

Finding the political in Myanmar, a.k.a. Burma

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The study of the political in Myanmar over the past 200 years has been conducted in circumstances and with methods that have resulted in only partial and often unsatisfactory outcomes. Difficulties of accessing data and problems in its analysis have forced analysts to seek to understand Myanmar's politics often through informed hunches from a comparative perspective. As the field has grown, it has also become somewhat more politicised and there is a necessity to be analytically self-critical in order to avoid making 'facts' fit theories.

From the British colonial soldier-officials and amateur historians who sought to explain the behaviour of the Konbaung monarchy to contemporary academics who attempt to decipher the relationship between 'the people', or 'peoples', and the current military government, the political studies image of 'Burma / Myanmar' has been conducted through a glass darkly. Prognostications and prescriptions are part of the enterprise as interpreters try to see forward by looking backward. Often the prevailing ideological or foreign policy interests of the society or government from which the analyst hails has shaped their lenses. Sometimes they write in minute detail, but more often, and less helpfully, in broad sweeping generalities. The scholarly goal of objectivity and empirically informed theory occasionally gives way to the activist's wishful thinking and / or the policy adviser's creation or shaping of 'fact' to fit desired outcome.

A number of factors have hampered our attempts to find the political in Myanmar. Included among them are our own prejudices, opinions, and prior experiences. No analyst comes to the task without intellectual and experiential baggage that shape the questions asked and the answers sought. No analyst ever has all the data required to make a complete and full analysis. Each must rely on hunches and informed guesses that may or may not be completely accurate. Certainly one of the most important skills in contemporary Myanmar political studies is the rare ability to find one's way through the thickets of information and misinformation that provide the backdrop to all political analysis. Particularly in the present time when both the government in Naypyitaw and its opponents at home and abroad are engaged in a

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form of cyber politics, trying to discern reality from fiction becomes a major and primary obligation of the analyst. Given the paucity of reliable facts available to study the political in Myanmar, one is required to think it through despite possessing insufficient knowledge. As Race Williams mused in 1931:

I won't say I reasoned things out as I rode down town in the taxi. Not me. Reason only too often confuses, especially when you've got little to reason on – not reason with. But thoughts would flash through my mind, and I let them swing along.¹

We foreigners' capacity to understand and analyse Myanmar politics are also limited by our linguistic capacities and immersion in the structures of the English language in which we reason, argue and write. Political thought in Myanmar is usually reasoned, argued and written in Burmese or one of the minority languages. Yet few students of Myanmar politics ever manage to learn even one minority language and those who tackle Burmese quickly discover that the language is very different from English. The lack of 'fit' between Burmese and English makes accurate translation very difficult; there is often room for interpretation and this bedevils agreement.

The linguistic problems involved in studying Myanmar's political disputes cloud issues, perhaps unnecessarily. Illustrative is the name taken to describe the country, state and majority population. An analyst's politics is believed revealed if he uses Myanmar or Burma. Before enacting of the Adaptation of Expressions Law² in 1989, individuals such as General Ne Win and Dr Maung Maung wrote on their party membership forms that their ethnicity was Myanmar while U Sein Lwin, for example, indicated that he was a Mon; yet all were citizens of Myanmar and leading officials in the Myanmar Hsoshelit Lansin Pati. However, to the English-speaking world, they were Burman or Mon and leaders of the Burma Socialist Programme Party of the Union of Burma.³ After the unelected military government rectified this anomaly, Western governments, opposition political activists, and party leaders refused to recognise the change, just as a few anti-military activists in Thailand persist in using Siam and Siamese despite the name change made in 1939. The use of Burma or Myanmar has become an issue greater than its analytical value.

Myanmar as the name of the state and place previously recognised as Burma allowed yet another linguistic adaptation to occur. Now Burmese speakers rarely refer

1 Carroll John Daly, 'The third murderer', *Black mask magazine*, June, July and Aug. 1931, reprinted in Harlan Coben, *Pulp fiction: The crimefighters* (London: Quercus, 2007), p. 508.

2 State Law and Order Restoration Council Law No. 15 / 89, 18 June 1989, in Union of Myanmar, *Myanmar laws (1988–1989)* (Yangon: Office of the Attorney General, Mar. 1999), p. 207. The translation is by the Drafting and Legal Translation Department of the Attorney General's Office which notes that 'owing to the difference in the linguistic system and grammatical structure of the Myanmar language and the English language, there may be divergences or ambiguities in the interpretation of the text of the original language and its English translation', Foreword.

3 It is said that consideration was given to rectifying this anomaly at the time of independence but resistance by the British government, and the press of more urgent issues involved in concluding the independence treaties, plus perhaps the familiarity of English to the first set of state leaders, meant the matter was not pursued (Interview in Yangon, Jan. 2002). To my knowledge, no one has conducted research to determine if this memory is accurate. Most of the members of the army government in 1989 did not speak English fluently.

to their state as Bama Pyi, while members of the majority group in the country refer to their ethnicity as Bamar and the dominant language of the country as Bama. This resulted, for the first time since before the 1886 annexation, in ethnic identity and the name of the state being cognitively separated in English, as they are in most countries, including the United Kingdom or the United States. One can claim to be of English or Welsh ethnicity and be a citizen of the United Kingdom just as a Bamar or a Shan may be a citizen of Myanmar Naingngan. Notwithstanding this fluid resolution, a rose by any other name is a pretty flower with sharp thorns.⁴

My thesis is that two dominant perspectives or potential ‘communities of scholars’ have coalesced to explain the political in Myanmar. As with most dichotomous expositions, each community defies definition. There is neither consistency nor coherence within them; moreover, a dichotomous model opens one to misinterpretation and misapplication, a peril for anyone trying to write about the study of the political in Myanmar at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Our scholarly community concerned with Myanmar has become more politicised as it has expanded in recent years. From being an academic backwater in which a learned paper could empty a seminar room faster than a call to drinks, now Myanmar political studies fill whole lecture theatres with newcomers hoping to understand Myanmar’s politics so that they can change them.

The use of these two categories or labels carries no significance beyond establishing analytical categories to make distinctions for the sake of discussion and clarity. When we are finished, we may usefully discard them. The labels I use relate to the logic of two analytical approaches standing in contradistinction to each other. These labels may seem clumsy, which is no bad thing; for if they were facile, they might be taken too seriously and have a longer shelf life than they merit. Choosing the labels was no easy thing because there is no single word that quite captures what I want to articulate. One I have chosen is ‘other-oriented’, implying exogenous. The other is ‘autonomous’, implying endogenous.⁵

The ‘other-oriented’ perspective tends to view contemporary and recent events and their social, economic, and other background elements as essentially dependent on a world external to themselves. That is to say, there is an exogenous model or form to which the Myanmar data must be measured against and if possible, found to be adequate or deficient. The second category, the ‘autonomous’ one, suggests that the phenomenon under examination, and all that surrounds it and by which it is shaped, and explained, are *sui generis*, or endogenous. Neither of these extreme possibilities actually exist and the analyst, whatever the brand of his or her bifocals, knows it if they are at all self-conscious about the enterprise in which they are engaged. Nevertheless, as cockshies, perhaps they have their utility.

