a country's political trajectory. Moreover, laments about illiberal democracy often obscure a threat from the opposite corner: Although it is certainly true that democracy unchecked by liberalism can slide into excessive majoritarianism or oppressive populism, liberalism unchecked by democracy can easily deteriorate into oligarchy or technocracy. Contrary to the fantasies of elites, these latter distortions are every bit as pernicious as the problem they purport to solve. A look back at the bumpy road once traversed by today's liberal-democratic states gives us a more realistic picture of the complex relationship between liberal democracy's two constituent parts.

Figure 5. Locating Populism in a Two-dimensional Cleavage Space



(From Amy Alexander and Christian Welzel, *The Myth of Deconsolidation: Rising Liberalism and the Populist Reaction*, *Journal of Democracy Web Exchange* 2017)

If the above chart were to be applied to Myanmar, there is clearly no liberalism of any kind. A recent survey has shown that trust is very low. Of the two major players in the country, one is steeped in illiberalism and the other is inclining steeply towards it. So it is a race and a rush to gain allegiance, and the unfortunately widespread sentiments against ‘aliens’ and ‘immigrants’ have become very handy indeed.

It might also be pointed out here that Myanmar has been in the ranks of least-developed countries for a decade, and moreover the income gap is wide.

### Populism against the Rohingya minority

Domestically both the ruling NLD government and the military have tasted the flavor of increased public support. What really counts for them is not the racist overtones but the votes that it can bring in the next elections. Myanmar’s ethnic diversity sits uneasily with a Bamar Buddhist majority that is increasingly chauvinistic and intolerant. With an antiquated first-past-the-post electoral system, the politicians and generals know very well that if you have the ethnic and religious majority sewn up, you don’t have to bother much about the minorities. (This was the lesson of the BJP and prime minister Modi in India).

But with Myanmar's added predicament of a 70-year civil armed conflict, electoral victories do not assure the return of peace. Relying upon majoritarian politics and mono-ethnic nationalism can actually deter a peace settlement with the ethnic nationalities and by extension, the hoped-for federal system. True, the current hard-edged racism is directed against the hapless Rohingya and secondly against Muslims in general. But it is delusional to expect that this unfettered racism will stop there. It should be noted here that most 'indigenous' ethnic organizations are largely silent on the ongoing crisis.

At a recent workshop I participated in, non-Buddhists (mostly young) had articulated the discrimination, exclusion, differentiation and denial that they are experiencing. In education, employment, residence, travel, and even in the size of bribes demanded.

Yes, a number of geopolitical assessments have been penned, and I daresay there are people in many foreign capitals making their calculations. But at this point I must stress that human lives matter more than geopolitics. What I am saying is not only for the Rohingya but for all the people in Myanmar as well. If the dark forces were emboldened, other ethnicities and communities will certainly feel the edge of its hand. (In the mid-1960s, Ne Win gained a measure of popularity by chasing Indians, Pakistanis and Chinese out of then-Burma, after nationalizing their business and property. Two decades later, hundreds of Bamar protesters had to die in the streets to bring his regime down).

So it quite a canvas and a palette that one has to work on, even on this single issue of a downtrodden minority. It would seem that democracy and human rights in Myanmar are subject to double or triple standards. It was an arduous and bitter struggle to get these installed in Myanmar, but now they are not being applied to all. The arguments that I have made can be summed up: let us get our society's house in order and grant citizenship and rights to all our minorities that are on Myanmar soil. Further immigration can be controlled or curtailed. Besides the liberal component of such a course of action, there are other, very practical reasons as well. There are problems and potential crises looming on many sides, so let us clear our decks.

### **Nationalism and (Absent) Nation-Building**

Nationalism is a form of both discourse and practice, and it divides the world as being naturally divided into 'nations', whose basis can be defined in linguistic, ethnic, religious or other cultural terms. Thus, nationalism is a multifaceted phenomenon, one that can be linked to the formation of a given state, but is not necessarily so, and that can be violent, but only under certain conditions.

When religion is regarded as a fundamental part of a nation, we speak of 'religious nationalism'. Sri Lanka is a prime example of religiously based ethno-nationalism.

In a conference paper written in 2009 -

The concept of the nation-state would imply that nation-building and state-building are twin processes but they do not necessarily go together. There are nations without a state, like the Palestinians and the Kurds, and states without a nation, as evidenced vividly by the intractable cases of Iraq and Afghanistan. Myanmar comes across as a country where both nation- and state-building have met with little success.

Nation building in this important sense has not been seriously attempted in Myanmar before. There is a pressing need now to look at it anew, in light of the civil conflict, military rule, setbacks to democratization and economic decline that have marked the past seventy-odd years. The question arises: has nation building suffered because of all this, or has the half-hearted and ineffectual efforts to build a nation contributed to the ills? And what implications are there for the future, which does not look rosy at all?

