Civil society and expectations of democratisation from below:
The case of Myanmar

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ABSTRACT

Western donors often try to avoid providing aid to governments that fail to meet their requirements of 'good governance'. In line with neoliberal thought, they prefer direct funding to civil society, thereby hoping to achieve 'democratisation from below'. Civil society organisations are expected to model democratic behaviour, and are relied on for transparency and inclusiveness. This paper will discuss such practice as it has taken place in Myanmar in recent years. It will address definitions of civil society in Myanmar, issues of representation, and the question if and how civil society organisations in Myanmar can promote democratic practice.

Civil society and democratisation

Studies of recent trends in development have shown increased importance attached to the role of civil society (e.g. Chandler, 2004). For many (often western) donors, funding civil society has become the preferred form of development aid in countries where governments do not meet standards of 'good governance' (Chege, 1999; Mercer, 2002; Salemink, 2006). By funding civil society initiatives, donors can support the population in developing countries, while preventing the channelling of funds towards persons or authorities they disapprove of. Additionally, donors are hoping to achieve 'democratisation from below': not only are they expecting civil society assistance to benefit the population of developing countries, but they are also hoping to sow the seeds for durable democratic practices, initiated by civil society organisations. In response to this trend, critics in development theory have started questioning the direct link between civil society and democratisation. By simply displaying civil society as benign, and government as unworthy of foreign assistance, donors risk overlooking undemocratic aspects of civil society, as well as progressive elements within government institutions, it is argued (Spurk, 2010).

In this paper, the assumption that support for civil society fosters democratisation from below will be examined with Myanmar[1] as a case study. The military government's 'Roadmap to Democracy', resulting in national elections in November 2010, did not satisfy international standards of democratisation 'from above', and the new government seemed to lack credibility[2] (Transnational Institute and Burma Centrum Netherlands, 2010). Meanwhile, western donors are seeking ways to assist the population. While the country still receives far less development assistance than its poverty level warrants, the flow of western donor money to non-governmental organisations in the country is increasing (Allchin, 2011). In 2011, the British government announced that it would double its assistance to the country by funding international and local organisations, making it the largest bilateral donor in Myanmar (Forbes, 2011). Other European countries such as Denmark have also chosen Myanmar as one of the focus countries for their development assistance in the coming years (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 2011).

Based on civil society theory, this paper discusses the expectation of promoting democratisation from below through international assistance to civil society in Myanmar. After discussing how civil society in Myanmar might be defined, we will look at the way civil society groups identify their beneficiaries, and to what extent they might be able to promote democratic practice. It will be argued that western donors and civil society organisations inside the country are making significant efforts to promote transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness. However, donors must also be aware of the constraints facing civil society in Myanmar, which include both external factors such as government restrictions and general lack of trust, and internal factors such as rivalries, contradicting strategies, and perceptions of elitism.

Characteristics of civil society in Myanmar

The concept of 'civil society' is generally thought to be western in origin, defined as citizen organisations that are independent from family, government or business, promote a public interest, and do not seek economic profit[3]. However, this definition has been called into question by researchers, particularly those working in non-western contexts. One point of criticism is that more informal organisations, often based on kinship or religious ties, are easily overlooked (Lewis, 2001). The assumption in neoliberal theory that civil society's primary goal is to provide a check on government activities has also been questioned (Salemink, 2006), and the suggestion that these organisations do not seek economic profit has been emphasised by the frequent use of the term 'non-profit'. As a result, donors might have an idealised image of civil society as non-divisive, non-political, and non-profit. This section will explore what kind of civil society organisations can be found in Myanmar, and to what extent ethnic and religious divides, political affiliations, and profitable aspects should be taken into account when identifying civil society organisations in this country.

The existence and characterisation of civil society in Myanmar is subject to continuous debate. Steinberg (1999) is often quoted referring to civil society in Myanmar as 'a void', stating that it was 'murdered' under the Burma Socialist Programme Party in the 1960s. Steinberg himself quotes Aung Thwin, who argues that the words 'civil' and 'civilian' do not exist in the Burmese language, and that the state-civil distinction is only made by those who are familiar with the western way of thinking (Aung Thwin, personal conversation, cited in Steinberg, 2001). Despite these reservations, there is nowadays little doubt among researchers that something resembling common definitions of civil society exists in Myanmar, and that it is far from new (Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 2007; South 2004).

