



# Griffith Asia Institute

## Regional Outlook

MYANMAR WATCH  
PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES

Andrew Nathan

# Griffith Asia Institute



## Regional Outlook

**Myanmar Watching:  
Problems and Perspectives**

**Andrew Selth**



# Contents

Executive Summary.....	1.....	
Author's Note.....	2.....	
.....20.....	23	2
		Author's Note .....





(formerly Rangoon) was confirmed as the administrative capital of the country. It remains the commercial capital, but in October 2005 the SPDC formally designated the newly-built city of Naypyidaw (or Nay Pyi Taw), 327 kilometres north of Yangon, as the seat of Myanmar's government. Where they appear in this paper, the terms 'Yangon regime,' or in some cases simply 'Yangon' are used as shorthand for the central government, including the military government that was created in 1962 and re-invented in 1974, 1988 and 1997. The government after 2005 is referred to as the 'Naypyidaw regime' or 'Naypyidaw' to reflect the administrative change that took place that year.

Another term used in this paper is *Tatmadaw* (literally 'royal force'), the vernacular name for Myanmar's tri-Service (army, navy and air force) armed forces. In recent years, this term has gained wide currency in English language publications on Myanmar. Sometimes, the *Tatmadaw* is referred to simply as 'the army', reflecting that Service's overwhelming size and influence, compared with the other two. While the term 'Defence Services' usually refers only to the armed forces, it is sometimes used in a wider context to refer to the armed forces, the Myanmar Police, the people's militia' and sundry other paramilitary forces. On occasion, the Myanmar Fire Services Department and Myanmar Red Cross have also been included in this category.

An earlier version of this Regional Outlook was presented at a Griffith Asia Centre workshop entitled *Political Fault Lines in Southeast Asia: Research Challenges* in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, from 12-13 October 2017.<sup>4</sup> Both versions draw on a number of research papers and articles that have been published by the author over the past few years. These works have been identified in the endnotes.

# 1. Introduction

---



volume of his autobiography *Myto Hidden Burma*, this was not because he spent most of his time on obscure postings, but because the country itself was so little known. In 1957, the eminent historian Hugh Tinker observed:

The British community in Burma was so small, and the period of British rule so brief that no comparable [to India] connection ever developed. To the average Englishman Burma conjured up one poem and perhaps a short story by Kipling. Kipling, who spent three days in Burma.

Myanmar was just an occasional blip on the international radar screen. It would take a well-publicized uprising against the military regime in 1988, the emergence of a charismatic figure like Aung San Suu Kyi and a global telecommunications revolution for Myanmar to capture the world's attention and, finally, become widely known.

This pattern has been reflected in global publishing statistics. It is possible, for example, to compile a graph from Google's NGram database, a word recognition tool created from over 5 million English language books covering four centuries. It suffers from considerable weaknesses; for example, it covers less than five per cent of all books produced. However, graphs generated by NGram based on the keywords 'Burma' and 'Myanmar' show a dramatic increase in references to the country during and after significant historical events, such as the Second World War and General Ne Win's military coup in 1962. There were also surges of popular interest in Myanmar in 1988, as a result of the nationwide protests that year, and again in 2007, during the civil unrest dubbed the Saffron Revolution.<sup>43</sup> When these statistical tools are updated, they will doubtless show a surge in publications as a result of the 2017 Rohingya refugee crisis.

Such tools are useful to illustrate fluctuations in public interest in Myanmar and related publishing trends. However, they are not much help in determining the nature of the works produced, in particular, in the case of fiction, the depth of research displayed and the quality of the arguments made. Nor do these electronic tools help measure the impact of certain works on public and official thinking about Myanmar, and what Timothy Garton Ash has called its 'ferdishly complex problems'.<sup>44</sup> Yet these are important considerations as, perhaps more than most other countries, Myanmar has suffered from a dearth of comprehensive, objective and accurate analyses. Particularly over the past 30 years, this has given rise to a number of problems. This paper aims to explore some of the reasons for this phenomenon and, through three case studies, to illustrate how these problems can affect both popular perceptions and official policies.