4 The first known use of Myanmar Pyi is in the Yadana Kon Htan inscription dated from 1235 CE at Bagan. Information supplied by Ma Thanegi.

5 This distinction has nothing to do with whether the research is conducted physically inside or outside the country. As for many years visas were difficult, if not impossible to get, and now some scholars are denied them or if are pursuing particularly politically sensitive subjects, some research and writing must be conducted by scholars physically outside the country.

'Other-oriented' analysts tend to see Myanmar as a problem or as a case of deviancy from the norm of the contemporary republican nation-state in ideal modern form.⁶ As Myanmar does not fit this mould, the political system is therefore a problem to be solved or at least one is obliged to show those points where it does not conform to the external ideal type. For this type of policy analysis, it must be condemned. In a more social scientific vein, analysts in this school of thought like to demonstrate through contrast and comparison what they consider rational or acceptable behaviour in the prevailing Myanmar system of government, political behaviour, or institutional norms. This can be done through moral, ethical, economic, or other categories of thought with applicability to political analysis. Occasionally, however, an 'other-oriented' analysis does not have a political point or a social scientific axe to grind, but rather wishes to hold Myanmar up as an exotic and unique tropical species only newly discovered.

By contrast, 'autonomously oriented' analysts tend to see Myanmar in terms of comparative political analysis in which the normative but ambiguous ideal type of the 'other-oriented' analysis are played down or ignored. One tries to make Myanmar fit a mould and the other pretends no mould exists. Neither is explaining the entirety of reality and neither intends to do so. The 'autonomously oriented' analysis tends to see the political in Myanmar as emanating from its own logic and history about which no normative judgements are made. Rather, the consequences of historical forces, be they economic, sociological, ecological, or a combination of these, shaped the contemporary political reality and are explained in terms of the country's history, 'political culture', or religious, structural, and institutional characteristics. This approach has the danger of concluding that what is must be; it can be accused of overlooking the possibilities of alternative strategies of action or of alternative political actors and institutions. Both perspectives are limited and in actual practice, most analysts tend to blend aspects of both.

Comparative political study was an outgrowth of the study of history and the law, and both shape the discipline today. English-language studies of Myanmar were in significant part derived from interests of state, as Great Britain and the United States have been the sources of most contemporary scholarship. From the outset, English writing about Myanmar was concerned not only with the country's politics but also to shape and guide those politics and the policies of those with interests in the sphere of Myanmar's power. Political analysis is often the handmaiden of power and this is as true of Myanmar-language studies as of English-, French-, American-, Chinese-, or Russian-language studies. It is remarkable how academics can sometimes be innocent in accepting the funding that facilitates their work, naively believing it was given because their work has inherent merit rather than its usefulness in the pursuit of public or foreign policy goals.

While these observations reflect my own experience when considering the contemporary state of political studies of Myanmar, it is important to remember that there has been evolution to the field. Understanding that evolution and reflecting on its

⁶ This view is held, despite knowing of its own shortcomings in reality. See Robert A. Dahl, *How democratic is the American constitution?* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

implications helps to make us more aware of the nature of the enterprise in which we are engaged. For example, historians of pre-colonial Myanmar found it difficult until the 1960s to see the political in the nature of the pre-colonial state. As the political in pre-colonial politics might be a factor in explaining the present, through example, experience, or 'culture', a possible clue to understanding was missing. Previously, the rise and fall of dynasties was interpreted as a process of unending, unlearning, uninformed medieval repetition where kings merely amassed wealth and armies and their subjects accumulated sweat and suffering. Even historians sympathetic to Myanmar and its people, such as J. S. Furnivall, writing from the Fabian socialist perspective in the 1950s, could write that the pre-colonial Myanmar state was 'both unstable and unproductive, and, when challenged by the forces of the West, it inevitably, if regrettably, collapsed'.⁷

This is not far different from G. E. Harvey's model of endless lines of kings fighting an endless list of like-modelled and like-minded neighbours for limited and scarce resources in a society made up largely of quarrelling tribes.⁸ If there were politics in these models of pre-colonial Myanmar, they were merely court politics driven by palace intrigues and perhaps mental instability coupled with fanciful superstitions and a kind of barbarism that the civilised world should not permit. Indeed, such a description helped justify, explain, and rationalise Victorian and other nineteenth-century imperialism. Echoes of Victorian era descriptions reappear in contemporary analysis of Myanmar politics. The labelling of states as 'failed' or 'failing' provides a helpful rationale for intervention in the Middle East, the Balkans, and Africa.⁹ Political analysis of Myanmar has not been immune from such attempts.

Lessons drawn from nineteenth-century British historiography of Myanmar's politics need revisiting in our own time. The annexation and the wars that preceded it were morally justified to an increasingly 'democratic' Britain. At least among the political classes of the day, the newspaper was gaining influence over public opinion and parliamentary debate. Prior to the third Anglo-Burmese War in 1885, the 'Burma problem' was launched and seemingly resolved by removing King Thibaw. The Konbaung Dynasty failed to understand that their political opponents were engaged in a 'media war' rather like today's cyber battles. A residue of that media war was the view of the nature of Myanmar and its politics that persisted for years after the annexation. As H. Fielding-Hall wrote in 1899, when discussing the consequences of the encirclement of Myanmar by the British prior to the war:

This intensified the natural concealment and reticence of an oriental government. Looking upon us [i.e. the British] as foes, they did not care in any way to justify and explain to us their acts. Expecting us to wilfully misunderstand them and find evil where we could, the Burmese government and people saw no use in trying to make matters

7 John Sydenham Furnivall, 'South Asia in the world today', in *South Asia in the world today*, ed. P. Talbot (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), p. 6.

