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Tamas Wells

Narrating Democracy in Myanmar

The Struggle between Activists,
Democratic Leaders and
Aid Workers

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and Aid Workers*

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Abbreviations

AFPFL	Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League
AusAID	Australian Agency for International Development
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
DFID	(UK) Department for International Development
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NLD	National League for Democracy
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UN	United Nations
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party
YMBA	Young Men's Buddhist Association





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Foreword

Tamas Wells

15th February 2021

It is two weeks since Myanmar's military coup. Thousands of protesters are on the streets around the country, police in bulletproof vests and riot shields are setting up perimeter lines on major roads and using water cannons to disperse crowds, and a widespread civil disobedience movement is gaining momentum with employees in many sectors refusing to work. State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint and many National League for Democracy (NLD) leaders have been detained, along with a number of activists. This military seizure of power is an incredibly distressing turn for those who have participated in the research for this book and who have devoted much of their lives to service of their country. It is with admiration for their bravery and commitment that I write this foreword.

One striking thing about the days following the coup – and a point which is at the heart of this book – is the degree to which the language of democracy is infused in communication, from military elites, foreign diplomats and protesters alike. As General Min Aung Hlaing attempted to justify the seizure of power, he did so through the language of democracy – by questioning the legitimacy of the November 2020 election and promising to hold fresh 'free and fair' elections which would bring about a 'discipline flourishing democracy'. On the streets in Yangon, Naypyidaw and Bago protesters held signs saying, 'Fight for democracy' and 'We want democracy'. North American and European leaders meanwhile condemned the coup and called for a restoration of democracy. Despite the vast gulf in aspirations and hopes for the country between Tatmadaw elites, NLD leaders, radical young activists, international aid workers and Western diplomats, the word democracy remained part of all their messages.

Before the coup, it was clear that the democratic visions of NLD leadership were being challenged on a number of flanks. On one flank, the last five years have underscored the divergence between the democratic visions of the NLD and those of a Western style liberal democracy – brought most obviously to light through issues of protection of Muslim minorities or freedom of the press. In this book I argue that while NLD leaders and European or North American aid workers may share expectations of basic procedures of liberal



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democracy, including elections, many of Myanmar's democratic leaders and activists view the country's democratization through a morally focussed story emphasising the values of benevolence, unity and discipline, rather than a story of progressive liberalisation.

Though less prominent in international media, I argue in this book that the NLD also faced a significant challenge from some Burmese activists and intellectuals who sought a more thoroughgoing change in democratic culture toward greater equality and less focus on the role of a benevolent leader. On yet another flank, many ethnic minority leaders articulated a federal vision of democracy in Myanmar – a democracy without the Burman ethnocentricity that they perceived in the NLD. And there are undoubtedly multiple alternate aspirations for democracy amongst religious minorities, rural and remote communities and urban radicals.

Ultimately though, it was the Tatmadaw's vision of 'discipline flourishing' democracy, combined with military hardware, that proved the greatest threat – ending the NLD's hopes of continuing their leadership and bringing about a new moral democracy in Myanmar. In times of military crackdown and appalling disregard for the wellbeing of citizens, it is easy to overlook the degree to which military elites envision a form of democracy in Myanmar, however twisted that version of democracy may be. Tatmadaw leaders wrote the 2008 Constitution – which upholds a restricted form of multi-party democracy – from a position of strength, not weakness. After the coup, a senior Western diplomat spoke to the BBC and said, 'I know it's hard to believe, but the armed forces really think they are working towards a multi-party democratic system' (Head 2021). The coup does not suggest that military elites are seeking to solidify a new form of long-term dictatorship, but rather that they felt that the trajectory of the country's democratisation had strayed too far from their vision of guided 'discipline flourishing' democracy intended within the 2008 Constitution.

The argument of this book is that struggles for democracy in Myanmar cannot be reduced to a binary contest between authoritarians and those seeking liberal democracy. Military elites have their own heavy-handed notions of democracy, and those opposing the coup are not all aligned with each other, nor behind liberal visions of democracy. Viewing the coup, and citizen protests, through a binary lens of authoritarianism and liberal democracy, serves to obscure the diverse meanings of democracy that inspire Myanmar's political actors.