At different times in history and up to now, the political and administrative entity referred to as Burma/Myanmar was assumed to be a single state. Most people involved in politics and governance in Myanmar would also accept that Myanmar is a nation-state. However, a measure of circumspection is called for in using those terms in a meaningful sense. Myanmar still falls short of becoming a nation, and the purported state is a weak one. The troubles that the country is beset with – including to related to democracy – can be said to stem from this.

In 1885, when the British annexed the last Bamar kingdom “they drew boundaries around territory that hosted one of the world’s widest diversities of indigenous populations, in one of the most fractured geographical settings. For purposes of bureaucratic simplification and fiscal cheese-paring, they partitioned the country into two zones. “Ministerial Burma’ or ‘Burma Proper’ and the ‘Frontier’ of ‘Excluded’ areas....no other Asian colony suffered such a radical bifurcation in its population’s fate” (Callahan)

Most states in East and Southeast Asia are multi-ethnic, marked by ethnic conflict and internal colonialism. States have attempted to enforce ethnic assimilation, unity through a common language, in-migration and military solutions to movements for autonomy. All these elements are seen in Myanmar. Nationalism in this wide region is seen less as an aggressive, externally oriented ideology but rather as entertaining domestic functions. These include an integrative nationalism aiming at further state- and nation-building, and a modernizational nationalism designed to mobilize the people in the interest of the shared, ‘solidarity’ goal of modernization (Derichs and Heberer). Myanmar’s present acute situation is a reflection of the failure of both functions. With the character of nation-building strongly related to the capacity of a state, Myanmar does not show up well either. (Khin ZawWin, 2010)

And again I have stated in “Time for Myanmar to Grow Beyond its Nationalisms” that -

Myanmar can be described as a land of many nationalisms but with no nation. Sixty-seven years after independence, nation-making has not only stalled, it has even regressed. There is a long list of countries that had been mapped into existence by colonial powers and eventually became independent states. Their postcolonial record in building states and nations has been patchy, and there is a voluminous literature on the whys and wherefores. Myanmar is in the category that has fared poorly. The most eloquent testament to this lies in the longest-running civil war in the world – beginning a bare three months after independence in 1948 and stretching up to the present day. In the early decades, this conflict was partly fueled by ideology and partly ethnic-based. Following the collapse of the Burma Communist Party in 1989, it has become a solely ethnic-oriented war, with religious overtones. No matter what some scholars say, economic motivations are of much lesser import in this conflict.

That nationalisms play an important – even pivotal – part in all this is widely accepted. The question now is how to bring an end to the lethal side-effects of nationalism without taking it out of the equation or pillorying it. Following the revival of a democratic system in 2010, there has been a resurgence of some forms of Buddhist nationalism. Then there is the imminent introduction of a federal system, with a panoply of ethno-nationalisms feeding into and growing out of it. (Khin Zaw Win 2015)

I would even say that nation-building in Myanmar and the search for a national identity – never strong to begin with – have implicitly suffered another setback. It is not only in elections; Naypyidaw and the armed forces will become entrenched as Bamar Buddhist strongholds (they are already close to it). For those who are comfortable with this, the downside is that other ethnic nationalisms shall become stronger too, more assertive, and opposed by reaction to the majority wave. The ultimate result will not be an integrated nation but a balance of ethnic nationalisms. Most likely at odds with one another.

The central lesson of all nationalist projects is this: if you push nationalism too hard, there is always a blowback. Coming down hard on the Rohingya may give you a shade of domestic popularity and a

better chance at the next elections. But this exclusion, intolerance, insensitivity and downright racism will drag you down in the long run. Remorselessly.

The current Myanmar state (generally classified as fragile) is not reaching out to the other nationalities in any genuine sense. The much-talked-about ceasefire process is only a military technical matter – and no wonder that the ethnic nationalities refuse to call it a peace process. With the recent upsurge in Bamar nationalism, there could even be a turning inwards, with dimmer prospects for a plural society and country.

The 70 year-old civil war in Myanmar is only a manifestation. The real tragedy of Myanmar is that one ethnic group sees itself as the only embodiment of Burma/Myanmar and that all the other ethnicities and minorities must conform to it.

Here, majoritarian bigotry and electoral politics come in. There is talk about responsible investment; in Myanmar we should start calling for responsible leadership. Shortly after the part-revival of a democratic system began in 2011, civil war returned with a vengeance in Kachin state, and anti-Muslim violence erupted. It is to be noted that Buddhist communities suffered too. The communal thing had been there, simmering. Then it suddenly burst out, sparked by incidents which were either trivial or trumped-up. The authorities were tardy and half-hearted in both pre-empting and reining in the violence. There is evidence as well as allegations with regard to ‘hidden hands’.