The number of civil society organisations operating in Myanmar can only be estimated. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can be distinguished from Community Based Organisations (CBOs), as the former are generally thought to be more professional, and larger in scale and budget. Heidel (2006) conducted an extensive study on civil society organisations in the country, estimating the number of CBOs at 214.000 and the number of NGOs at 270, but his methodology (extrapolating a limited number of findings) leaves room for discussion, as Heidel acknowledges in his paper. Furthermore, it is clear that cyclone Nargis, which hit Myanmar in May 2008, has had a significant effect on the growth of civil society in the country. The scale and impact of this disaster[4] ironically created a unique opportunity for citizens to organise themselves and 'help their own people' (Human Rights Watch, 2010). As both domestic civil society activities and foreign assistance increased in the aftermath of cyclone Nargis, it is safe to conclude that the civil society landscape in Myanmar would look different today, had this disaster not taken place.

Although Buddhist organisations can be considered among the oldest and most influential civil society groups in the country (Heidel, 2006), they traditionally rely on donations from local communities, and as such have been largely outside the picture of international donors. This is in line with the argument that religious groups tend to be overlooked in western definitions of civil society. On the other hand, it should be noted that many civil society initiatives that are funded by foreign donors in Myanmar are organised around religion. These include relatively many Christian organisations, and a number of Islamic and Hindu organisations (Heidel, 2006). Also characteristic for Myanmar is the fact that many civil society organisations are targeting a specific ethnic group (South, 2004). This applies not only to organisations in the ethnic states[5], but also to some organisations in the cities of central Myanmar. The ethnic and religious foundations of many civil society organisations in Myanmar can be considered both a strength and a weakness: it ensures a large potential for mobilisation and for providing services to people who might otherwise be difficult to reach, but it can also reinforce existing divides.

In traditional civil society theory, NGOs and CBOs are defined as non-political, voluntary organisations. Many critics have pointed out that such definitions are too rigid, and do not adequately reflect the role civil society organisations can play in their societies. Although political parties are only rarely included in definitions of civil society, this does not mean that there is no connection between civil society and politics. There are many examples where civil society groups are either calling for political reform, or are even endorsing certain parties or candidates (Ndegwa, 1996). It is also not uncommon for individuals previously involved in civil society activities to later take up positions in government (Foley and Edwards, 1996). This has certainly been the case in Myanmar, where candidates without a military background were only recently allowed to contest in elections, which means that most of them come from a different career background, such as civil society or business. Indeed, over the past years, foreign donors and civil society trainers have realised that a strict distinction between politics and civil society in Myanmar would be artificial, and have been engaging with different sectors of Myanmar society, including members and candidates from political parties.

Although some civil society organisations have political links or aspirations, others limit their activities to the community level and engage in service provision, because it fits their goals, or in order to maintain a certain position or image. In NGO literature, such organisations have been referred to as 'operational NGOs', as opposed to 'advocacy NGOs', although in practice many organisations are a combination of the two (Gordenker and Weiss, 1996 cited in Van Tuijl, 1999). In the case of Myanmar, the distinction between advocacy organisations and service provision organisations can help explain the ambiguity in terms of the relation between civil society and politics (South, 2004). Since organisations that engage in service provision are relatively harmless to the government and are in fact providing much needed societal support, they are usually allowed to operate, although they have to make sure their activities are strictly non-political and not too high-profile or influential (Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 2007). On the other hand, activists who have overt political aims, or refer explicitly to 'sensitive' topics such as human rights and democracy, are frequently followed, harassed or detained. Groups that are particularly known to mobilise people into possible dissent and protest, such as student groups and Buddhist monks (Steinberg, 2006), are also closely watched and frequently obstructed, for example by introducing distance learning instead of communal university classes, and by preventing lay people from visiting monasteries.