By any measure however, the immediate future for the country looks bleak. Even before the February coup, democratic leaders, activists and aid workers faced enormous challenges. Along with dealing with chronic



issues of grinding poverty and ethnic and religious divisions, the COVID-19 pandemic further threatened the health and livelihoods of Myanmar people. The coup is therefore a damaging turn for the country – if the NLD administration struggled to make progress on the country's many challenges, a context of direct military rule is likely to be worse. It is not yet clear whether the new military administration can hold on to power in the coming months, but the country may now be vaulting into a future worse than many had hoped.

Head, Jonathon. 2021, 'Myanmar coup: what will the military do now?' BBC 14 February Last accessed 17 Feb 2021 at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56053007>





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1 Introduction

Abstract

This chapter introduces the concept of narratives of democracy and links it to the context of Myanmar and the struggles between Burmese activists and democratic leaders, and international aid workers, over the meaning of democracy. It also provides an overview of the book's structure.

Keywords: Myanmar, elections, democracy, narrative, activists, aid

Nay Pyone Latt announced on Facebook that he had won. It was not unexpected. The well-known blogger was a candidate for Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), which was the favourite to win Myanmar's 2015 national elections. Yet, just a few years before, Nay Pyone Latt had been a political prisoner. During the countrywide 2007 protests, the so-called Saffron Revolution, the then seventeen-year-old had been accused by Burmese authorities of mobilising protest through blogs and videos. He was promptly sentenced to more than 20 years in prison. But in 2012, amidst a mass pardon of political prisoners by then President Thein Sein, Nay Pyone Latt was released. By evening on the day after the 2015 election it was clear that he had won his seat for the NLD in a landslide and would soon join the Yangon Region Parliament.

By that same evening, 9 November 2015, there were crowds massing on Shwe Gone Daing Road outside the NLD headquarters in Yangon. Most in the crowd had dark indelible ink stains on their little fingers as a mark that they had voted in the election. Many wore red T-shirts with a picture of Aung San Suu Kyi or red NLD headbands – with the distinctive white star and yellow peacock – while some waved NLD balloons or flags. News was emerging of a decisive victory in which the NLD ultimately won 255 of the 330 possible seats in the Pyithu Hluttaw, or lower house of parliament. The victory was seen by many local reporters and commentators as ushering in a new post-authoritarian era of government for the country.

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The NLD victory was celebrated not only domestically but also internationally. Amongst media commentators and diplomats in Europe and North America, the 2015 elections were considered to be a pivotal moment in Myanmar's long struggle for democracy. The White House said that President Obama had talked directly with Aung San Suu Kyi, praising her for her 'tireless efforts and sacrifice over so many years to promote a more inclusive, peaceful and democratic Burma' (Slodkowski 2015: 1). After 25 years of resistance to an authoritarian regime, the democracy movement – led by Aung San Suu Kyi – had won a largely free and fair election. Pre- and post-elections, a series of human rights awards and honorary doctorates and citizenships were bestowed on Aung San Suu Kyi, bringing comparisons with Nelson Mandela's trajectory from political prisoner to inspirational national leader. This optimism was also reflected in some scholarship on Myanmar. In *Journal of Democracy*, Blažević (2016: 101) glowingly said that Myanmar was like 'a fairy tale beyond the wildest dreams of democracy advocates'. One of the most famous struggles for democracy in the world seemingly had its 'fairy tale' ending. From Aung San Suu Kyi to a new generation of younger NLD members such as Nay Pyone Latt, democrats in Myanmar had finally overcome their rivals.