8 See G. E. Harvey, *History of Burma* (London: Frank Cass, 1967), originally published in 1925.

9 For an example of advocacy of the 'new liberal imperialism', see former British Prime Minister Tony Blair's foreign policy adviser and now top level European Union foreign policy adviser Robert Cooper's writings, including *The breaking of nations: Order and chaos in the twenty-first century* (London: Atlantic, 2003).

plain and put their conduct in a fair and clear light. Explanations would be weakness, and moreover useless to an enemy determined to see only the worst.¹⁰

Noting that the government was autocratic and hence likely to have many enemies, Fielding-Hall explained that Britain's newspapers were consequently full of 'the tales of spies whose only concern was to speak evilly'.¹¹ While Thibaw's supporters remained distant and uncommunicative with his foreign opponents and even potential friends, their 'enemies were only too ready to pour their grievances and scandals into our, as they hoped, sympathetic ears, hoping thereby to obtain vengeance on those who had injured them'.¹² Noting the propensity of the British, and for that matter most people, to think ill of that they do not understand, Fielding-Hall went on to write:

So partly through our own fault, partly through the fault of the Burmese themselves, the stories that obtained credence and circulation about the king and his people were to their discredit. It was in this way that arose the tales of the continual drunkenness of the king, of the bloodthirstiness of the queen, of the utter wickedness of the palace in general. Little sparks of truth were fanned into huge flares that lit the whole history of these years with lurid light. Tale-teller vied with tale-teller as to which could impute most wickedness to the palace, regardless of truth or even probability. Yet consider how improbable those tales were, how impossible to believe to any one who stayed a moment to consider them!¹³

By creating the impression that there was nothing of value in old Myanmar, this poisoned atmosphere contributed to the 10 years of chaos and conflict that the imposition of direct rule by the British Indian army created in lower and central Myanmar.

The positive aspects of the indigenous administration that the British could have adapted and used to manage Myanmar as a buffer state between India and China, including the king's army, the judicial system, and the existing administrative structures and personnel, were abandoned. Naturally, the dismissal of many government servants, both nobles and high-placed commoners, and their replacement with new structures staffed by foreigners and individuals of lower social status whetted initial anti-British sentiments, creating strong nationalist sentiments before they could be expressed in modern political language.¹⁴ The fateful decision to administer the Shan states and the rest of northern Myanmar separately from the remainder of the country, implemented only two years after the annexation, shows how unaware the British were of the reality of the political and administrative systems of the country they had first dismantled and then blindly annexed to India. Much of the country's post-independence politics have resulted from varying understanding of the

10 H. Fielding, *Thibaw's queen* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1899), p. 7. I am indebted to Stephen Lee Keck for reminding me of this interesting volume. See his 'Another look at "Thibaw's queen": A challenge to colonial historiography', in *Essays in commemoration of the Golden Jubilee of the Myanmar Historical Commission* (Yangon: Myanmar Historical Commission, 2005), pp. 357–78.

11 Fielding, *Thibaw's queen*, p. 7.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

13 *Ibid.*

14 See Thant Myint-U, *The making of modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) for an elaboration of these arguments.

implications of that decision, not least the division of the population into allegedly exclusive ethnic categories.

Earlier historians and political analysts had created the conditions that allowed for the easy acceptance of the stories about King Thibaw and Queen Supayalat that facilitated the final annexation. As Professor D. G. E. Hall made clear nearly half a century ago, Dr G. T. Bayfield, Henry Burney's assistant in his mission to the court, in his account of Burmese–British relations up to 1834, entitled 'British political relations with Ava', badly distorted reality.¹⁵ To quote Professor Hall:

The work is full of instances of Bayfield's cavalier treatment of source material. In his hands it becomes a polemical pamphlet aiming at exposing Burmese perfidy. He writes in a spirit of high moral indignation, and takes every opportunity to display his contempt for the Burmese.¹⁶

Professor Hall further writes, after noting how Bayfield's distorted views were accepted as the historical canon by later authors such as G. E. Harvey and even himself, 'It is a pity, for mistaken views of history long accepted have amazing powers of persistence, and Bayfield's contemptuous treatment of the Burmese ... has wrought much harm.'¹⁷ Bayfield's legacy lives on even today.

Some nineteenth-century analysts of Myanmar's history did attempt to write sympathetically about the country. Sir Arthur Phayre was one such. His *History of Burma*,¹⁸ published in 1883, nonetheless is merely a 'story of struggles between peoples and princes, with virtually no consideration of economic, cultural, or other aspects'.¹⁹ Thus, the first political histories of Burma were written, as Tinker notes, as a story like that of William the Conqueror, 1066 and all that. Invading armies and warring tribes were sought and found, and rogue kings and simple courtiers to serve them became the warp and woof of the West's understanding of Myanmar's politics. No one learned any lessons and nothing ever changed. Contemporary analysts need to be alert to the possibility that they are making the same mistake.

So prevalent did the views drawn by the enemies of Myanmar's kings and their governments become, and so thoroughly did they come to represent the nature of all Burmese kingdoms, that it was not until the second half of the twentieth century that more sophisticated and empirically informed interpretations of Myanmar's monarchical politics began to emerge. Michael Aung-Thwin's *Pagan: The origins of modern Burma*²⁰ and Victor Lieberman's *Burmese administrative cycles: Anarchy and conquest, c. 1580–1760*,²¹ and

15 G. T. Bayfield, 'British political relations with Ava', supplement to R. Boileau Pemberton, *Report on the eastern frontier of India* (Calcutta: Supreme Government of India, 1835).

16 D. G. E. Hall, 'British writers of Burmese history from Dalrymple to Bayfield', in *Historians of South East Asia*, ed. Daniel George Edward Hall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 264.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 266.

18 Sir Arthur Phayre, *History of Burma* (London: Susil Gupta, 1967), 2nd edn.

19 Hugh Tinker, 'Arthur Phayre and Henry Yule: Two soldier-administrator historians', in *Historians of Southeast Asia*, p. 273.

20 Michael Aung-Thwin, *Pagan: The origins of modern Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985).

21 Victor Lieberman, *Burmese administrative cycles: Anarchy and conquest, c. 1580–1760* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

related writings by both authors, stimulated analytical debates which opened minds to the richness of Myanmar's political past. Different readers drew different themes and lessons from their work, but for me Aung-Thwin made clear the continual fiscal tension in Myanmar statecraft and Lieberman demonstrated convincingly the state's ability to learn and develop rather than, as Phayre, Harvey, and others had argued, merely repeat the past in endless cycles.

By treating indigenous historical records as valuable documents, and extending their range of sources to economic and religious texts, while applying comparative historical analytical tools, Aung-Thwin and Lieberman revealed the inner dynamics of the pre-modern Myanmar states in various periods of its development. By showing how statecraft and state issues evolved over time, politics and government in pre-colonial Myanmar, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, came to look like politics and administration in much of the world. Therefore, it became something that was comprehensible and understandable on its own and in a comparative sense. Lieberman's study of political and administrative cycles and their relationship with institutional and economic change revealed the underlying pressures for centralisation of power within Myanmar. The growth of international trade became a variable that changed internal dynamics and therefore the means that rulers had at their disposal with which to cope with popular evasions and the autonomy of political and military rivals.

