

Defining civil society

‘Civil society’ is a contested concept: there are many definitions of the term, used in different ideological traditions. Furthermore, the sector itself may be contested (i.e. with multiple civil-society actors who compete for material and/or political resources). This chapter uses a non-prescriptive definition of civil society – actors, voluntary associations and networks operating in the space between the family/clan, the state in its various incarnations, and the for-profit market. This includes but is not limited to non-government organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs – see below). Local civil society in Myanmar includes village-level associations and networks whose members conceive of and undertake their work in ‘traditional’ ways that differ from the western ‘rational-bureaucratic’ approach (see note 3 on p. 88). It is debatable whether organizations closely associated with state and non-state actors (so-called ‘GONGOS’ and ‘NSAG-GONGOS’) should be considered part of civil society.

The terms (‘local/national’) NGO and CBO are often used interchangeably. However, there are important conceptual and practical differences between the two types of organization. A CBO is used here to mean a grassroots membership organization – based in the community and locally managed – with its members as its main beneficiaries. CBOs usually exist in just one community or a group of adjacent communities. In contrast, NGOs are service providers that work for social, non-profit ends (for the benefit of the community). Staff may be local, national or international but not necessarily drawn from among the beneficiaries. Although NGOs often employ participatory, ‘grassroots’ approaches, they usually work in broader thematic and geographic areas than do CBOs.

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Development of civil society in Myanmar

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The peace process currently underway in Myanmar represents the best opportunity in half a century to resolve ethnic and state–society conflicts. Critical to the success of this peace process will be the role that is played by various actors in the country’s civil society. In this chapter, the nature of civil society in Myanmar is examined. In a subsequent chapter on peace-building in Myanmar, the actual engagement of these various actors in the peace process will be explored in greater detail.

An important aspect of the recent violence and ethnic hatred in parts of Rakhine State and central Myanmar (described elsewhere in this volume – see especially p. 323ff.) has been the role played by various political actors at the local and national levels, often in competition with each other. Not only do these events indicate that there are spoilers on the sidelines, working to undermine the reform process by using local tensions to provoke violence but also it is important to acknowledge the potentially ‘dark side of civil society’ (an issue we shall return to later in this chapter).

Contestation and evolution of civil society

A contest for power within and over Myanmar’s civil-society sector is not a new phenomenon. For half a century, the state has sought to penetrate and suppress, and/or mobilize, the country’s diverse social groups, while members of Myanmar’s diverse ethnic nationalities (including the Burman majority) have sought to carve out spheres of autonomy – both for the intrinsic value of civil-society work (in providing services, promoting democratization, etc.) and to contest a dictatorial and often

brutal state authority – in ways which in many cases reflect ethnic and religious divisions in society.

Following the military takeover of 1958, and especially after the 1962 coup d'état, the government began extending its control over previously autonomous aspects of social life.¹ Many civil-society networks could no longer operate independently, and opposition to the military regime was eliminated, driven underground or forced into open revolt. The existence of renewed armed opposition to the military government provided a pretext for the further extension of state control, and suppression of diverse social groups deemed antipathetic to the modernizing state-socialist project. The military regime's suppression of non-Burman cultural and political identities, epitomized by the banning of minority languages from state schools, drove a new wave of disaffected ethnic-minority citizens into rebellion.²

By 1980, even the previously independent *Sangha* (monkhood) – members of which played key roles in Myanmar's struggle for independence – had been brought under at least partial state control. Nevertheless, Myanmar's 250,000 monks and novices retained a prestige and influence that extended across all strata of society. Among the few institutions in Myanmar not directly controlled by the state, the *Sangha* – and Christian networks – remained among the potentially most powerful sectors of civil society, especially in ethnic minority areas.³

Popular participation may be mobilized either for (or against) an authoritarian regime, and it seemed for a few weeks in the summer of 1988 that 'people's power' might prevail in Myanmar, as it had two

1. Kyaw Yin Hlaing (2007).

2. According to David Steinberg, 'civil society died under the BSPP; perhaps, more accurately, it was murdered' (Steinberg 1999: 8). Under the 1974 constitution, all political activity beyond the strict control of the state was outlawed (Taylor 1987: 303–09).