Yet, in the years following that historic 2015 election victory, the hopes – of European and North American donor agencies – for a 'fairy tale' ending began to unravel. The 'democrats' had won, but many donor agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) began to wonder if the NLD were actually the 'democrats' they had hoped for. At a practical level, the NLD government proved difficult for international agencies to work with. If anything, many aid workers reported that the operating environment for international NGOs and civil society organisations became *more*, rather than less, restrictive as government leaders sought to control flows of aid and decisions about programming. The NLD seemed to be less rather than more open to capacity-building support from international donor agencies than their quasi-military government predecessors (Décobert & Wells 2019). Progress in peace negotiations with ethnic armed organisations in the country appeared to slow rather than accelerate under the leadership of the NLD. Where the Thein Sein government had made some progress in ceasefire agreements, the sporadic '21st Century Panglong' series of Union Peace Conferences under the NLD has few tangible outcomes. And after a rapid liberalisation of the domestic media context under the Thein Sein government in the early 2010s, the NLD began to restrict rather than empower media freedoms. 'In reality', one international NGO worker lamented about the NLD government, 'many things kind of deteriorated' (ibid.: 17).



It was, however, the escalating crises in Rakhine State in 2016 and 2017 that raised most questions about a supposed victory of ‘democrats’ over ‘authoritarians’ in Myanmar. On the global stage this came most prominently to the fore in August 2017 as news of Burmese military violence against Muslim minorities in the west of the country began to spread across international media outlets. After an armed group – the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army – made small-scale attacks against several police stations, the Burmese military responded violently, allegedly committing widespread human rights abuses and ultimately driving more than half a million people – most of whom were Muslim Rohingya – across the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. The United Nations (UN) described this as a ‘textbook example of ethnic cleansing’ (UN 2017) and in September 2018 the UN’s Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar found evidence of gross violations of human rights by Myanmar’s military in Rakhine State (UN Human Rights Council 2018).

The violence was initiated by the Burmese military which, according to the structure of Myanmar’s 2008 Constitution, operate outside the confines of the NLD’s civilian rule. Yet the lack of outspoken criticism of the military’s actions – from Aung San Suu Kyi or other senior NLD figures – led to much international outcry. The NLD had seemingly stood by as ‘ethnic cleansing’ had taken place in the country. Over the coming months, Aung San Suu Kyi’s international reputation went from, as *The Guardian* observed, ‘peace icon to pariah’ (Ellis-Petersen 2018). In 2017, the *New Yorker* named her the ‘ignoble laureate’ (Jacobson 2017). In 2018 the US Holocaust Memorial Museum withdrew its highest award, the Elie Wiesel Award, which it had given her in 2012 (US Holocaust Memorial Museum 2021). Aung San Suu Kyi’s honorary citizenship of Canada was removed soon after. Amnesty International (2018: 1) then stripped Suu Kyi of its Ambassador of Conscience Award (granted to her in 2009), expressing its ‘profound disappointment’ in her ‘failure to speak out for the Rohingya’. What had seemed in 2015 to be a ‘fairy tale’ end to a decades-long struggle between democrats and authoritarians now seemed to be quickly unravelling. What happened to the ‘democrats’ in Myanmar?

Most scholarly and popular attempts to make sense of Myanmar’s democratic trajectory before and after the 2015 elections implicitly or explicitly construct the struggle for democracy as playing out on one axis alone (Cockett 2015; Blažević 2016; Thawngmung 2016; Welsh, Huang & Chu 2016; Huang 2017; Barany 2018; Dukalskis & Raymond 2018). This axis is between ‘democrats’ – democratic leaders, activists and members of ethnic minority parties who favour a liberal style of democracy – and ‘authoritarians’

– military or ex-military elites – who resist liberal democracy. I am not at all suggesting that this axis should be dismissed. Andrew Selth (2018) and others (Huang 2017; Roman & Holliday 2018) are right to point to the ways in which Burmese military officers (and their families) retain significant formal and informal power. And democratic leaders in Myanmar are indeed faced with the challenge of navigating ongoing military control in many areas of policy. Yet, if considered *only* on this axis of authoritarianism and liberal democracy, then the actions of the NLD leaders and other democracy activists after the 2015 election may be misunderstood. Their actions may not be ‘missteps’, as suggested by Barany (2018), but rather shrewd and calculated steps responding to different logics of perceived challenges, and toward different goals. Rather than simply evaluating the actions and beliefs of Myanmar’s ‘democrats’ against the vision of liberal democracy, is there another way to understand what is happening in Myanmar?