## 2. Research Challenges

---

After Myanmar regained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1948, it slowly began to recover from centuries of neglect by the international scholarly community. However, progress in this area was effectively halted by the advent of Ne Win's conservative and intensely nationalistic military government in 1962. For the next quarter century, visitors were only granted visas for a week or less, access to officials and official records was restricted, and little confidence could be placed in government statements or statistics. The state-controlled news media mainly published propaganda. The few foreign scholars granted the rare privilege of access to the national archives were closely monitored. It was also difficult to travel around the country, large swathes of which were declared out of bounds for security reasons. As David Steinberg wrote in 1978:

Burma could be considered *terra incognita*

travel around Myanmar, interview people and obtain reliable data. This meant that an accurate and balanced picture of developments in the country was still hard to obtain. In 2001, for example, David Steinberg outlined the problems faced by academics:

Myanmar presents problems of analysis and even data. Statistics are often whimsical, events are sometimes opaque, the complexity of the past clouds our thinking, information is filtered through skewed political lenses, propaganda is rife, and the future presents conundrums even for participants in this drama, let alone observers on the periphery.

Representing journalists and others, the travel writer Emma Larkin expressed similar views in 2010:

Given the regime's restrictions on information and association, it is difficult to form any public consensus or verifiable version of the truth. While certain events can be accounted for with certainty, there is much that remains unknown. Like those blind men in the parable [trying to describe an elephant from different vantage points], it has become impossible for anyone to see or fathom the beast in its entirety.

In a society where nothing can be taken for granted, distorted truths, half stories, and private visions are, by necessity, woven into the popular narrative of events. Burma is a place where the government hides behind convoluted smoke screens. It is a place where those who sacrifice themselves for their country must go unrecognized and can only be lauded or remembered in secret. It is a place where natural disasters happen, at least not officially, and where the gaping misery that follows any catastrophe must be covered up and silenced. In such an environment, almost anything becomes believable.<sup>26</sup>

A measure of the problems encountered by researchers during the NLD period can be gauged by the fact that this passage was written by a resourceful and experienced observer who spoke Burmese and was thus able to travel back to the local population more easily than most other foreign visitors.

After 2011, when the armed forces (Tatmadaw) handed over direct power to a moderately reformist government under President Thein Sein, conditions eased and field work became easier to carry out. This process was taken a stage further by Aung San Suu Kyi's quasicivilian administration, which took office in 2016. That said, anyone wanting to learn and write about Myanmar still faces many challenges. Apart from any obstacles encountered within the country, they need to be wary of publications and online posts about the country that do not meet the high standards usually expected of scholars and other professional observers.

## 3. Reporting Problems

---

Many of the shortcomings in publications about Myanmar that have been identified above stem from restrictions imposed on foreign researchers by the military regime, and the difficulty of reporting accurately on what was still an isolated and relatively undeveloped country. However, mention also needs to be made of problems for which researchers and authors themselves need to accept responsibility.

In surveying the publications about Myanmar produced over the past few decades, it is not difficult to find examples of inaccurate, misleading and biased works that cannot be excused by referring to the difficult research and reporting environment. As Robert Taylor saw the situation in 2008:

Often the prevailing ideological or foreign policy interests of the society or go



undermine the system, even if only symbolically. At the same time as they were engaged in this everyday resistance, individuals, families and civil society groups established relationships of various kinds with the authorities, 'with the flow simply to survive and get things done. Also, as Ardeth Maung Thawngmung has described, there were ethnic minority communities in Myanmar which chose not to take up arms against the regime but tried to live peaceably with it. Attention to these sorts of factors would have helped paint a richer and more balanced picture of life in Myanmar.

Indeed, the oversimplification of life and developments in Myanmar underscores another problem, namely the tendency of foreign observers to treat large, diverse groups of people in the country as homogeneous entities with a single point of view. For example, there are around 300,000 Buddhist monks in Myanmar at any one time stretching credibility to claim that they all think alike. In fact, there are many shades of opinion within the *sangha* as demonstrated by the emergence of the extremist 969 movement. Similarly, the Tatmadaw, estimated to be about 350,000 strong, is another large organisation that, despite appearances and the efforts of the military high command, includes members with differing political views. Throw-away references to 'the government' and 'the NLD' are also misleading, as there are deep divisions within both institutions over policy and other issues. Likewise, not all so-called armed groups represent everyone in the ethnic communities after which they are named. Labels like 'the monks', 'the army', 'the party' or 'the Karens' fail to take into account the enormous complexity of these groups and the wide range of views found within them.

To help appreciate these and similar problems, it might be instructive to examine three case studies in a little more detail.