On the final dynasty, the Konbaung, two important works shed illumination. The first, by William Koenig, who sadly left historical study for other things, 'The early Konbaung polity, 1752–1819: A study of politics, administration and social organisation in Burma',²² finally brought ordinary people alive as actors in Myanmar's social, economic, and political life. Myo Myint, who also has left the field at least temporarily, made the survival strategy of King Mindon real and gave understanding to events and actions previously obscured by ignorance and prejudice. His unpublished doctoral dissertation, 'The politics of survival in Burma: Diplomacy and statecraft in the reign of King Mindon, 1853–1878',²³ opens up the working of the king's court as no previous historian had succeeded in doing. Myo Myint demonstrates the creativity of the Konbaung court as it balanced old and new forms of power despite its increasingly weak bargaining position *vis-à-vis* the encroaching British Indian Empire. More recently, for students of politics, Thant Myint-U's *The making of modern Burma* is particularly useful for the comparisons he usefully makes with Thailand, thus showing another possibility to that which colonial policy had actually created.

These historical studies, making the past alive with real political issues and problems, provide an important background to the development of more contemporary post-colonial political studies. Modern political studies of Myanmar developed simultaneously with the rise of nationalism globally. Much more was

22 William Koenig, 'The early Konbaung polity, 1752–1819: A study of politics, administration and social organisation in Burma' (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1978); *Burmese Sit-tans 1764–1826: Records of rural life and administration*, ed. Frank Newton Trager and William J. Koenig (Tucson: University of Arizona Press for the Association for Asian Studies, 1979).

23 Myo Myint 'The politics of survival in Burma: Diplomacy and statecraft in the reign of King Mindon, 1853–1878' (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, May 1987).

involved than just the institutions and ideas of kings and other political figures. ‘The people’ and their views and attitudes were seen as having a role in determining the nature of states and how they operated. Moreover, in democratic theory not only did the ‘people’ have role in the history of the ‘nation’, another new construct, but they had rights that should be respected and accommodated in political practice. Myanmar political studies started not, however, in the groves of academe, for Western political scientists largely limited themselves to studying European and North American politics until the Cold War and the development of ‘area studies’. Rather, a retired colonial civil servant sympathetic to the power of nationalism and its potential utility as a force for social and economic reform first attempted to explain the origins of modern Myanmar’s politics.

John Sydenham Furnivall, the grand old man of Myanmar studies in whose shadow we all stand, was a most unusual figure. Much has been written about his work²⁴ and, thanks to Julie Pham, we now have well-researched essays on his life and intellectual development.²⁵ Anyone with a sense of humour and even a modest interest in the development of the modern state in Southeast Asia must find Furnivall’s lengthy essay ‘The fashioning of the Leviathan’²⁶ essential reading, while *Colonial policy and practice*²⁷ is a must for students of any social science discipline interested in what drove change in colonial Southeast Asian societies. Less often read is Furnivall’s first book and the first book by anyone on the economy of the Myanmar, *An introduction to the political economy of Burma*. The lengthy introduction to the third edition, published in 1957, is of particular interest for his observations after working with the government of U Nu for a decade as well as explaining his own position *vis-à-vis* the colonial business community and the moderate nationalists with whom he worked.²⁸ Before Furnivall gained fame in the Western academy, he was recognised in Myanmar as a major intellectual figure. As early as 1937, Furnivall’s contribution to Myanmar and the study of the country’s conditions were acknowledged in print by students at Rangoon University who described him as ‘an architect of our destiny’.²⁹

24 For a complete bibliography of Furnivall’s writings, see *Furnivall of Burma: An annotated bibliography of the works of John S. Furnivall*, ed. Frank N. Trager (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies Bibliography Series no. 8, 1963).

25 See Hoai Julie Pham, ‘Empire, nationalism and Fabianism in the thought of John S. Furnivall’ (M. Phil diss., Cambridge University, 2002); ‘Ghost hunting in colonial Burma: Nostalgia, paternalism and the thoughts of J. S. Furnivall’, *South East Asia Research*, 12, 2 (2004): 237–68 and ‘J. S. Furnivall and Fabianism: Reinterpreting the ‘Plural Society’ in Burma’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 39, 2 (2005): 321–48.

26 J. S. Furnivall, ‘The fashioning of the Leviathan’, *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, 39, 3 (1939): 1–138.

27 J. S. Furnivall, *Colonial policy and practice: A comparative study of Burma and Netherlands India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948; reprint New York: New York University Press, 1956).

28 J. S. Furnivall, *An introduction to the political economy of Burma* (Rangoon: People’s Literature Committee and House, 1957).

29 ‘An architect of our destiny’, *Oway*, 7, 1 (1937): 2–3. The editors of the journal at that time included Hla Myint who was eventually Professor of Economics, University of London, at the London School of Economics; Nyo Mya who became a famous journalist in Myanmar after studying in the United States; and Ba Swe who became minister of defence, deputy prime minister and briefly prime minister of Myanmar in the 1950s.

The first American to write a significant political and administrative analysis of Myanmar was John Leroy Christian.³⁰ His work has been largely ignored and his death in the Second World War ended what might have been a major contribution to Myanmar studies. Unlike Furnivall, he was relatively unsympathetic to demands of Myanmar nationalists and was willing to take a generally benign view of the nature and consequences of British-Indian policy as applied to Myanmar. Unusually for an analyst of Myanmar politics and administration, he did not live in Yangon but rather in Meiktila, a relatively small city in central Myanmar, where he was principal of the technical college for eight years. Many of his views would be considered 'politically incorrect' today, not least his disparaging comments on the veracity, sagacity, and sincerity of Myanmar's politicians and student nationalists. Nonetheless, in terms of trying to understand how Myanmar looked from a non-British perspective in the 1930s, his work repays study.

Post-independence political studies are marked, in contrast to studies of many other countries of Myanmar's size and strategic importance in the world, by several sociological characteristics. First, it has been a field of study with very few long-term participants. Finding communities of scholars was therefore not possible. What we find are individuals who occasionally met, discussed, agreed and disagreed, had a beer, and went home. By and large, an amiable small band found few others before 1988 with whom to share their fascination with Myanmar and its politics. Consequently, given the small number involved and their differing intellectual interests, Myanmar political studies were rather like the committee of blind men asked to describe the heart and brain of a pachyderm by feeling around aspects of its skin.

Denied access to many forms of political information gained from conventional fieldwork, students of Myanmar's politics borrowed and adapted data and theories from other disciplines to supplement what little traditional political science revealed.³¹ Given the authoritarian and secretive nature of the state in Myanmar not only today but for many years previously including the so-called 'democratic parliamentary period', and given the relatively limited amount of published material that was available both inside and outside the country, this has been a strategy not only of convenience but of necessity. Given the absence of opportunities for *in situ* political research, especially between 1962 and 1988, it is perhaps not surprising that the field of scholars has been so small and Myanmar did not become a subject that had significant impact on the field of comparative politics. As foreign governments and foundations largely ignored Myanmar after independence, the massive amounts of money that were poured into Indonesian, Thai, or Vietnamese studies never existed.