3. The Anglican, Baptist, Catholic and other churches in Myanmar have well over two million members. Although most of their activities are religious-pastoral, the churches devote considerable energy and resources (including some international funds) to education, social welfare and community development projects, also in armed conflict-affected areas. These are significant, countrywide organizations, the majority of whose members come from minority communities. However, they also face considerable skills and capacity constraints. Many Buddhist voluntary associations exist, too. Although many senior monks have been co-opted by the military regime, the *Sangha* still has great potential as a catalyst in civil and political affairs. However, Buddhist and other traditional networks tend to be localized and centred on individual monks who may not conceptualize or present their aims in a manner readily intelligible to western agencies. Such non-formal approaches are therefore often 'invisible' to western (and western-trained) staff (South 2008).

years previously in the Philippines. The failure of the 1988 ‘Democracy Uprising’ in Myanmar, like that of the May–June 1989 ‘Democracy Spring’ in China, was in part due to the suppressed nature of civil society in these states. Under the rule of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which came to power in 1988, state–society relations were further centralized and attempts were made to penetrate and mobilize the country’s diverse social groups. Particularly following the ascension of General Than Shwe in 1992, social control was reinforced by the reformation of local militias, the indoctrination of civil servants, and the major new drive by the SLORC to develop a state-controlled mass organization. In addition to new GONGOs (organizations closely associated with state and non-state actors), these included the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a mass organization (many members of which were coerced into joining) that was established in September 1993 along the lines of the pro-military GOLKAR party in Indonesia. The USDA was transformed into the USD Party to contest the 2010 elections.⁴ The USDA and pro-government militias were heavily involved in the brutal suppression of the Sangha-led ‘saffron revolution’ in September 2007 (see p. 293ff.).

The following year, the Irrawaddy Delta and parts of Yangon Division were devastated by Cyclone Nargis, a huge natural disaster that struck on 2–3 May 2008 (see p. 397). Following the cyclone, in the absence of an effective government or international response, local communities took the initiative in responding to the unprecedented humanitarian crisis. In Yangon and across the Delta, monks helped to clear debris, undertook emergency rescues and repairs, and provided shelter to the destitute. This was a politically significant development, given the government’s violent suppression of the monks’ uprising the previous year. Furthermore, a broad array of formal and informal local associations and citizens, including several prominent celebrities and business networks, participated in an impressive range of relief activities. Church and other civil-society organizations mobilized to deliver assistance, including money and material donated by international organizations.⁵

4. Callahan 2003: 8; see also p. 57. The USDA/USDP’s objectives include upholding the regime’s ‘Three National Causes’ (non-disintegration of the union, non-disintegration of national solidarity and perpetuation of national solidarity) and reaffirming the Myanmar Army’s self-appointed state- and nation-building role.

5. South (2012).



Emergency food relief after Cyclone Nargis, August 2008 (photo: Nils Carstensen, courtesy Dan-ChurchAid)

Mapping civil society in Myanmar today

Since the 1990s, civil society in Myanmar has gradually re-emerged.⁶ Until 2011, many of the more dynamic sectors of Myanmar civil society were situated among ethnic groups. The re-emergence of civil society within and sometimes between often highly conflict-affected communities was partly a result of the previous round of ceasefires in the 1990s. The space for civil and political society has again expanded dramatically since mid-2011 when the new government took power in Myanmar.⁷

In brief, then, the civil-society sector can be mapped as follows. A more detailed overview (but one oriented towards mapping peace-building activities) is found in our later chapter (from p. 223). In addition, the general point can be made that, although the peace process in Myanmar is heavily dominated by men, women activists play more prominent roles in civil society, particularly among ethnic-nationality communities.

6. Lorch (2006).

7. In a significant development for civil-society organizations, a new law was passed by parliament in June 2014 that provides voluntary registration procedures for local and international NGOs. It also replaces the draconian laws enacted by the military regime shortly after it seized power in 1988 that effectively banned NGOs not closely tied to the regime. (MD)

Urban/Burman areas

Over the past decade, urban civil society in Myanmar has grown and also become more politicized. Since mid-2011, there has been a huge increase in civil-society activism. While not exclusively identified with the majority community, activism is nevertheless focused particularly around Burman intellectual classes aiming to promote democracy in their country.

Those working to 'build democracy from below' have established a number of predominantly Burman-staffed national NGOs, with significant achievements made in areas like education and community development. Several of these organizations grew substantially in response to Cyclone Nargis and some are now well established. The trend towards a more politically engaged civil society was magnified by the decision of the National League for Democracy (NLD) to enhance its political prospects by engaging in social work.