The voluntary or not-for-profit aspect is another characteristic that does not apply to all civil society actors. It would be naive to assume that NGO workers or community-based activists do not consider financial (or other) benefits in their decision making. Especially in developing countries, organisations that manage to attract foreign

funding are particularly attractive employers. This can create a situation whereby organisations that are expected to raise the voices of the poor and the marginalised are actually run by persons who are quite well off. As a consequence, they might be mistrusted by those they are supposed to help. Indeed, the more prominent civil society organisations in Myanmar tend to consist of urban, educated and literate elites[6] (South, 2004). Most of the larger organisations are based in Yangon, or at least have an office there, which facilitates foreign contacts and helps them get in the picture of international donors and service providers. However, this complicates their access to local communities in the more remote areas of the country, which is further aggravated by ongoing armed conflict in certain regions, as well as general communication and transportation difficulties.

Moreover, those who have been educated in the west have a better understanding of international donors' reporting requirements and communication preferences, and are a valuable workforce for the NGO sector. International NGOs in particular can offer competitive salaries and work conditions, taking away those with the most education or work experience from local organisations. Subsequently, their employees have access to further networking and training opportunities, which help advance their careers, and make them attractive employees on an international level. Given this reality, donors may unintentionally influence societal relations and the makeup of the local workforce by hiring local staff, or funding those with high potential to study abroad, contributing to a significant brain drain inside the country. Local community-based organisations are often left with relatively inexperienced staff, and limited access to donor funding. Some donors are now seeking to counter this trend, by providing scholarships only for study in the region, and by trying to encourage scholarship recipients to return to their country and benefit their communities after completion of their studies. However, this problem will not be solved as long as educational and employment opportunities for qualified people in Myanmar remain limited.

Identifying the beneficiaries of civil society activities

In terms of representation, it is important to identify the perceived and actual beneficiaries of civil society activities. It has often been noted that Myanmar society remains hierarchical in many ways. Men are more active in public life than women, and young people are expected to respect their seniors, and not disagree with them in public (International Crisis Group, 2001). These power relations are pervasive in many levels of society, from the private to the public, and are also reflected in the near absence of women and young people from senior positions in the army and in government institutions. Since it is often observed that civil society organisations partly reflect the culture of the country they are working in, these traditional power relations could be expected to influence civil society in Myanmar as well (Lorch, 2008).

The more traditional, often Buddhist organisations still show such signs of hierarchy. But in the newly established organisations, power relations seem to be shifting. Cyclone Nargis, for example, caused an increased awareness of, and interest in 'social issues' among Myanmar youth. The scale of the disaster and the lack of a coordinated response also provided them the opportunity to take on leadership roles. In recent years, donors have made an effort to support youth and women playing a role in civil society activities, for example by funding women's organisations, or providing scholarships for youth with leadership potential. As youth and women feel empowered, existing power hierarchies are increasingly being challenged.

Including youth and women, however, does not guarantee an inclusive representation of the larger society. In Myanmar, as in many developing countries, there is a strong interest to promote grassroots activities and community based projects. However, researchers have argued that commonly used terms such as 'grassroots', 'community based', 'participatory' and 'partnership' can be ambiguous (Lister, 2003; Salemink, 2006). Civil society organisations are usually expected to represent the most marginalised in society, who would otherwise not have a sufficient voice in decision making mechanisms. Given the tendency towards creating NGO 'elites' as discussed above, the question is how such organisations can make sure that these persons are actually involved.

Most INGOs and large NGOs in Yangon experience difficulties reaching these 'grassroots', particularly rural, poor and illiterate people. Once they reach these communities, they find it challenging to assess their needs. People without previous exposure to 'civil society discourse' are not used to answering questionnaires, or taking part in focus group discussions. What is required here is not only research experience, but a great level of context sensitivity, often best provided by people from the same background. Given the previously mentioned brain drain, these persons are often hard to come by. When local constituencies are not adequately consulted, there is a risk that those in charge of the money (INGOs or foreign donors) and their immediate partners determine the local agenda, which could result in the implementation of inappropriate projects, inspired by donor presence rather than by local demand (Salemink, 2006).