Other struggles for democracy

This book uses a different lens through which to make sense of democratisation in Myanmar and the actions of democratic leaders and activists over the last decade. I argue for greater attention to what I describe as *other* struggles for democracy. Not struggles on a single axis between authoritarians and democrats, but struggles *within* democracy movements, *within* democratic parties and *between* democratic actors and their international allies. They are not struggles to attain liberal democracy, but rather over whether or not a liberal form of democracy should be the goal. They are struggles not over material resources or state power but over who gets to define what ‘genuine’ democratisation will entail. They are struggles that are not always overt but often obscured, even from political actors themselves.

Exploring these struggles for democracy brings a different emphasis than that of mainstream analyses. The last century saw profound political changes across the world, as the numbers of democratic countries contracted and expanded significantly at different times. It is thus understandable that the tendency within democratisation scholarship, which emerged as a discipline in the twentieth century, has been to portray a worldwide struggle between ‘democrats’ and ‘authoritarians’. Whether analysing the global or regional progress of democracy transitions, the focus of democratisation studies has been on shifts from various forms of authoritarianism – whether communist, totalitarian or pre-modern – to liberal democracy. Drawing on Huntington’s (1990) earlier image of democratic ‘waves’, many mainstream



scholars continue to describe democracy as emanating out from established democracies to transitional countries.

To be sure, there has been considerable attention within this literature on analysing complexities within processes of democratisation. Democratisation scholars have critiqued earlier notions of a linear progression of countries from totalitarianism to liberal democracy. There is no simple ‘transition paradigm’ (Carothers 2002) and regimes often take on different ‘hybrid’ forms, mixing features of both liberal democracy and authoritarianism. However, while the simplistic ‘transition paradigm’ may have been rejected within democratisation scholarship, the underlying emphasis has remained largely the same. Simple linearity has been replaced by a complex linearity (Teti 2012). The tendency in democratisation studies is still to consider democratic struggles as those between liberal democrats and authoritarians.

There undoubtedly remains a place for analysis of democratic struggles against authoritarian regimes. Yet as the word ‘democracy’ increasingly becomes a point of consensus in international politics, it is crucial to also examine contests over its meaning. Even in 1940 – which was a low point in the democratic history of the twentieth century – T.S. Eliot famously wrote that ‘when a term has become so universally sanctified as “democracy” now is, I begin to wonder whether it means anything, in meaning too many things’ (Eliot 1940: 11–12). If democracy meant ‘too many things’ in Eliot’s time, when there were only a handful of countries laying claim to democracy, how much more divergence and contestation over the meaning of the ‘D’ word must there now be? This book opens up the examination of *conceptual* struggles, or, in Kurki’s (2013: 7) words, ‘conceptual politics’ around the meaning of democracy. Rather than beginning with liberal democracy as an ‘ideal type’ from which to compare all other meanings of democracy, I seek to reveal and understand the way democratic leaders, activists and aid workers in Myanmar make sense of democracy *on their own terms*.

Myanmar may be the example par excellence of a country where scholarly focus is on a contest between authoritarians and democrats. Since 1988 the political struggles of the country have often been portrayed as though they are ‘a modern variant’ of ‘morality plays’ (Holliday 2012: 183). They present a Manichean image setting the virtuous Aung San Suu Kyi and long-suffering ethnic minorities against a brutal military. Perceptions of Myanmar since 1988 have been shaped by the compelling image of ‘the beast and the beauty’, with military leaders as the authoritarian ‘beast’ and Aung San Suu Kyi as the democratic ‘beauty’ (Zöllner 2012a). Hence, Blažević (2016: 101) could easily frame his commentary around Myanmar as a ‘fairy tale’. This ‘Hollywood’ imagery was also prominent within reflections from aid

practitioners (Décobert & Wells 2019). One international political analyst and former donor advisor in Myanmar explained that ‘for an analyst, it was great: I’ve got a lady, I’ve got an evil junta, I’ve got a bunch of ethnic groups. [...] Everyone loves a good Hollywood story, or a Disney story!’ (ibid.: 10).