Another resurgent entity in the present eased-up atmosphere is Buddhist extremism. The sizeable movement which is the Ma-Ba-Tha\* has a nationalist element which is fixated upon ‘protecting the faith’ against incursions from other religions, and is putting a lot of effort into the moral uplift of Buddhist youth. There are varying shades of extremism in it. Farther out, there is the real rabid fringe. Inflammatory rhetoric from this cabal can ignite the larger movement at critical moments. Another sad commentary on democracy in Myanmar is that this large segment of the population is being eyed by political leaders of all stripes as ‘vote banks’ as they are called in India.

From a deterministic perspective, one could say that this unholy alliance with militant Buddhism has been in the cards all along. In a way, the present establishment is continuing what former prime minister U Nu began in 1960. Allying with extreme Buddhism is more than just a tactical arrangement to contest the elections: it inclines towards a longer-term cohabitation.

\*Ma Ba Tha is the Burmese acronym for Organization to Protect Race, Language and Religion.

## **The Neglected Economy**

A resource-rich country beset by a multitude of ills. Myanmar stands out in that this situation has persisted for over 60 years. For as long as one could remember, it was part of the gospel that Myanmar is rich in natural resources including land but under-developed. Therefore these resources have to be utilized and harnessed to develop the country and help it become a “modern” one.

When one adds the politics of resources, national and international, the circumstances become more acute. Following the popular uprising of 1988 and the subsequent military coup, the economy was partly “opened up” while political control remained. Due to the wave of repression and human rights abuses, the West imposed sanctions. Foreign investment from neighbouring countries came in but was heavily skewed towards extractive industries. A class of crony capitalists sprang up, accumulating their wealth and political influence through unfettered extraction of natural resources.

It is not to be denied that there has been growth in the economy, but it is heavily skewed in favour of those with wealth and power [this doesn’t sound strange, does it?]. It is a sad commentary on the revival of democracy that hardly any attention is being paid to issues like this which make for more equitable social redistribution of benefits, by both governments.



For the political and business establishment, this cozy relationship with East Asian economic growth and development would have continued to flourish had it not been for civil society voices speaking out. With the elections of 2010 and the expansion of political and media space, the outcry has spread, significantly to popular movements – particularly of smallholder farmers and the landless.

Myanmar's manufacturing and service industries are still in the initial stages, and so much of the national economy is still dependent upon natural resources. And development still has to give precedence to the challenges and setbacks of the political transition. State capacity and implementation are as weak as ever. Control over land and other natural resources is pervaded by corruption and armed might. It will take time and effort for laws and regulations to be imposed, if ever.

### **The Recalcitrance of Land Tenure**

Throughout successive eras, ideologies and governments in the largely agrarian country that Burma/Myanmar is, the rural sector has always been marked by subservience, subjection and exploitation. The standard reference to 'uncle farmers' and the gratitude that is owed to them notwithstanding, the rural populace still occupies the bottom rungs in society and are very seldom taken very seriously. (It has to be pointed out that there is yet another, lower strata – the underclass almost – comprising those of South Asian descent including the Rohingyas).

The country has had two Communist parties, both of which had gone into armed rebellion and eventually collapsed, and a protracted period of military-backed 'socialism'. In all cases, the rural world was used as a base and a platform, and invariably the rural people became the victims. Their lot was closer to being serfs rather than independent cultivators, labourers and fisherfolk. Political leaders of all stripes and backgrounds valued their support (and now votes) and more importantly the commodities they produced. In return they received promises and elaborate schemes involving extraction and confiscation – a state of affairs that sadly persists today.

The 'opening up' of the country that began in the 1990s and the revival of a multi-party democracy in 2010 did bring changes and improvements, but also severe challenges and threats. Land suddenly became a prized commodity: it can be seized by the state and private interests, and large land concessions were parceled out to a new class of 'crony capitalists'. The return of a more open political system allowed demonstrations, protest marches, labour unions and in some instances, forcible reoccupation of seized farmland. But it also brought about endless disputes over land, a nation-wide phenomenon which the state seems to have neither the capacity nor the will to address effectively. This has gained particular prominence and disillusionment following the victory of the National League for Democracy in the November 2015 elections on a campaign slogan of 'time for change'. On the two foremost threats which assail the country – achieving peace and resolving the land 'cancer' – the new NLD government after more than a year in office has hardly made a dent. Civil society including lawyers' groups and the media have stepped into the gap but these can only do so much in the face of what amounts to a nation-wide affliction.