## 4. Case Study One: Surveying Public Opinion

---



---

As noted above, Myanmar watchers, activists and other commentators have long been making assessments about developments in the country on the basis of little hard information.<sup>45</sup> Before 2011, the government's statistics could not be trusted, official spokesmen rarely gave away anything of value and the state press largely peddled propaganda. Reports generated outside Myanmar were often highly politicised. In such circumstances, gauging the popular mood in Myanmar was always fraught with risk. Structured assessments of public opinion were forbidden.<sup>46</sup> There were occasional household surveys and attempts by embassies and international organisations to sound out target groups about specific issues. However, access to some parts of the country was difficult and the regime's coercive apparatus was so pervasive that the likelihood of gaining an accurate picture was low. People were afraid of speaking out, particularly on sensitive issues. As Stan Sesser found in 1989, for a local to be cited as a source in a news story or academic paper was tantamount to a jail sentence.<sup>47</sup>

As a result of all these constraints, Myanmar watchers were reliant on fragmentary information derived from relatively small numbers of personal contacts, anecdotal sources and gossip. Whenever there was a major incident of any kind, the Yangon rumour mill went into overdrive, adding to the difficulties of sorting out fact from fiction. This did not prevent educated speculation about what people in Myanmar felt about certain issues, but such assessments invariably lacked hard empirical evidence. After the advent of President Thein Sein's government, however, the atmosphere changed. Within a few years, both civil society groups and international organisations began to test the limits of the government's tolerance.<sup>48</sup> Even under Aung San Suu Kyi's government restrictions remain, but there is now much greater freedom to conduct comprehensive surveys that give reasonably reliable views of public opinion. Two such exercises, both conducted by US institutions with the support of foreign governments, stand out.

One of the first publicly reported opinion polls was carried out in April 2011 by the International Republican Institute (IRI), and enjoyed the backing of the United States Agency for International Development. It canvassed the views of 3,000 adult men and women from 208 rural and 92 urban locations in all 14 states and regions of Myanmar.

Pbuar1Ats srn reae asdo-1.9 (a5n)1 ( r)7 (po6 (e)1 (pTd ( (e)1 (244 (r27)Tj 0.0[ (u )0.3.9 (e)1 (y)2 (s t

against corruption, there was considerable support for the Tatmadaw and its tame political organisation, the Union Solidarity and Development Party.

The second survey was conducted in May and June 2014. It was sponsored by the Asia Foundation, with help from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Australian Aid. The results were released as *Myanmar 2014: Civic Knowledge and Values in a Changing Society*. It too canvassed the views of 3,000 respondents across all fourteen states and regions, once again through personal interviews. The Asia Foundation survey was more comprehensive than the IRI exercise, and yielded more nuanced results. It found, for example, that there was very limited knowledge about the structure and functions of Myanmar's central and regional governments, particularly at the subnational level. Respondents still hoped for a real democracy, but there was little understanding about the principles and practices that underp



Myanmar



## 6. Case Study Three: Analysing Aung San Suu Kyi

---

---

Not so long ago, Myanmar's de facto ruler Aung San Suu Kyi was hailed as

contending factions, and make hard decisions about contentious issues, in ways that would leave some of her admirers dissatisfied. She would not be able to please everyone, or avoid controversy, simply by referring to broad principles and abstract concepts. However, for obvious reasons, the recipients of such assessments were unlikely to share them with the public. Some senior officials may have even been reluctant to accept them. Thus the net effect of the worldwide campaign being waged on her behalf was to strengthen the popular image of her as being without fault or peer, existing above the grubby political fray.

Particularly in the case of human rights campaigners and former advocates of Aung San Suu Kyi in Western capitals, there now seems to be a strong sense of loss, even betrayal. They feel badly let down by a figure who was once ~~idol~~ the custodian of their most treasured ideals, someone who was different from other politicians, someone in whom all people of goodwill could place their complete ~~trust~~. At most like spurned lovers, these former admirers now seem to be lashing out with extra force against someone once held dear, giving a particularly sharp edge to their comments. Some criticisms may be personal in other ways too, as politicians and activists who were once vocal champions of Aung San Suu Kyi try to distance themselves from their fallen idol, lest they too become targets for criticism, or are accused of having been too credulous or naive.<sup>76</sup> Others have simply withdrawn. Notable acolytes like former First Lady Laura Bush and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, ~~for example~~, have remained silent about Aung San Suu Kyi's attitude towards the Rohingyas.