This civil-military struggle in Myanmar has indeed been pivotal in the country’s political trajectory. As I have said, I do not wish to underplay this, and these ongoing contests reverberate through many of the arguments of this book. Yet in order to make sense of Myanmar democratisation, there is now a critical need to examine *other* struggles for democracy in Myanmar. Given the powerful ways in which Burmese politics has been constructed over the last two decades – through images such as the ‘beast and the beauty’ – it is crucial to unpack and expose conceptual contests which have received less attention.

Some Myanmar scholars have begun to illuminate such conceptual contests over democracy. Roman and Holliday (2018: 191) examine what they describe as ‘limited liberalism’ in Myanmar and acknowledge that ‘we have to accept that something that does not make sense to us is nevertheless sensible to others’. Yet, while nuancing Myanmar’s political trajectories in valuable ways, Roman and Holliday (ibid.) still rely on democratic liberalism as the yard stick from which they evaluate the ‘contradictions’ in the beliefs of Burmese political actors. More promisingly, G. McCarthy’s (2019) ethnographic study of central Myanmar highlights how politicians and citizens enact a – at times illiberal – concept of ‘democratic deservingness’ where distinctions are made between individuals and communities who do or do not demonstrate or perform self-reliance. Walton (2017) meanwhile argues that prominent meanings of democracy amongst Buddhist monks and politicians are guided by a Buddhist ‘moral universe’, rather than liberal values.

More broadly across Myanmar and between various groups – whether ethnic, religious, gender, class or age groups – there are myriad ways in which democracy is communicated and contested. For some citizens or political actors, democracy may be a closely held value, while for others the word may hold little relevance at all. From soldiers in ethnic armed groups in Kachin state to young Burman professionals in Yangon or women’s networks in rural Shan State, the word ‘democracy’ is woven into conversations in differing ways and filled with diverse meanings. This book seeks to extend the work of Walton (ibid.) and G. McCarthy (2019) and reveal ways of understanding and communicating about democracy that defy easy categorisation, and which destabilise key assumptions within liberal democratic thought.

In the coming chapters, I draw on the example of urban networks of Burmese (and specifically Burman) activists and democratic politicians and

their allies in international aid organisations. I expose conceptual contests within and between these networks over how the story of Myanmar's democratisation ought to be told. Various narratives of democracy – describing visions, challenges and strategies – were drawn on by these actors and held up as the only acceptable way to describe the country's democratisation. On one hand, a *liberal* narrative was prominent amongst Western aid workers, emphasising the problem of personalised politics and the need for capacity building to develop formal democratic institutions and liberal values. In contrast, a *benevolence* narrative – which was prominent amongst Burman activists and NLD politicians – highlighted the problem of dictatorial leadership and the need for unity, discipline and selfless leadership in the country's democratisation. Finally, an *equality* narrative, communicated within other activist networks, stressed the problem of hierarchy in Burmese culture and a vision of democracy as relational equality.

Not all of these meanings of democracy drawn on by Burman activists and democratic leaders aligned with liberal democratic expectations. For instance, when compared with the *liberal* narrative, within both the *benevolence* and *equality* narratives there was far less emphasis given to formal liberal institutions of democracy. Within the *benevolence* narrative, the moral values of individual leaders and citizens were far more important while within the *equality* narrative, cultural, rather than institutional, reform was the focus. Yet neither could these alternate and at times illiberal meanings given to the word 'democracy' by activists or opposition leaders be easily dismissed as cynical, or simply a mask for authoritarianism. As in the example of Nay Pyone Latt and Aung San Suu Kyi, many democracy activists faced arrest, detention as political prisoners, or threats to family members by Myanmar police or intelligence personnel. Burma may have been an international cause célèbre for Western human rights organisations in the 1990s and 2000s, but this did little to help the grim realities for Burmese political activists during that time. Many of the Burmese activists and democratic leaders I met during this research had demonstrated considerable personal commitment to the cause of 'democracy', and some had suffered profoundly for that commitment. Simple lines cannot be drawn between 'democrats' and 'authoritarians' amongst activists and political leaders in Myanmar. Some meanings given to democracy were not liberal, yet neither could they be dismissed as cynical.