Besides the state and domestic private sector, foreign business interests are making deep inroads into Myanmar's rural world – with those from neighbouring China making up the majority. Foreign investment is significant in infrastructure and the weakness of land governance has brought another spate of land contestation.

Farmers have little representation in the politics of the country. Farmers' unions are now legally permitted and a not inconsiderable number has emerged at village level. But they are not yet able to coalesce at township level (there are approximately 330 townships in the country). Unions are viewed at askance by the establishment old and new, and the NLD has deliberately kept them at a distance.

The issues of land and education are major ones and have major impact upon the country. There is no denying that students and farmers have valid discontents which are being expressed through newly-formed unions.

The present process is top-down and government-led, and yet does not extend to all parts of the state. There are holdouts and vested interests that oppose the reforms. Land is one sector where progress has been minimal, and real change will not happen until the local administration changes.

## **Re-emergent Racism**

Mukhand and Rodrik have this to say -

In other, non-Western parts of the world, mass politics arrived typically as a consequence not of industrialization, but of de-colonization or wars of national liberation. It wasn't economic change and the rise of factories that spurred social mobilization, but national struggles against colonizers or foreign enemies. So the relevant cleavages were from the very beginning based on ethnicity or nationality rather than class or economic status. This was reinforced by the fact that colonizers had often codified and deepened pre-existing identity cleavages and allied themselves with some, often minority ethnicities against others in order to facilitate their rule.

The nationalist movements of the developing world more or less all claimed to be democratic in some fashion – even those who ascribed explicitly to socialist or communist ideology. But theirs was a democracy that was based largely on identity cleavages. It was explicit about the “people's” right to rule over ethnic-religious-linguistic minorities or defend against a presumed external enemy. It was unlikely to promote liberal practices and prone to deteriorate into electoral democracy or worse.

For half a century, successive authoritarian regimes fobbed off a pack of lies upon the people of Myanmar – on economic growth rates, paddy production, child mortality and much else. It took a bloody unfinished revolution to bring it to an end. Now Myanmar happens to be saddled with twin sources of untruths – the military as before, and also the newly-installed ‘democratic’ elite. And on nothing less than a systematic act of barbarism upon an entire minority people.

The outbreak of violence is part of the pattern that you see in post-authoritarian, newly-democratic countries. With the revival of democratic freedoms, various elements with political agendas harnessed nationalism to their own ends, and Muslims became an easy and visible target.

With the Rohingya it is one shade worse, because they happen to be on the border with Bangladesh (formerly Bengal), which is a civilizational fault line. Rakhine Buddhist nationalism is even more virulent and the Rakhine see themselves as a bulwark against the ‘dark alien tide’. The policy of successive governments up to now was to bottle up the Rohingya in two border townships, and this only exacerbated the situation.

In the essay on nationalism I had warned that -

To enlarge upon and elaborate further (and add to the sense of acuteness), the present new state and polity have shown neither the strength, commitment nor inclination to address the consequences adequately. The ongoing Rohingya crisis is an enduring case in point. Bamar (Burman) nationalism appears to a sacrosanct ideology which no one dares to touch. Indeed, some ‘leaders’ would be more likely to exploit it. More than that, no one seems to care much about the consequences of keeping an unmodified ideology beyond its shelf-life. The fact that

the country continues to bear the burden of past folly and arrogance in fanning the flames appears to be missed. We have to think of what more lies in store for Myanmar then.

What emerged after August 2017 is a terrible fulfillment.

We have to face the fact that there are deep fissures and divisions in Myanmar's ethnic, social and religious fabric that are in need of healing. Does anyone in his right mind think that excluding one particular minority is going to make things easier with the other minorities? Bringing the country together will not be helped by making some people outcasts. We want to return to a time when we can take pride in our country – beyond military 'prowess'. What is happening now with the Rohingya shames the nation. We don't have to listen to foreign advice on what to do. We know what to do, and by doing so Myanmar can become a stronger, healthier, kinder and more-cohesive nation.

The Rohingya issue presents a test for Myanmar as a democratic society, a Buddhist society and a humane society. As things stand, Myanmar is failing on all three counts. Following the isolation of half a century of dictatorship, there is now a resurgence of Buddhist-tinged nationalism and majoritarianism with intolerance of minorities. "Democratic" politics is engrossed with amending the constitution and winning the elections.

Both the NLD government and the military are handling the Rohingya issue very, very poorly. I reiterate that there is an unabashed attempt to harness populism.