A common point of criticism regarding western definitions of civil society is that precisely those organisations which can mobilise the largest number of people, such as trade unions and student groups, are hardly considered suitable for funding, while NGOs with little or no formal membership are more successful in acquiring donor support (Spurk, 2010). It has also been noted that some organisations in Myanmar are run mainly by one or a couple of charismatic individuals, who act as spokespersons and decision makers in their organisation, and thus determine the organisation's goals and strategies. While such decision making processes might not contribute to a sense of accountability and representation, this does not always have

implications for the effectiveness or legitimacy of the organisation. In places like Myanmar, where public criticism of the government can have severe and long-term consequences, a few individuals might well be able to voice the concerns of many. This situation therefore can only be expected to change, once local capacity increases, and fear of reprisal diminishes.

After cyclone Nargis, when many civil society organisations inside the country were started and the sector grew within a short period of time, calls for accountability became more prominent. More foreign money was entering the country, and both donors and local people raised questions regarding the spending of such funds, and the effectiveness of the recipient organisations. At that point, international standards for humanitarian assistance such as the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership and the Sphere Project entered the country. Increasingly, NGOs in Myanmar show interest in, and awareness of, the need to report on their activities, both towards their donors and towards their beneficiaries. At the same time, they are dependent on foreign agencies' understanding of the local situation inside the country, where financial accountability and openness regarding conducted activities are often more complicated than elsewhere, especially for the many civil society organisations which are not formally registered, and thus are not allowed to open bank accounts or receive foreign funding (Lorch, 2008). The balance between accountability, flexibility and trust between donors and recipient organisations is delicate, and often depends on previous experiences and established relationships. Likewise, beneficiaries of civil society activities might have limited understanding of the demands imposed on organisations by their donors.

Civil society and 'democratisation from below'

In what ways could civil society organisations potentially contribute to 'democratisation from below'? What are the 'bottom-up' mechanisms, to use another buzz word from development theory, that civil society organisations can employ, and what are the end goals? The word 'democratisation' is continuously evolving in academic and popular discourse. Traditionally it referred almost exclusively to national politics, but demands for democratisation have expanded to inter-governmental institutions such as the World Bank and the United Nations, local organisations, and even interactions between individual people, such as parent-child or parent-teacher relations. In this paper, democratisation will be defined as having both political and societal aspects.

As mentioned, in response to donors' trust in the potential of civil society, critics warn against the automatic assumption that civil society organisations will further democratisation. One of their arguments is that some organised groups of citizens simply do not have democratic goals. Some therefore prefer to see civil society as a platform that gives room to all voices in society, not only popular or 'politically

correct' ones (Ndegwa, 1996). Several authors have come up with the term 'uncivil society' (e.g. Spurk, 2010) for organisations that could be considered civil society in terms of their structure, but do not seem to advance a common good, in particular when they are promoting conflict or violence, or seek to exclude people based on ethnicity or religion.

When assessing the prospect of civil society contributing to 'democratisation from below' in Myanmar, one can choose to include or exclude 'non-democratic' or 'uncivil' NGOs such as the USDA, which is considered government-led (Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 2007; South, 2004) and was in fact turned into a prominent political party, the USDP. Excluding a number of similar 'GONGOs' (government organised non-governmental organisations), we are left with the growing field of NGOs, CBOs and international NGOs as detailed above. The impact they are having (or hoping to have) on democratisation can be assessed on political and non-political levels.

Political opportunity and societal status largely determine to what extent civil society organisations can further democratisation on different levels. Where possible, they can hold politicians accountable, either directly, through advocacy, or indirectly, by mobilising citizens to become aware of political decisions that affect their lives. Even in the absence of full-fledged democratic governance, they can promote democratic values, rights and duties through education and international advocacy, or by creating local democratic mechanisms, even within their own organisations. Social movements in particular can be active in advancing democratic rights which the state fails to acknowledge, as the abolitionist movement, the women's rights movement, and many other emancipation movements have shown. However, in a repressive context such as Myanmar, overt mobilisation of people might not be the preferred course of action, due to the high risks for those who get involved. In this case, many civil society organisations turn to subtle forms of empowerment and awareness raising, providing education and information for people to make their own decisions, without using explicit mobilising language.

