

Print Journeys



Fig. 1: Protestors in Washington D.C. speak out about Myanmar's military coup (Photo by Gayatri Malhotra on Unsplash).

For IIAS Publications, we invite authors and editors who have recently published in the IIAS Publications Series to talk about their writing experiences. What inspired them to conduct research? What did they encounter in the field? What are the stories behind their books? For more information on IIAS books, please visit www.iias.asia/books

activists and party leaders to be at the center of the process of democratization. Meanwhile, other groups of Myanmar activists and intellectuals stridently critiqued this common focus on benevolent leadership and sought a cultural reform toward equality in society.

Across Myanmar, it was clear that the word 'democracy' did not always mean the same thing. The widespread perception that democracy was imminent in the lead-up to the 2015 elections brought the differences in these contrasting narratives to the fore, sparking deep controversies over issues such as the rights of Muslim minorities, the political role of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and the freedom of the press. After the 2015 elections – and during the period of NLD governance – these policy contests continued, revealing deeper contrasts in visions of democracy.

party leaders, and foreign aid agency representatives to see a coherent meaning for 'democracy' as an end to military rule in governance. Seemingly disparate actors could unify around opposition to the military.

When we fast forward to 2022, activists and democratic leaders are again facing an entrenched and stubborn military leadership holding on to power. 'Democracy' in Myanmar is once again perceived by many to be far off. Yet opposition to military rule – and the perceived distance from democracy – has, to some degree, brought alignment and a new unity among diverse political groups. The protests of 2021 and the Civil Disobedience Movement have had broad public support. Some communities in the Burman majority areas of the country are experiencing the brutality of the military in a way that many ethnic minority areas have long suffered, therefore bringing new shared experiences of oppression. While fractures remain in the opposition, there is a newly galvanized resistance to the military, often crossing ethnic and religious boundaries.

From here, there are a range of scenarios for Myanmar, ranging from the optimistic (e.g., a breakthrough for the opposition and the formation of new democratic governance) to the pessimistic (e.g., a gradual centralization around military rule, or brutal and prolonged war). What will unfold in the coming years remains unclear.

From a personal perspective, the release of my book just after the Myanmar coup has been surrounded with sadness. The coup has been an incredibly distressing turn for those who participated in the research. Such people have devoted much of their lives to service of their country through work in political parties and NGOs or in advocating for justice. Many of them are also former colleagues and long-term friends. I hope that the book conveys my admiration for their bravery and commitment.

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Democracy: A Distant Vision in Myanmar?

Tamas Wells

Myanmar's 2021 coup d'état saw the country's military leaders forcibly remove the democratically elected government led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party. Yet after more than a year however, the military regime have been unable to gain control over the country's governance in the way they had hoped. Through the popular Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), the reach and control of the regime is heavily curtailed. Yet despite widespread resistance and their deep unpopularity, Myanmar's military leaders are proving difficult to dislodge. In the short term, it is challenging to envisage a comprehensive victory for either the military leaders or the widespread opposition movement. This sadly leaves Myanmar politics in a brutal stalemate where poverty continues to deepen for many.

I began research for my book *Narrating Democracy in Myanmar* in 2013, and at that time many of my Myanmar activist and NGO friends had a guarded optimism about the rate of change in the country. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and many political prisoners had been released in previous years and were reengaged in public life. The press had new freedoms, and there was a flowering of new journals covering everything from fashion and sport to national politics. For activists, there were also new breakthrough shifts in government decision making – such as President Thein Sein's suspension of the Myitsone dam project – which gave hope for advocacy efforts. The military-aligned and much maligned USDP party still controlled parliament, but there was optimism that the upcoming 2015 elections would be an opportunity, the first in decades, for the people of Myanmar to participate in a relatively credible election.

Whilst there were many troubling issues in the country at that time, including growing violence against Muslim minorities, the anticipation of change and use of the word 'democracy' was increasing. Yet the more the word 'democracy' was used, and the closer it was perceived to be, the more complex and indeterminate it became. At this time, new fractures emerged between activists, democratic leaders, and their

donor supporters. New questions were raised about the practices and values of democracy. As a set of more imminently achievable practices and values, 'democracy' now entailed many potential points of difference. Rather than there being one way to conceive of Myanmar's democratization, there were in fact many contrasting stories being told. My own research – with urban activists in Yangon, members and leaders of the NLD (Aung San Suu Kyi's political party which held government from 2016 to 2020), and European and North American donor representatives – revealed distinct narratives of democracy in Myanmar.

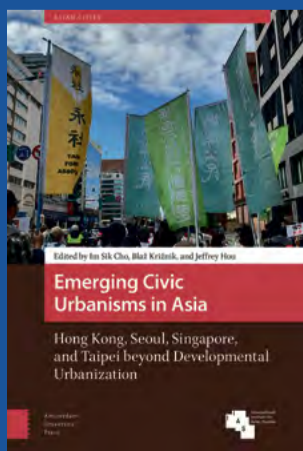
The most obvious narrative about democratic change – within European or North American donor programs on governance and democracy – was a liberal one. This focused on the development of new institutions and the promotion of liberal values of rights and minority protections. Yet at the time, many Myanmar activists and democratic leaders that I spoke to narrated a very different story of Myanmar's democratization, focusing instead on the problem of self-interested and dictatorial leadership and the need for a benevolent leader who could unite the country. This was democratization primarily through the fostering of goodwill and selflessness. The development of formal institutions was also important, but it was not considered by these

A unifying vision, from a distance

In 2006, I was living in Yangon and working for an NGO. I enjoyed going to local galleries and looking at the work of Burmese artists. Once I saw a stunning watercolour of a downtown Yangon streetscape. In the image, rain was falling, and the buildings seemed to close in on the street. I noticed, though, that the painting had a different impact depending on how far away you were standing. When viewed from a distance, the painting looked like a coherent street scene, but when viewed from close up, it was a complex mess of colours.

In 2006, democracy seemed a far-off vision in Myanmar. Power was continuing to centralize under Senior General Than Shwe. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi – along with hundreds of activists and NLD party members – remained in house arrest or prison, and civil wars continued around the periphery of the country. Opposition to the brutal governance of the military leaders was a common cause for civil society organization leaders, ethnic political party members, urban activists, and members of the NLD. Donor agencies from Europe, North America, and Australia also sought ways to support these groups in their efforts to promote democratic change. At a time when democracy seemed far off to most Myanmar people, it was relatively easy for a diverse group of activists, political

Latest Publication



Emerging Civic Urbanisms in Asia: Hong Kong, Seoul, Singapore and Taipei beyond Developmental Urbanization

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In parts of Asia, citizens are getting increasingly involved in shaping their neighbourhoods and cities, representing a significant departure from earlier state-led or market-driven urban development. These emerging civic urbanisms are a result of an evolving relationship between the state and civil society. The ten contributions in this volume provide critical insights into how the changing state-civil society relationship affects the recent surge of civic urbanism in Hong Kong, Seoul, Singapore, and Taipei, and present cases of grassroots activism and resistance, collaboration and placemaking,

neighbourhood community building, and self-organization and commoning in these cities. Exploring how citizen participation and state-civil society partnerships contribute to more resilient and participatory neighbourhoods and cities, the authors use the concept of civic urbanisms not only as a conceptual framework to understand the ongoing social and urban change but as an aspirational model of urban governance for cities in Asia and beyond

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