I still think working on society is key, and for that one cannot rely on the state alone. Indeed it is doubtful whether the state as the capacity or the willingness to do this. Unknowingly, Bamar Buddhist society is facing an internal crisis and Buddhist leaders – lay and clerical – do not seem to be finding a way out. Extrapolating this paralysis to other ethnic issues and the civil war does not produce a very encouraging picture.

The final word on Buddhism – the Myanmar Theravada school to be precise – is that there will have to be an internal re-think of its rigidity, insularity and intolerance. This is not a new process since Buddhist schools have evolved over the centuries. A serious comparative study of the other schools and traditions within Buddhism should not be unacceptable. Misconceptions like the 'siege mentality' have to be abandoned.

### **The Turmoil Below the Surface in Myanmar**

Two years into the NLD government, the country has to be warned that the real questions are being missed, often deliberately. With this, Myanmar could well be letting itself in for more grief. In the recent clamouring to amend present constitution, it has to be realized that a more democratic constitution does not mean that society also takes on stronger democratic values, like tolerance for minorities. In building a democratic Myanmar, and the other tasks are sadly being neglected. Too much attention is being paid to the superstructure of a democratic system and not enough to the real substance of such a system.

In assessing current Myanmar politics, let us lay aside the debate over democracy, human rights, the rule of law and other buzzwords for a moment. In the past, it was a matter of the military dictatorship ruling over the people. The re-introduction of a democratic system has meant that power based on the gun is replaced by power based on numbers. The power establishment has been clever in courting the 'big-ticket' organizations mentioned above. This has involved relegating religious and ethnic minorities to a lower status, even that of perceived threats which must be persecuted. Looked at this way, the treatment of the Rohingyas, the other Muslims and ethnic minorities becomes very clear. To put it another way, the building of 'democracy' = majority rule requires that the minorities pay the price. And a heavy price at that.

A Nordic Buddhist friend and co-worker has been trying consistently to revive the Rock Edicts of Emperor Asoka, who ruled India's Mauryan Empire in the 3rd century BCE and embraced Buddhism after a battle in which tens of thousands were slaughtered. Especially Edict XII, in which Asoka urged respect for all religions. Wrapped in scepticism and angst, one could ask what real impact did Asoka's Rock Edicts have, with the Subcontinent still mired in communal hatreds and periodic rampages?

One could do the same with philosopher Deleuze and his writings of the past century and decry what is happening in France and Europe with all that Islamophobia and resurgent right-wing politics. But history and society and life itself cannot be reduced to a project logframe and its linearity. Asoka was a man and a monarch much ahead of his time, and for all times. Deleuze and Michel Foucault, who has praised the former's writings, still make one's heart beat faster. A fellow-political prisoner and leftist poet once said to me that "we are in politics because of our heartbeats". He had an unfortunate life. Not only was he in poor health following interrogation by Military Intelligence (those people had a special regime for the left) but after his early death, his family was ignored by the mainstream opposition.

If you think Asoka and his edicts belong only to archeology, you are wrong. At a recent seminar on what is happening with Buddhism in Myanmar, an elderly monk demanded to know why it was relevant to discuss the Asokan edicts. The answer is plain if he would only think: respect other religions as you would your own. It was valid two millennia ago and it is valid now. (Khin Zaw Win, 2015)

One has to go about creating and strengthening bulwarks against extremism of any kind. Intellectually, Myanmar is at a juncture. The university system is being thoroughly shaken up and can be said to be in a state of catharsis. We hope that universities in Myanmar can become the universities they should be (and have been in the past) and assume a role in the country's intellectual life that has been neglected for decades.

It is time to say this. By doing so, nothing derogatory is meant towards any people: my only intention is to highlight the struggles entailed.

The discourse on the Rohingya is starting to resemble that which had prevailed during the Abolition of slavery in the US. The struggle between the abolitionists and anti-abolitionists had been bitter indeed. It was mainly between white Americans, and the people of African origin had very little say in it. And even after the legal abolition of slavery, sentiments remained for a long time.

The ongoing wave of repression in Rakhine is only the latest episode. It underscores what I wish to draw attention to: the way the Rohingya and other ethnicities are regarded by the Myanmar majority. Besides not being a panacea, democracy and democratic leaders have brought it into sharp relief.

In- and out-migration have existed throughout Myanmar history. Branding people as non-native, blaming colonialism, and denying present wrongs can never be the solution. I am not just appealing for tolerance and liberal attitudes: I am asking people to be sensible.

**One doesn't see many explicit signs of discrimination and exclusion here, but to a member of a minority group they are everywhere. Rejection, denial, different-iation, stereotyping and outright demolition. In education, employment, residence, travel, and even in the size of the bribes demanded.**

I would say it was military dictator Ne Win who had propounded a very narrow view of citizenship and indigenoussness, and what it means to have lived in Burma/Myanmar for centuries. And we know it was the despicable British who divided the subcontinent just before independence, leaving noxious legacies for future generations.