In terms of national politics, the influence of civil society in achieving democratisation in Myanmar has been limited at most. The national election results of 1990 were ignored by the military, and it took the government twenty years to organise the next elections as part of its 'Roadmap to Democracy'. In terms of election procedure and results, civil society has not had a great influence on the military government. However, the announcement of the 2010 elections provided an opportunity for certain groups to engage the population in discussions on politics. Given the lack of political information in the formal education system and the media, this was the first time for many people to learn about their rights and duties in relation to their fellow citizens and the state.

In the run-up to the 2010 elections, the government sent mixed messages in terms of political involvement: citizens were strongly encouraged to vote, with calls for election boycott denounced and suppressed (Aye Nai, 2010), but voter education was not encouraged either (Thai Action Committee for Democracy in Burma, 2011). Restrictions continued particularly in relation to the political opposition groups and any of their supporters. On the other hand, not all opposition groups were banned from participating, creating some level of political choice, particularly in certain ethnic states. Many organisations and individuals cautiously took the opportunity to engage citizens in discussions about politics and the future of their country, by organising civic education initiatives (Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, 2010).

On the societal level, a couple of factors are limiting the potential for civil society in Myanmar to model democratic practices. Lack of trust, caused by historical and recent political events, might be the most prominent remaining obstacle. From pre-colonial Burma to the period of British rule and the Second World War, Burmans and different ethnic minority groups fought against each other, and allied with different occupying forces (Callahan, 2007). After independence, many ethnic groups were promised self-governance, a promise that never materialised. Up to recently, many insurgent groups in the ethnic states were fighting the government army, while further internal division was created by the government's previous attempts to offer 'border guard force' status to ethnic armed groups (Kramer, 2009). Restrictions imposed on ethnic minorities in using their own language, developing an ethnically sensitive education system, and exercising their cultural practices have contributed to the dispersion of civil society activities along ethnic and religious lines. Inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogues have been actively promoted only over the past few years (Heidel, 2006), and many of these are deliberately supported by western donors. Likewise, women and youth are becoming more influential in regional organisations, particularly in ethnic states or in ethnic-based organisations (International Crisis Group, 2001).

Lastly, it has been observed in development literature that western donors often expect civil society organisations in developing countries to have shared strategies and shared goals. Once they realise that civil society organisations in the same context might have different or competing goals, they are easily tempted to dismiss non-western civil society as 'weak, underdeveloped or fragmented' (Mercer, 2002, p.8). Some Myanmar civil society organisations, including transnational groups, are known to be conflict-ridden, lacking unity and coordination. Most disagreements within Myanmar's civil society concern political strategies and perceived ties with one side or the other. Organisations that desperately try to stay away from politics are accused of being ineffective and not constructive, while organisations that involve themselves in politics without encountering severe consequences are distrusted, because of perceived ties with the military government. This also resulted in contradictory strategies in the run-up to

the 2010 elections: while some groups were actively engaging in civic education, others were calling on citizens to boycott the elections (Transnational Institute and Burma Centrum Netherlands, 2010). Similarly, the international community has been hearing strong contradictory voices on issues such as economic sanctions and investment.

Such pluralism could be regarded as a sign of democratisation, whereby different voices in society have a chance to be heard, including possible unpopular or 'uncivil' ones, as mentioned earlier. It is also a fact that different organisations aspire different goals. Some will criticise the government openly, and would continue to do so no matter how far democratisation progresses on the national level, while others, due to the nature of their work, will choose to cooperate with government officials whenever they can.

On the other hand, fragmentation might be the result of a deliberate 'divide and rule' strategy employed by the government (Lorch, 2008), or even of competition for foreign attention and funding. The resulting lack of unity can inhibit civil society as a whole from reaching its full potential. The government's history of playing out different parties against each other, be they neighbouring countries, armed groups, or civil society organisations, contributes to the continued lack of trust which may well be one of the greatest obstacles to more effective civil society activity in the country. Different groups in Myanmar have been afraid to share information with each other, and might be hesitant or practically unable to meet regularly, due to the inaccessibility of conflict areas, or long travel distances.