30 See John Leroy Christian, *Modern Burma: A survey of political and economic development* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1942) and the second edition of the same volume with a discussion of the Japanese period, *Burma and the Japanese invader* (Bombay: Thacker, 1945). Christian, who was in the US Army Air Force stationed in India, died in action in 1944. See L. A. Mills, 'American historical writing on South East Asia', in Hall, *Historians of South East Asia*, p. 297 and the dust jacket to his posthumous *Burma* (London: Collins, 1945).

31 The work of journalists, particularly Martin Smith and Bertil Lintner, has also been important for understanding the country's political situation. See especially Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the politics of ethnicity* (London: Zed Press, revised edn, 1999) and Bertil Lintner, *Burma in revolt: Opium and insurgency since 1948* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 1999), 2nd edn.

Myanmar political studies were and are a career choice few sane individuals would make.

As we look at the field, a handful of names emerge. Hugh Tinker wrote a very important work that is replete with useful data and an essential reference for any student of the political in Myanmar especially during the 1950s. His *The union of Burma*³² is complemented by the Burma chapters in *The foundations of local self-government in India, Pakistan and Burma*.³³ Unlike most other students of Myanmar, Tinker's comparative reference was not to other Southeast or East Asian states but to South Asia. In generational terms, Frank Trager is the next name with which to conjure when reviewing Myanmar political studies. His *Burma from kingdom to republic, A historical and political analysis*³⁴ and other writings gave more attention to foreign affairs and matters of Cold War interest than did most other analysts. Trager's scholarship was extensive and his work prodigious.³⁵ However, after his left-wing political experiences, his subsequent close connection with the American intelligence community, his strong anti-Communist views, and friendship with top officials in General Ne Win's regime, perhaps overly influenced his choice of subjects.

Two more recent scholars have developed their own particular analysis of Myanmar's politics. The person who introduced me to the field via his erudition was Professor Josef Silverstein. His 'Burma' in George Kahin's essential textbook *Government and politics of Southeast Asia*³⁶ introduced several generations of students to the subject. David Steinberg's writings, informed by economic analysis and his own familiarity with many of the government relations issues of Myanmar as well as by his South Korean experience, were also important sources for the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.³⁷ Were it not for these two authors, the field would have nearly died during those years.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, prior to the 1962 coup, the condition of Myanmar political studies must have looked much more promising. The Rangoon-Hopkins Centre spawned a number of works and looked set to produce a corpus of

32 Hugh Tinker, *The union of Burma: A study of the first years of independence* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, Oxford University Press, 1967), 4th edn, first appeared in 1957.

33 Hugh Tinker, *The foundations of local self-government in India, Pakistan and Burma* (London: Athlone Press, 1954).

34 Frank N. Trager, *Burma from kingdom to republic: A historical and political analysis* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966). The British edition is subtitled *From kingdom to independence* (London: Pall Mall, 1966).

35 Particularly helpful was the book by Frank N. Trager, *Burma: A selected and annotated bibliography* (New Haven: Human Relations Area Files Press, 1973). He notes that among his seven students who assisted him in preparing the volume, one was Daw Aung San Suu Kyi who enrolled in a Masters programme at New York University while living in the city in the late 1960s.

36 Josef Silverstein, 'Burma' in *Government and politics of Southeast Asia*, ed. George Kahin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964), 2nd edn, pp. 75–181. The arguments here are further elaborated in the *Burma, military rule and the politics of stagnation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).

37 See especially David I. Steinberg, *Burma's road toward development: Growth and ideology under military rule* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1981).

major scholarship. John Badgley,³⁸ Lucien Pye,³⁹ William Johnstone,⁴⁰ Dorothy Guyot,⁴¹ Manning Nash,⁴² and Richard Butwell⁴³ are some of the names who come to mind from this effervescence. The dominant political studies interpretations of Myanmar at that time were the lenses of the reigning comparative politics theories of the day in which ‘modernisation’, ‘political development’, and ‘political culture’ were dominant motifs. Modernisation theory was the quintessential external perspective, rather like Marxism, in as much as it was predicated on a pattern of future development that was historically conditioned and inevitable. Political culture theories, however, tended toward a more internal or autonomous perspective as they explained politics as the product of Myanmar’s allegedly unique religious or folk wisdom, or psychological variables. This led one analyst to declare that ‘Burmese politics is thus at heart a politics of charisma’.⁴⁴ Few others could be so categorical.

With the advent of the Revolutionary Council government and the closing of the country, that opening to foreign scholarship ended. The lack of access, combined with a paucity of indigenous scholarship and research conducted from the 1960s through the 1980s saw scholarship dwindle and what was done by foreigners was driven by macro-level questions viewed from a great distance. You would have to have been mad to take up Myanmar political studies in the 1960s or 1970s. This is not to say, however, that during the Ne Win era, indigenous scholarship completely halted as a number of important dissertations were written then.⁴⁵ The revival of English-language Myanmar political studies had to wait until the 1990s when a new generation of scholars entered the field asking new questions informed by the political science questions then currently fashionable.

My own contribution to Myanmar political studies of necessity commenced in research conducted in London in the Burma Office Files. Through a fortuitous meeting with a Burmese-language student in Australia, the late U Lay Myint, I was granted a visa to study Burmese in Yangon in 1978 for six months. Another such visa was granted to me in 1982 for a projected biography of Bogyoke Aung San. My periods of living in Myanmar led to two kinds of work: one was my translation of Thein Pe Myint⁴⁶ and

38 John Badgley, ‘Progress and polity in Burma’ (Ph.D. diss., University of California, 1962) and *Politics among Burmans: A study of intermediary leaders* (Athens: Ohio University, Centre for International Studies, Southeast Asia Programme, no. 15, 1970).

39 Lucien Wilmot Pye, *Politics, personality and nation building: Burma’s search for identity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962).

40 William Johnstone, *Burma’s foreign policy; a study in neutralism* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1963).

41 Dorothy Guyot, ‘The political impact of the Japanese Occupation of Burma’ (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1966).

42 Though an anthropologist by training, Manning Nash’s *The golden road to modernity: Village life in contemporary Burma* (New York: Wiley, 1965) is full of political insight and analysis.

43 Richard Butwell, *U Nu of Burma* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969), 2nd printing.

44 Lucian W. Pye, *The spirit of Burmese politics: A preliminary survey of a politics of fear and charisma* (Cambridge: Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, undated), p. 31.