There had been resentments, for example of animal sacrifices, but it rarely broke out into open violence until 2012. In the early 2000s some monks had been imprisoned for fomenting anti-Muslim disturbances; a number were released together with me in 2005.

In her long years of struggling for power, Aung San Su Kyi should have prepared for this moment but she didn't. It is a state of denial occasioned by her singular lack of capability. She fears she might lose Buddhist majority votes, and also doesn't know how to work with the armed forces on a security crisis like this.

This denial of diversity and of history – and not the incompleteness of democracy – is at the core of what Myanmar is having to face today. Two or three generations ago, certain ethnic leaders did contemplate secession. This can be internalized by the sweep of history and reconciliation. But entire ethnic communities at the present should not be victimized by a virulent strain of misguided ethnic 'vengeance'. We cannot condone sectarian or ethnic violence, particularly with state organizations taking part in it. It is incumbent upon those who call themselves leaders to recognize and restrain this. And yes, concerned friends in the international community have to lend a hand.

Volumes have been written about whether the Rohingya 'belong' to Burma/Myanmar. This I would say is quite off the mark. The very issue of 'belonging' reeks of racism. (But a lot of people are happy with racism sadly). It may have been acceptable in the Ne Win era but continuing it now – in a democratic revival under none other than the NLD – is a sad reflection upon shabby times and a shabbier leadership. The situation is popularly portrayed as an 'alien influx' but the reality is that illegal immigration would make up only a small percentage. Using British colonialism as the root cause, not only the Rohingya but also other communities elsewhere in the country are seen as not part of Burma/Myanmar. Indeed many of those people are stateless – a condition which the UN is beginning to look into. All in all, even if people are illegal immigrants they should not be treated this way.

It should be borne in mind that the direness of it all applies to the other 'indigenous' communities too. I don't mean just the Rakhine and the unfortunate Mro, caught up in the deadly racial crossfire. If what we are witnessing is the instrument that the Myanmar state continues to apply, it doesn't bode well for the other minorities too, I regret to say.

While Aung San Su Kyi is beset by a paralysis of leadership, the military swung a sledgehammer at a nut. For both it was not a matter of malign external forces wreaking havoc, but one that stems from intrinsic failings. Rakhine continues to be a severe test to be sure, but if Myanmar state institutions were to respond in similar fashion to the country's other challenges, the prospects are dire indeed.

Besides the individual shortcomings, there is also the inability and unwillingness to coordinate. It appears to be the delusional state of each side being convinced that it can go it alone. Dominance and unipolarity are both hallmarks and objectives in their world-views. And now the Rakhine crisis is laying them low.

Myanmar's border with Bangladesh seems to have been drawn with a tragic hand. It is not a long border actually but physical dimensions are not the issue here. It is the populations. I have referred to it as a civilizational fault line. During the days of the British Empire, it wasn't even a border – merely a boundary between two provinces and later two colonies. The mischief (which later became tragedy) began with the two partitions – the earlier one of the province of Bengal, and the more infamous one in 1947. This was followed by the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, amidst carnage and war.

Between these successive political-administrative units and Burma/Myanmar there had been migration both ways, as well as seepage and spillage. Governments in Myanmar have had a dismal record in immigration policy – in both formulation and implementation. To make things worse, draconian measures were enacted upon the non-indigenous population of north Rakhine, the majority of which were Rohingya. The popular perception is that they are illegal immigrants. You cannot make

up for policy weaknesses and failures by deploying excessive brute force. But now we see the Myanmar state doing exactly that.

The attitudes of the Myanmar public are the greatest long-term concern. The state is doing nothing on this except to harness those sentiments for its own sordid ends. I am sorry to say the impact of the (free) internet availability has been mixed. I can lament the sorry state of higher education but then in the old South Africa good universities had co-existed with apartheid. In a poorly-literate country like Myanmar, one has to lead by example. Aung San Su Kyi is NOT doing that.

I would propose that much of the new political education industry re-examine and revamp itself, especially the democracy-promotion people. What is happening now goes deeper than bad politics and worse politicians. Nobel Prize for Literature winner V.S. Naipaul once wrote a book about his ancestral India, titling it “An Area of Darkness”. He referred to India as a ‘wounded civilization’. Only a work of such scope can do justice to the deep-seated malaise that afflicts Myanmar.