Whatever may emerge from the future analysis of modern Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi's reputation as a champion of universal human rights has been irreparably damaged. Most history books will probably record her as a fallen star, an idol whose feet were found to have been made of clay. Her extraordinary achievements over decades, both as a prisoner of conscience and an inspiration to millions in Myanmar and elsewhere, will be forever cast in shadow. She had so far to fall, however, because the international community raised her up so high. She was rarely judged against the same criteria as other world figures. Granted, there was an element of political opportunism on both sides, but less journalistic hyperbole and more measured scepticism along the way might have resulted in a more balanced view of her natural strengths and weaknesses. If her foreign admirers had been able to see her more as a real person, with human failings, and a tough politician with an unblinking eye on the ultimate prize, as much as a democratic icon and reflection of their own ideals, they may not feel quite so angry and disappointed now.<sup>77</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

Since the 2010 elections, much in Myanmar has changed, and much has stayed the same. Two quasi-democratic governments have been installed in Naypyidaw and most of the population is now enjoying greater freedom of movement, expression and association. Newspapers and books are no longer subject to the strict censorship of the past and, while the standard of journalism in Myanmar may leave something to be desired, many publications have broken new ground in their investigation of local issues. Official bodies have published data that has filled in gaps that had existed for decades. There have also been surveys of the population, the economy and civil society by respected local and international organisations. Foreign scholars, students and journalists have poured into Myanmar to conduct research, or to travel and become more familiar with a country that for decades was cut off from mainstream academic studies. The flow of learned (and not so learned) publications has become a flood.

All that said, there are still some areas of Myanmar society that pose major research challenges. A case in point is the Tatmadaw, which is arguably still the most powerful political institution in the country. Until such gaps are filled, a comprehensive understanding of Myanmar and its complex and disquieting internal dynamics will remain beyond reach. Also, the advent of a new administration in Naypyidaw, and the harsh military crackdown against the Rohingyas in 2017, have aroused strong emotions around the world. Once again, Myanmar's government and armed forces are the target of passionate denunciations in the press and online. Not all these publications stand up to scrutiny. Questions have arisen over some of the facts and statistics being cited. Some reports fail to take into account factors that do throw a different light on the issues being examined. A few bizarre conspiracy theories have been given a public airing. While her own government has clearly been guilty of peddling fake news, Aung San Suu Kyi was not entirely wrong when she pointed to an iceberg of misinformation about contemporary issues.

In these circumstances, Myanmar watchers still need to exercise caution in evaluating rumours, gossip and news reports. There are powerful groups promoting partisan views about Myanmar through publications, online and through the social media. Despite all the changes that have occurred over the past few decades, it is important that the same level of intellectual rigour is exercised to determine exactly what is happening, why and with what consequences. This can only be done through careful, objective and evidence-based analysis. As Peter Perry has written:

# Notes and References

---

---

- 1 Andrew Selth, 'More name games in Burma/Myanmar', *The Interpreter*

- 19 Hans-Bernd Zollner, 'Die langen Schatten der Politikum Stand der Birma  
Forschung' (The Long Shadow of Politics Research on Burma),

- 41 Ardeth Maung Thawngmunt, *The 'Other' Karen in Myanmar: Ethnic Minorities and the Struggle without Arms* (Lanham: Lexington, 2012).
- 42 *The Resistance of the Monks: Buddhism and Activism in Burma* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2009), p26. In 2008, an official spokesman told a visiting American scholar that there were 56,839 monasteries, 246,000 monks over 18 years of age, 300,000 novices and 43,000 nuns in Myanmar. Personal



[online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/Burma\\_Analysis\\_Bombfactors\\_11April2011.pdf](http://online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/Burma_Analysis_Bombfactors_11April2011.pdf)

60 Andrew Selth, 'If not nukes, what about missile base', *The Interpreter* 11 January 2010, at <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2010/01/11/Burma-if-not-nukes-what-about-missiles.aspx>

61 'N. Korea missiles at Burma base', *Democratic Voice of Burma* 63h02 -0 (u)-6 (t)-1.1 (4257 (y)7.9 ( )Tm)1

- 79 'Aung San Suu Kyi slams iceberg of misinformation over Rohingya', *Indian Express*, 6 September 2017, at <http://indianexpress.com/article/world/aung-san-suu-kyi-slams-iceberg-of-misinformation-over-rohingya-4831598/>
- 80 P.J. Perry, *Myanmar (Burma) since 1962: The Failure of Development* (Ashgate, Aldershot, 2007), p13.