45 For example, Ba Thann Win, ‘Administration of Shan states from the Panglong conference to the cessations of the powers of the Saophas 1947–1959’ (MA diss., Rangoon Arts and Sciences University, n. d.), or San San Myint, ‘Hpa Has Pa Lat Hkit Myanma Naingnganyei Thamaing 1948–1958’ [Political History of Burma in the AFPFL Era, 1948–1959] (MA diss., Yangon Arts and Sciences University, 1979).

46 Robert H. Taylor, *Marxism and resistance in Burma, 1942–1945: Thein Pe Myint’s ‘Wartime Traveler’* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, Southeast Asia Translation Series no. 4, 1984).

related studies of the Burma Community Party (BCP) during the 1940s, and the second was my book *The state in Burma*.⁴⁷ It is for others to assess the value of that work, but the reactions they produced says something about the vicissitudes of Myanmar studies in the 1980s. For my work on Thein Pe Myint and the BCP, I was branded a radical leftist, if not a communist, by some members of the armed forces and old socialist party supporters in Myanmar. For *The state in Burma*, which was published on the eve of the great upheaval of 1988, I was accused of being a regime apologist by critics who appeared to me either not to understand the book or not even to have read it.

Since the 1990s, there has been a welcome rebirth of Myanmar political studies. Not only are new foreign scholars entering the field and developing new perspectives on Myanmar's political evolution, but also a number of indigenous analysts, armed with advanced university training in the latest social science theories and methods, are providing insights that only persons rooted in the country can provide. Moreover, this new scholarship is not asking macro-level questions from a great distance observed through a telescope, but rather producing detailed, fine grained research that opens up new areas of exploration. Tin Maung Maung Than's wide-ranging essays opened a number of topics for exploration, most especially in terms of the role of the state and the absence of economic development.⁴⁸ Mary Callahan's research on the development of the Myanmar army and its role in the state in the 1950s has illuminated the origins of the foundations of military rule.⁴⁹ Kyaw Yin Hlaing,⁵⁰ Ardeth Maung Thawngmung,⁵¹ Aung Myoe,⁵² Ashley South,⁵³ and Morten Petersen⁵⁴ followed soon after. Each has examined different aspects of Myanmar's broad range of political issues and, fortunately, none has left the field despite the obstacles and misunderstanding that stand in their way. Their work will be important for years to come.

One of the great strengths of recent scholarship is that it draws attention away from the concentration on elite politics and the frequent descriptions of stagnation and

47 Robert H. Taylor, *The state in Burma* (London: C. Hurst; Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press; Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1987).

48 See inter alia, 'Burma's national security and defence posture', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 11, 1 (1989): 40–60; 'Sangha reforms and renewal of Sasana in Myanmar: Historical trends and contemporary practice', in *Buddhist trends in Southeast Asia*, ed. Trevor Ling (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), pp. 6–63; Tin Maung Maung Than, *State dominance in Myanmar: The political economy of industrialisation* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006).

49 Mary Patricia Callahan, *Making enemies: War and state building in Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

50 'Reconsidering the failure of the Burma Social Programme Party government to eradicate internal economic impediments', *South East Asia Research*, 11, 1 (2003): 5–58, and 'Burma: Civil society skirting regime rules', in *Civil society and political change in Asia: Expanding and contracting democratic space*, ed. Muthiah Alagappa (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 389–418.

51 Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, *Behind the teak curtain: Authoritarianism, agricultural policies and political legitimacy in rural Burma / Myanmar* (London: Kegan Paul, 2004).

52 Maung Aung Myoe, *Military doctrine and strategy in Myanmar: A historical perspective* (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, 1999) and others in the series; and M. Aung Myoe, *Neither friend nor foe: Myanmar's relations with Thailand since 1988: A view from Yangon* (Singapore: Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University, 2002).

53 Ashley South, *Mon nationalism and civil war in Burma: The golden sheldrake* (London; New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003).

54 Morten B. Pedersen, *Promoting human rights in Burma: A critique of western sanctions policy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007).

stasis to local level or non-elite politics. While Myanmar scholars such as Dr Mya Than and Professor Khin Maung Kyi revealed aspects of the political at the local and intermediate levels, the primary function of their research was in terms of economic and social analysis.⁵⁵ Not since Manning Nash and John Badgeley wrote about village factionalism and intermediary leaders in the 1960s has it been possible to see the dynamics of Myanmar politics at the everyday level. The variety of relationships revealed, and the nature of the perceptions that people form toward their government and its leaders, makes apparent the dynamics of Myanmar's political world much more than do the debates about abstract, high-level elite issues that dominate the media presentations about the political in the country. The image of monolithic stagnation is seriously challenged by such studies.

I began by suggesting that historically there have been two dichotomous viewpoints in the study of the political in Myanmar. In the current period, leaving aside highly politicised and tendentious analyses, one can see how these perspectives result in contrasting questions and answers on a number of axes. These axes grow out of contrasting definitions and expectations about what is normal and how human nature reveals itself in political action. For example, the question of ethnicity and its political origins and functions provides one such axis. Some see Myanmar as a country that is deeply driven by clashing ethnic rivalries, rather as Harvey described nearly a century ago. Others, however, following in the footsteps of Edmund Leach,⁵⁶ Christopher Lehman,⁵⁷ and Maran La Raw,⁵⁸ detect a society in which ethnicity is plastic and becoming less politically salient as ethnic integration occurs and other political issues such as democratisation and economic development replace ethnic identity conflict from centre stage.⁵⁹

Another axis of analysis depends rather where one puts Myanmar on a scale measuring 'crisis' to 'coping'. Whereas some analysts see Myanmar as a state in crisis, or even a 'failed state', others see it as a poor nation coping with the tools at its disposal to address its issues possibly no more nor less efficiently or effectively than many other

55 Mya Than, 'A Burmese village – revisited', *South East Asia Review*, 2, 2 (Feb. 1978): 1–15, and Khin Maung Kyi *et al.*, 'Process of communication in modernisation of rural society: A survey report on two Burmese villages', *The Malayan Economic Review*, 18, 1 (1973): 55–73.

56 Edmund Leach, *The political system of highland Burma* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966 and other editions).

57 'Ethnic categories in Burma and the theory of social systems', in *Southeast Asian tribes, minorities and nations*, ed. Peter Kunstadter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), vol. 1, pp. 93–124.