If comparisons with nationalism in Europe past and present are to be drawn, one striking factor is that economic chaos, unemployment and austerity are not the driving forces as they are in Europe. A columnist has written of nationalism in Europe -

This was the terrain out of which fascism grew 80 years ago. The Great Depression had delivered millions into the arms of destitution and unemployment across a European continent that was yet to fully recover from the catastrophe of the First World War. As with the economic shock to engulf the world in 2008, the Great Depression of the 1930s started in the United States with the stock market crash of 1929, arriving on the back of a boom that had been fueled by an unsustainable level of consumer debt, reckless lending in poorly regulated markets, and lack of long-term investment. The result was a global slump which proved a godsend to hitherto marginal political figures such as Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler, along with the movements they led.

In their modern incarnation, nationalist movements and parties throughout the continent, with the exception of Scotland, have succeeded in legitimizing racist views and the revulsion of multiculturalism and immigration. In its most extreme form this has manifested in organized violence against people deemed 'untermenschen'.

In the period leading up to the Second World war, Bamar nationalist movements had emulated their counterparts in Europe (especially Germany and Italy), particularly in their militancy. In those years too, the resentments had not stemmed so much from economic factors, and were instead fueled by anti-colonial and anti-immigrant sentiments. The common feature that connects with Europe and with colonial Burma/Myanmar is that politicians find nationalist agitation an easy and useful tool to employ.

## **Discussion**

With its 135 nationalities (official count), 93 political parties and hundreds of CSOs, Myanmar epitomizes diversity. One of the greatest ironies of the country is the denial and fear of this diversity. It could be asserted that the two major parties are built around this, attempting instead to rally around the military institution (USDP) or a charismatic personage (NLD). Up to 2016-17 there had been hopes pinned on the democratic ‘champion’ but sadly these have been dashed. With the sands fast running out for them, both parties are embracing the populist option. As ways of seeking to struggle out of this two-party, either-or situation, some new parties are being formed, or existing ethnic parties are planning to merge. Myanmar is still caught in the political party ‘trap’ and the party-civil society divide.

Civil rights for minorities are what have been missing. Myanmar has a large number of various ethnicities and minorities, and virtually all of them are denied rights. What has been called ethnic rights are actually civil rights.

Having abandoned ideology, it was more or less pre-ordained that the two sides would resort to populism. The intellectual dimension is missing for anything more than that. In addition the lack of managerial capacity makes it difficult to run even a bureaucratic state, much less a developmental one. But as useful as it may be in winning elections, populism is totally irrelevant in the sustaining of effective government. Two years into its term in office, the NLD government still does not have an economic policy to speak of. The former Thaksin Shinwatra government in neighbouring Thailand has been derided by critics as populist, but it was able to bring health care at minimal cost to the rural areas. The populism that is currently being utilized in Myanmar is of the opposite, negative kind. The hatred of the 'other' is strong now, but how long can it last?

There is also the reaction that unbridled populism engenders. With communications technology, a freer media, and contrarian civil society, the purveyors in power have to realize that theirs' is not a forever game. Stirling concludes about the broad sweep of historical change –

...contrary to much received wisdom, it is repeatedly unruly, bottom-up 'transformations' rather than top-down structured 'transitions' (in these senses), that

typically achieve the most profound (sometimes rapid) radically progressive social change.

But what ecological and social justice challenges arguably actually require instead is less singular controlled 'transitions' driven by whatever are the incumbent structures in any given area, and more vibrant agonistic political mobilisations towards more open-ended and pervasive 'transformations' (Stirling 2014a; Stirling 2011b)

But this 'change from below' has to be seen together with the challenges that it faces. Tania Li writes with regard to Indonesia:

The big picture is that the reform period since the end of Suharto's authoritarian New Order in 1998 has not resulted in a renewal of political mobilisation among the rural or urban poor, despite apparent opportunity. Laws passed since 2000 on labour, investment, plantations and mining strongly favour capital. The material outcome of the current balance of class forces is starkly conveyed in the numbers. In the period 1990–2011, Indonesia had the second biggest increase in the Gini coefficient for inequality of any Asian country, with steeper growth after 1998; it has the second lowest spending on health as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP), and its social protection expenditure is also very low, far behind India and China (ADB 2012). Although Indonesia is now classified as 'middle income', its rate of childhood malnutrition is comparable to that of low-income countries. These sad facts should be the subject of serious critique and popular mobilisation, but they mostly pass unremarked. None of the plethora of new political parties addresses the problems of poverty or inequality in more than superficial terms. Indeed, the parties cannot be distinguished on the basis of their political platforms or class constituency; they are simply variations of the same oligarchy, in slightly different colours.

NGOs such as the environmental consortium Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia that helped bring down Suharto have stalled in their attempts to develop into mass social movements. The farmers' unions that played an important role in agitating for agrarian reform around 2000 have lost momentum, and remain localised in particular regions, mainly parts of Java and north Sumatra .