Ethnic actors in government-controlled areas

Before the socio-political opening of the past two years, the roles and scope of civil-society action in government-controlled areas were severely restricted. Nevertheless, provided they worked with great caution and had powerful patrons, Christian (mostly ethnic minority) civil-society groups enjoyed considerable space and were able to maintain strong international connections while remaining mostly disconnected from Burman-majority civil society. Over the past two years, ethnic-nationality civil-society actors in Myanmar have enjoyed more space for action. The dynamics of this fast-changing situation vary, according to the context of particular conflict and peace processes. Civil society in many ethnic communities is often faith-based or involves other more traditional types of association. Though maybe invisible to Western observers, this indigenous civil society constitutes the heart of the communities in question, being a great reservoir of 'human capital' and strategic capacity for change.

The borderlands; areas of ongoing armed conflict

Over the past two decades, a veritable 'aid industry' has grown up along the Thai border. Here, a number of civil-society groups have flourished, staffed by dedicated Myanmar personnel as well as long-term foreign actors. However, as the peace process gains ground (with the important caveat of recent heavy fighting in Kachin areas), the old distinction between areas of ongoing conflict and ceasefire and government-

controlled areas is beginning to break down. Not only are vulnerable, armed conflict-affected communities in remote areas increasingly accessible from inside the country; the political narrative is also shifting more and more *into* Myanmar. Many border-based groups are adapting to this change but others find it threatening, especially those advocacy groups that became used to controlling the political agenda, framing the ethnic conflict for international consumption, and channelling donor funds to their own conflict-affected client populations. The dilemmas and issues thus arising raise important questions about the nature of civil society (see our follow-up chapter, p. 223ff.).

Refugee and diaspora communities

As well as the millions of mainly ethnic minority people internally displaced within Myanmar or living as refugees in the borderlands (discussed above), a further 2–3 million migrant workers and their dependents live in Thailand where they have become part of the ‘grey’ and ‘black’ economies. (Their situation is explored in greater detail later in this volume – see p. 364.) As noted for the borderlands, many activist and exile groups in Thailand and beyond have sought to play constructive roles in the peace process while others feel more threatened by the changes in Myanmar, and have positioned themselves as ‘spoilers’.



A refugee camp at Mannerplaw in eastern Burma (photo courtesy of Free Burma Rangers)

Strategic roles of civil society

As warned by others,⁸ it is important to acknowledge the potentially 'dark side of civil society': the sector may have significant discontents ('uncivil society'). Civil society is not inherently progressive, but can be both reactionary and repressive or at least unaccountable. Indeed, civil society in Myanmar tends to be dominated by (local) elites, and as such may reproduce the inequalities of society at large.⁹ Nevertheless, civil-society networks are essential for the achievement of 'bottom-up' social and political transition in Myanmar, and for conflict resolution at both the national and local levels. In order for democratic change to be sustainable, the country's diverse social and ethnic communities must enjoy a sense of ownership in any transitional process, and equip themselves to fill the power vacuum that may emerge, either as a result of abrupt shifts in national politics, or of a more gradual withdrawal of the military from state and local power. The ability of people to organize, and re-assume control over aspects of their lives, which since the 1960s have been abrogated by the military (including insurgent armies), will depend on such grassroots mobilization, and practices of local governance.

At the local level, the development of civil-society networks and 'human capital' establishes patterns of empowerment, trust and participation that can gradually change structures of governance on the part of local authorities (including ceasefire groups). The creation of 'social capital' and the related concepts of reciprocity and 'political trust', through voluntary cooperation in the mutually accountable activities of civil society, is one of the hallmarks of citizen engagement in liberal democracy. In the Burmese context, this is related to a shift in power relations, from 'power over' (the mode of military government, reflected in much of the wider society) to an empowering, innately democratic 'power with' form of participatory social organization.¹⁰ Elements of re-emergent civil society in Myanmar reflect the countries' authoritarian traditions and recent history. Furthermore, Myanmar civil society remains 'segmented' among ethnic lines. Nevertheless, there are reasons

8. Alagappa (2004) and, in the case of Myanmar, Lorch (2006).

9. See also South (2012).

10. As noted elsewhere, one way of achieving this transition may be through implementing codes of conduct and supporting the work of local ceasefire- and peace-monitoring networks.

for hope regarding the dynamic engagement of citizens in processes of peace and democratization.

Authors' Note

As with our later chapter on peace-building (see p. 223), this chapter is based on material from the background paper 'Mapping of Myanmar Peacebuilding Civil Society', which was prepared by the authors for a meeting of the Civil Society Dialogue Network focused on the evolving peace processes in Myanmar and held in Brussels on 7 March 2013 (more details at <http://www.eplo.org/civil-society-dialogue-network.html>). Part of this extracted material is updated from South 2008. For a survey of civil society in Myanmar, see Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007.

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