58 'Toward a basis of understanding the minorities in Burma: The Kachin example', in *Ibid.*, pp. 125–46. 59 For example, compare the arguments and assumptions in Lian H. Sakhong, *In search of Chin identity: A study in religion, politics and ethnic identity in Burma* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies; London: Taylor & Francis, 2002) with some of the essays in *Exploring ethnic diversity in Burma*, ed. Mikael Gravers (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2007) especially those by Mandy Sadan and Sandra Dudley, 'Constructing and contesting the category 'Kachin' in the colonial and post-colonial Burmese state', pp. 34–76. Also 'Reshaping Karenni-ness: Education, nationalism and being in the wider world', pp. 77–106. For a more avowedly political analysis, see the discussion of the public policy questions that impact on this question by comparing Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 'The politics of language policy in Myanmar: Imagining togetherness, practising difference?', in *Language, nation and development in Southeast Asia*, ed. Lee Hock Guan and Leo Suryadinata (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), pp. 150–80 with Mary P. Callahan, 'Language policy in modern Burma', in *Fighting words: Language policy and ethnic relations in Asia*, ed. Michael Brown and Sumit Ganguly (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

states in similar positions and levels of institutional development. This is often related to the axis of comparison in terms of whether Myanmar is to be measured against some putative externally defined 'international [Western?] norms' or to be judged against its own recent past and the comparative historical pasts of similar Southeast Asian states and societies. In other words, and as I discussed at the beginning of this paper, are politics and the state in Myanmar seen as a problem to be solved or a political system to be understood and explained comparatively and historically? Is Myanmar indeed exotic and unique or malignant and warped, as opposed to different but knowable and accessible to normal methods of analysis and consideration?

How one tends to interpret historical, economic, and sociological forces as opposed to individual or institutional agency also shapes analyses of the political. Is Myanmar seen as a state, dominated by one man or a small clique or a state system responding to historically driven forces and expectations beyond the control of any one man or any small clique? Is the state in Myanmar an institution that dominates and dictates on its own terms to the larger society or is it a state that is forced to respond to societal processes with inadequate information and poorly articulated administrative and political systems? If one reads between the lines of most writings on modern Myanmar's politics, an author's bias on these and related questions can usually be discovered just as in practice authors blur these stark dichotomies.

Students of the political in Myanmar face a particularly interesting question when asked to divide the past into analytical units or periods. Noted above were the revelations that became evident when Michael Aung-Thwin and Victor Lieberman abandoned the previous periodisation of Myanmar's pre-colonial past to show how political, economic, social, and institutional change occurred under different kings and within dynasties. Similarly, when one examines the political during the colonial period, if the changing policies that the British implemented are seen as significant for political action, one gets a much more finely shaded and detailed picture of nationalist politics than if one treats the colonial period as merely one endless period of oppression and incipient revolution as nationalist hagiography is in danger of doing.

How one divides the post-colonial period determines significantly the questions one is likely to ask in analysis. Looking for the 'watershed years', or the points when extraordinary changes occurred, and then trying to explain their causes, becomes the heart of the search for the political. Do we see the period between 1942 and 1962 as one analytical unit or as a vast period that requires explanation for events in 1942 – politics after the Japanese invasion, or 1945 – after the return of the British, or 1948 – independence? Does the post-independence political period exist as one period of parliamentary government or do we break it down to the civil war period (1948–52), the period of AFPFL dominance (1952–58), and AFPFL split and the rise of the army (1958–60 or 1962)? Similarly, do analysts see the period from 1962 until 2007 as one merely of military domination and therefore of necessity analysed as one large unit of history or do the ostensible changes that took place during that 35-year period, from Revolutionary Council to Myanmar (Burma) Socialist Programme Party one-party rule to outright military rule again after 1988? Or indeed, does one seek the political by penetrating ever more deeply into details of the period from 1988 until the present, as a number of discrete analytical periods with watersheds in 1989 – the arrest of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, 1990 – the abortive elections, 1992 – the ouster of Senior General Saw

Maung, 1995 – the NLD walkout for the National Convention, 1997 – the removal of most of the original coup group, 1999 – the re-arrest of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, 2002 – the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, 2003 – the Dipayin incident, and 2004 – the ouster of Prime Minister General Khin Nyunt? If so, one would draw different conclusions about the nature of Myanmar's politics during the larger period than one would if considering it as a whole. What is true for the recent past, of course, applies to earlier periods as well. Finding the causes and consequences of headline-grabbing issues forces the analysis into seeking the dynamics of power and its origins and uses.

For example, does one see the past decade as one which confirmed the consolidation of the power of Senior General Than Shwe, following the ouster of most of the remaining 1988 coup group for 'corruption' in 1997, and therefore a period in which we can cease looking for the political in the minutiae of day-to-day events? Or does one see this period as one of continual tussle and conflict, between the army and the NLD leadership, the Western governments, Asian governments, recalcitrant peasants, 'ethnic' political leaders, warlords, drug lords, criminals, cronies, entrepreneurs, foreign investors, NGOs, UN agencies, wives, and other actors? If one chooses to concentrate on one or two of these potential relationships, does one miss seeing the whole or can one generalise usefully about the whole? In so doing, does one potentially miss out on such a significant dimension such as internal conflict within the ruling military group? Was and is that group dictating events or responding to events, or perhaps caught up in a continual process of adjustment, revision, and redefinition? How are we supposed to know what motivates any or all of these potential subjects of study? Is someone who says he or she is acting selflessly, or appears to be acting thus, in order to advance democracy or human rights, to be believed as more honest and reliable than those who appear to be standing in the way of those goals?

'Democratisation' and 'human rights', are wonderfully vague ideological constructs, but they dominate current political science literature, as new theories, new methods of political analysis, and new funding streams have emerged in the post-Cold War era.⁶⁰ The recent politicisation of the search for the political in Myanmar is a subject that Dr Bayfield and H. Fielding-Hall would have understood two centuries before us for its poses problems of analysis of which we must be aware. One is the problem of sources. Given the paucity of reliable information from within Myanmar, given the prevailing censorship and secrecy that surround many subjects, and given the general dislike of military regimes in the twenty-first century, there is a tendency to rely, often rather unquestioningly, on voices that purport to come from the oppressed, the censored, or the 'legitimate / democratic' political actors. That these sources may also distort, twist, or fabricate information to justify their own positions and advance their own causes is too often not considered. The existence of piles of 'human rights' reports based on such evidence are often sufficient for students with access to no other sources of information.