Initiatives supported by western donors aimed at trust building and networking are a potentially effective way to counter these obstacles, as long as they manage to have an impact beyond the limited groups and geographic areas that are initially targeted. The media and foreign diplomats also have a role to play. Such parties are known to have limited attention and financial resources available, which might lead them to seek after a single message. Nevertheless, they should realise that open discussion and expression of different views are vital to democratisation, especially in a large and diverse society such as Myanmar, and that their choices can influence relations between organisations and individuals on the ground.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that much progress is needed to improve the lives of the people of Myanmar on many levels. As long as the government fails to provide the necessary conditions for positive change to occur, a significant percentage of the population will remain dependent on foreign assistance. In addition to the need for humanitarian aid inside the country, donor funding to civil society is vital in creating platforms for citizen mobilisation, service provision, and the development of long-term strategies to improve conditions throughout the country.

At the same time, donors should realise that their choices in funding are having a significant impact on power relations inside the country, and should make efforts to look beyond the most readily available recipients who 'speak their language'. This includes groups with religious origins or political goals, as well as organisations that are effective in reaching out to marginalised groups. Popular concepts such as 'grassroots' and 'bottom up' should be paired with clear benchmarks on the one hand, and patience and flexibility on the other hand, in order to be more than hollow phrases. Donors can help local organisations improve on accountability and transparency, but they should be mindful of the fact that Myanmar's society differs substantially from their own, and that they cannot simply copy mechanisms that have proven successful in other parts of the world.

In terms of promoting democratisation, civil society organisations can have an influence on the political and the societal level. The 2010 elections in Myanmar provided the first opportunity for many civil society groups to legitimately engage in political debates and promote voter education. The aftermath of these elections shows that there is a long way to go in terms of citizen participation and political accountability, but the prospect of regular elections could create new opportunities in the future. In terms of debates about the future of the country, the plurality of voices heard from civil society groups can be regarded as signs of democratisation from below. Current obstacles to further development in this respect include restrictions imposed by the government, practical difficulties in terms of communication and transportation, as well as a deep lack of trust between different parties.

Democratisation from below is a powerful concept, which can create agency for people where it has long been absent on the national level. Nevertheless, its potential cannot be seen separately from political developments. In the long run, democratisation from below might contribute to democratisation from above, and vice versa. For democratisation to have a lasting effect, it should be broadly defined and include not only reference to political systems and individual freedoms, but also to general wellbeing, equal opportunities, and the ability of the population to collectively discuss and decide on the future of its country. Civil society in Myanmar will continue to play a vital role in these processes. While donors would be wise to continue supporting the many civil society groups active in Myanmar and make use of their expertise, they should also acknowledge and support other parties that can contribute to democratisation from above and from below. While a flourishing civil society is an important condition for democratisation, it should not be the end goal.

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Notes

1 For practical reasons, I have chosen to use the official name of the country in this paper, rather than Burma, which I tend to use interchangeably.

2 This paper is based on the situation in Myanmar before the new government started functioning. In the course of 2011, President Thein Sein's government took some steps toward reform, which have been met with cautious international approval. As these events occurred after this paper was completed, they could not be taken into account.

3 From this introduction, it might appear as if civil society only consists of organisations. This is not to deny the relevance of individual persons, both as members of civil society organisations and as independent contributors to a public cause or debate. This paper focuses on organisations, since most donor assistance to civil society is distributed on this level.

4 Human Rights Watch (2010) estimates that at least 140.000 people were killed, while another 2.4 million were affected.

5 Myanmar consists of seven divisions and seven states, the latter being primarily populated by a large variety of ethnic minority groups.

6 It is acknowledged that the focus in this paper is on those civil society organizations that consist largely of urban and educational elites. However, these organizations in urban areas such as Yangon are found to be more representative on other aspects, such as gender, ethnicity and religion.