As the word 'democracy' increasingly becomes a point of agreement between the NLD, civil society groups, ethnic minority parties and even the Burmese military, the more pressing contests are not the binary ones between 'authoritarians' and 'democrats', but those between different



narratives of democracy. The longstanding focus on the binary contest has obscured other crucial struggles. In this book, I seek to illuminate this analytical space for examining *other* struggles for democracy, struggles within and between democratic political parties, activists and Western aid agencies. In uncovering these *other* struggles for democracy, I describe the interactions and underlying contests between Western aid agencies and networks of activists and democratic leaders. I describe the connections of these Burmese actors to the governance and democracy-promotion programs of agencies such as the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Uncovering these contests – which I unpack in detail in the coming chapters – helps to develop more nuanced understandings of the actions and beliefs of democratic leaders and activists in Myanmar. Further, exposing these contests over meaning forces us to reconsider core assumptions within mainstream democratisation scholarship about the universality of liberal democratic expectations.

It is important once again to stress here the diversity in the ways democracy may be given meaning by political actors in Myanmar. Drawing on the example of urban and Burman activists and democratic leaders and European and North American aid workers, I reveal struggles for democracy that lie beyond just the ‘democrat-authoritarian’ axis. These are not, however, the only *other* struggles for democracy in Myanmar. Ethnic minority political parties and armed groups have long engaged in contests over how notions of democracy are entwined with values of equality and self-determination for ethnic minorities. These struggles are crucial to the future of the country and, at times, ethnic politics intersects with the narratives of democracy that I describe in this book. Meanwhile, amidst male-dominated leadership in activist groups, women’s networks in Yangon have sought to promote the connection between gender equality and democratisation. Amongst church groups in Chin State or networks of Hindu business owners in Mandalay, there may be varying constructions of the vision of a democratic future for the country.

The particular struggles I relate in this book – amongst activists, democratic leaders and aid workers – are crucial in making sense of Myanmar’s political trajectories and the supposed ‘fall from grace’ of the country’s democratic leaders and activists. Yet the narratives I describe emerged in very specific networks of urban *bamar* (Burman ethnic majority) elites who all identified as Buddhist, and in connection with networks of international aid workers. They are therefore each intrinsically limited in their portrayal of the country’s democratisation – often reflecting the particular circumstances of



their proponents, as educated Burmese elites from the religious and ethnic majority, or aid workers from Europe and North America. In short, the narratives I describe in this book are by no means the *only* stories of democracy in Myanmar. Detailed tracing of narratives of democracy in rural communities, or amongst ethnic and religious minorities in Myanmar, or amongst other groups, would be a valuable endeavour and would reveal another array of conceptual contests over the meaning of democracy – contests that may diverge from, and overlap with, those I describe in the coming chapters.

Narrating democracy

I use the word ‘narrative’ here intentionally, as in this book I argue that narrative theory can illuminate new dimensions of meanings of democracy. Amongst scholars who have taken interpretive approaches to the study of democracy there has, to this point, been no thorough application of narrative theory. How, then, does the concept of narrative unlock new insights about meanings of democracy? What is it particularly about attention to narrative that helps us to address questions about meanings of democracy?