The proliferation of 'human rights' reports, groups, institutions, seminars, workshops, and training programmes along the borders of Myanmar since 1988 has led

60 For an informed discussion about how this subject has been shaped and understood in the South East Asian context, see Anthony J. Langlois, *The politics of justice and human rights: Southeast Asia and universalist theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

to the growth of a significant industry that is dependent on keeping the story of oppressed Burma the centre of attention to the exclusion of other issues. The competition for funding and the necessity of justifying it means that news is produced, or often reproduced, that either exaggerates or generalises from the specific to the totality of the country. One unfortunate person, or one village in a conflict zone, comes to be a metaphor for the entirety. The personal and the particular are seen as the general and regular. That people do not always tell the truth about their own experience when given a chance to vent their spleen to visiting social scientists and human rights researchers may also affect the basis of research outcomes.⁶¹ Thoroughly probing many stories can reveal bias, contradiction, and self-serving argumentation, often accepted as fact. Tales told by diplomats, often learned from other diplomats or political opponents of the regime or locally employed are often Western diplomats' only non-official sources, frequently accepted as fact without any further verification.⁶²

Another problem faced in a period of emotionally driven political debate is the question of motivation. Political and administrative action can be driven by a large number of variables. There is a tendency sometimes to assume the most base of motives to explain actions and decisions. In the heat of political exchanges, do we accept the explanations of one side or another in a conflict? Take, for example, the fraught period between August 1988 and the elections that occurred in May 1990. Few analysts have made the effort to study the details of the period leading up and immediately after those elections, perhaps because 'we have not thought the history of these things was worth learning', to quote Fielding-Hall writing 90 years earlier.⁶³ An exception is Derek Tonkin, himself not an academic.⁶⁴

In the hurly-burly of political action, signals and signs are oft ignored, and analysts can get caught up in the emotions of the fray. That political party leaders assumed the worst motives of the generals in all their actions during and after the election is to be

61 As prison experts and criminologists discovered when interviewing prisoners in Latin American prisons in the early twentieth century. When they had been radicalised by political prisoners amongst them, collective action was the result. Carlos Aguirre, 'Prisons and prisoners in modernising Latin America (1800–1940)' in *Cultures of confinement: A history of the prison in Africa, Asia and Latin America*, ed. Frank Dikötter and Ian Brown (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 41.

62 Such as the claim that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was badly injured or on hunger strike following the Dipayin attack which presaged her re-arrest in 2003. This was seen by many as true only until it was refuted by Ambassador Razali Ismail and a spokesperson for the ICRC. For an example of political analysis that places heavy dependence on diplomatic sources, see Donald Seekins, *Order in disorder: The army-state in Burma since 1962* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2002). It seems it was ever thus in diplomatic reporting from Yangon and perhaps most other capitals. Note this account by Professor John F. Cady about his stint at the American consulate in Burma, between Dec. 1945 and Apr. 1946: 'My title was Chief Economic Reporter, although I was no economist at all, just a plain historian. I was afforded full cooperation by Mr Abbey, and he was willing to support all of the reports that I sent home. I was also made responsible for liquidating Burma's OSS files, which I knew all about, much to the disgust of the major who had previously been in charge. We got him sent home after it became clear that he was doing nobody any good. He was usually drunk at 10 o'clock in the morning and he paid out unvouchered funds to informers who found out what he wanted to hear. His reports consequently predicted war breaking out almost any weekend.' Oral history interview with Professor Cady, the Truman Library, pp. 24–5, 31 July 1974, accessed online from the Truman Library 25 Oct. 2007.

63 Fielding-Hall, *Thibaw's queen*, p. 6.

64 'The 1990 elections in Myanmar: Broken promises or a failure in communications?', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 29, 1 (2007): 33–54.

expected; should an analyst do the same? Should not he or she consider other options and seek wider evidence? If so, what should one make of the observation of the late unlamented General Saw Maung two weeks before the house arrest on 20 July 1989 of key leaders of the National League for Democracy (NLD) following their aborted attempt to organise a separate mass ceremony to mark Martyrs' Day?

Another thing is ... what is going to be done on the basis of these words? It is most dangerous. It is the most frightening for the State. Don't use this word 'confrontation' lightly. It should not be used. Such ideas ought not to be put into the heads of youths. The word 'confrontation' sounds good to be used or pronounced. As a matter of fact if it is used as a military term it means 'head on'. When we employ military tactics, we use the words 'Avoid the nose'. This is a rough way of expressing it. When an offensive is launched, there is the 'nose' – a 'cone'. It is the 'hardest point'. When we launch an offensive we have to avoid that point. We avoid head on collision. It is very dangerous. Today the parties are using this word, and practising it. This word ought not to be used at all. This is diametrically opposed to the establishment of democracy. If they want to establish democracy, it will be very wrong if they employ the confrontation method.⁶⁵

At that time Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, general secretary of the NLD, was convinced that the formal head of state and commander in chief was a mere puppet and that the army was acting as the private or pocket army of former BSPP Chairman Ne Win.⁶⁶

Would the analyst be correct in accepting Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's assumption that Saw Maung was a cipher and his words therefore meaningless? Or should he or she assume that the general was genuinely concerned about the establishment of a functioning democratic system in Myanmar and was warning his critics of a parlous path of action with significant long-term consequences if they did not heed his words? Or was the whole thing just a charade because the army had no intention of ever handing over power following an election and that the whole political opening was merely a ruse to draw the military's enemies out into the open, as some have suggested?⁶⁷ Might it not be that we really do not know what motivated the general to say those words or whether he was sincere in uttering them? Even if he were alive today and we could ask him what he meant, could we be confident of getting an accurate answer?

One can multiply *ad infinitum* such examples. If we who attempt to study the political in Myanmar get it wrong with our hunches and guesses, our assumptions and prejudices, does it make any difference? It is tempting to agree with the late Dr Maung Maung, someone who abandoned a career at Yale as a student of Myanmar's politics in order to follow the law and eventually enter into politics himself. He wrote about our activities a decade ago:

65 Speech to foreign and local journalists on 5 July 1989, in *State Law and Order Restoration Council Chairman Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Services General Saw Maung's addresses* (Yangon: News and Periodicals Enterprises, Ministry of Information, 1991), pp. 159–60.

66 See Michael Aris, 'Introduction', in *Freedom from fear and other writings*, ed. Michael Aris (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. xxi.

67 Alan Clements, *The next killing fields* (Berkeley, CA: Oadian Press, 1991), p. 30.

[S]cholars and scientists watch them [cycles of change], analyse them, and make their projections. They do not always get them right, of course, but that does not matter. They do not always agree about their conclusions either, to put it mildly, but that too doesn't matter. It is a fascinating occupation anyway.⁶⁸

Perhaps his observation should at least make us a bit humble about our claims to discover the essence of our subject. It should not be forgotten that all of our constructions, theories, and hunches are necessarily tentative, and that someone hoping completely to understand how and why the black box of government works in Myanmar will ultimately remain as mystified as they are about the same processes in Mongolia or Germany or the United Kingdom or the United States. We can advance hypotheses and offer tentative explanations but it is for the gods to know the laws.

68 Maung Maung, *The 1988 uprising in Burma* (New Haven: Yale Southeast Asia Studies Monograph 49, 1999), p. 9.