The point of my summary is not to criticise these organisations, but to note that their resources are very limited, and in huge parts of rural Indonesia farmers and workers

have simply not heard of them...Farmer groups and cooperatives arise and disappear with project funds, and do not develop into member-driven, self-sustaining units. Elections from the village level upwards are governed by ‘money politics’ in all but exceptional cases. Hence, tens of millions of rural Indonesians are still without access to the intellectual and organisational resources that provide crucial frameworks for the development of leadership skills, and could help foster political mobilisation and debate.

It is a time for bold solutions but boldness appears to be a very scanty commodity. Before going to the solutions themselves (there aren’t many) first allow me to remove the veil from Naypyidaw. There is a Bamar saying that goes ‘it looks all right when you are sitting; only when you get up and walk does it become apparent that you are lame’. Both governments since 2010 have done just that for the Myanmar state – showing up not only its lameness but also its hollowed-out condition as well.

There is of course the razzle-dazzle which tends to attract and blind a long line of state visitors, donors, experts and other peddlers trooping to the capital. And the state on its part has to keep up appearances. But it should be clear by now that there is a policy drought and incapacity and failure that stretches from the mountains of Kokang to the coasts of Rakhine.

Referring to Sheri Berman’s “The Pipe Dream of Undemocratic Liberalism” again -

Democratization, in short, does not cause the social strife that often emerges along with it. Rather, it allows the distrust and bitterness built up under dictatorships to come to the surface, with lamentable results. Nostalgia for authoritarian stability is precisely the wrong response to such troubles, since it was the pathologies inherent in dictatorships that helped to cause the underlying problems in the first place.

Fighting back against the populist tide and avoiding illiberal democracy therefore requires finding ways to remove the barriers that have weakened contemporary democracy and to encourage greater citizen participation. This will require making governments and other democratic institutions responsive to the majority of the people, rather than to only a narrow elite, or to markets, unelected bureaucrats, or corporate interests. Far from seeking to restrict democracy, we should be revitalizing it instead.

Alexander and Wenzel conclude that –

Indeed, a major commonality among post-industrial democracies is the increasing concentration of wealth in the top social stratum, stagnant real wages and declining job security, above all in low-skill occupations. These trends, observable since the 1980s, might have made social class more salient again.

In other words, by switching their historically evolved sides in the cleavage space, established parties left the lower class in an ideological vacuum that populist parties are now eager to fill.

...This is an important insight because the prescription of a healthy cure requires a correct diagnosis in the first place. The real source of our current problems is the increased class polarization and the marginalization of the lower classes. It resonates easily with these people’s feelings when populists declare immigration and globalization as the cause of their problems.... But democracy is a learning system, which is reason for hope that the liberal forces wake up and become more active in meeting the populist challenge.

This is an era of electoral politics, with an electorate emerging from decades of dictatorship. Populism holds sway and beyond garnering votes, parties and politicians have little regard for public opinion. There seems to be little thought as to the direction in which the country is going, or needs to go. Civil



society is not strong or big enough; it is divided and mostly involved in niche issues. The crony private sector is flourishing and going from strength to strength, keeping to its rentier, extractivist and exclusivist ways. On top of it all, all these stakeholders are discrete and inward-looking. One donor has asked how a democracy can be built if people do not talk to each other. In other words, Myanmar seems to be losing its way. After expending much time and suffering, a semi-democracy has been gained. But beyond this, there is neither road nor chart.

This de-diversifying trend will impact upon the already sputtering peace process, ethnic relations, and relations with neighbouring countries. Minorities will continue to bear the brunt of all this. Federalism will come to a certain extent, but whether it is just a shell or something with substance will depend on the minorities too.

If Myanmar is to grow out of its nationalisms, they will have to be discussed and an honest appraisal done. This is not happening. There is a state and a society with the mis-attributes mentioned above, engaged in many pursuits and speaking with many voices, yet missing the axial issue at the heart of its troubles. There is a need to 'go to scale' despite the leadership that cannot be relied upon.

Myanmar is being subjected to forces and influences quite unlike what it has experienced in the past, and change whether willing or unwilling is going to be the order of the day. With an incompetent state and un-visionary leaders pursuing their paltry little ends, Myanmar has little chance of standing up to the winds of change. The out-dated nationalism which is found so useful now may be transformed beyond recognition. Only a diverse and resilient national identity can hold its ground.

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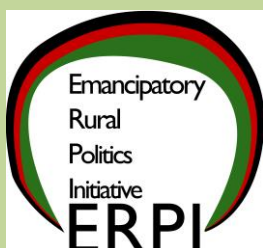
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**The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI)** is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless 'growth', climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

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