In this book I draw on Schaffer’s (2016) notion of ‘elucidation’ of concepts such as democracy. For Schaffer, there are three major ‘modes’ of conceptual ‘elucidation’. The first is *grounding*, where researchers examine the ways that political actors themselves understand a concept. The second is *locating*, where researchers trace out the linguistic and historical context of the way concepts are understood. Finally, researchers seek to *expose* how everyday concepts are embedded in relations of power. This task of exposing highlights politics in the way that concepts are used – the ways that people ‘shape’ and ‘wield’ concepts to advance particular goals (ibid.). I argue that Schaffer’s notion of elucidation – and the three modes of grounding, locating and exposing – can valuably be extended through the use of narrative theory.

Simplified stories are a pervasive mode of understanding and communicating about political issues. Narratives play a role in making sense of the ‘flux of everyday experience’ (Polkinghorne 1995: 16). When activists or aid workers talk about democracy in Myanmar, they bring together visions, current and past challenges, and strategies by which those challenges can be addressed. We can enhance our understanding of meanings of democracy and their construction by analysing these narratives and their use. When asked in an interview or survey about how they understand democracy, an activist, for example, may reply with a vision of particular democratic values, outcomes or institutions. However, using a narrative approach, I

unpack the way visions of democracy are embedded in wider stories. This entails uncovering the counter-positions that meanings of democracy are reacting to. What are the problems that democracy is intended to solve? For instance, between the *liberal* and *benevolence* narratives that I describe in detail in this book, there were profound differences in the perceived obstacles to democracy in Myanmar. For many aid workers, personalised politics – and a supposedly unhealthy focus on Aung San Suu Kyi – was considered to be a key challenge. In contrast, some activists and members of the NLD saw the central problem not as personalised politics, but rather the problem of immoral leaders in Myanmar's past – leaders who were motivated by power, rather than the values of selflessness and discipline. Beyond visions and obstacles, within a narrative's plot there are also explicit or implicit strategies or interventions to address the central problem. Unpacking these wider plots – and especially their counter-positions and strategies – can bring richer understandings of how democracy is given meaning.

Another distinctive feature of narratives is that they are not just an interpretation of events but are wielded politically to promote certain interests and to privilege the voices of certain actors over others. Narratives serve to construct characters in the story. Narratives inevitably create certain actors as 'villains' who are responsible for the main problems or challenges, others as 'heroes' who can help to reach the vision, while others still are portrayed as passive bystanders, peripheral to the main flow of the story. Narrators inevitably construct themselves, and their rivals, in certain ways within the story. Narratives are not just neutral interpretations but are closely associated with the positioning of actors and attempts to outmanoeuvre their rivals.

In this sense, narrative theory overlaps with notions of discursive power. Power is exercised not only from above, for example, through the use of force by Myanmar's military, but also through everyday communication and the way that certain actors can control a 'true' meaning of words. Power is not only material and coercive, but also discursive, as is demonstrated by the ability of political actors to position themselves or others as 'experts', set the agenda of action, or define what are reasonable or unreasonable courses of action in a particular situation. The way narratives are constructed can serve to produce or undermine the discursive power of political actors. Partnership meetings, evaluation workshops and project reports can be settings for conceptual contests where activists, democratic leaders and international aid workers attempt to position certain narratives of democracy as the most credible representation of vision, challenges and strategies.



This dimension of narrative analysis reminds us that meanings given to the word ‘democracy’ are not innocent or neutral, or simply reflections of certain cultural context, but are also embedded within conceptual contests. In this way my use of narrative theory emphasises the dimension of *narrativity* – the focus on plot and character construction taken by Roe (1989) or Polkinghorne (1995) – but also the dimension of narrative and *discursive power* found in the work of Moon (2006), Little (2012) and Hajer (1995).

My argument in this book is that uncovering plot and characters within narratives of democracy can contribute to each of Schaffer’s three major modes of elucidation of concepts – grounding, locating and exposing. In the task of *grounding* concepts and paying attention to the way actors themselves make sense of them, the narrative framework – of vision, challenges, strategies and temporal range – can reveal new dimensions of meaning that may not be immediately self-evident. These narratives can then be *located* through the particular way that political actors and networks adapt, reject and adopt other historical or contemporary narratives. Finally, particularly through analysis of character construction, attention to narratives is valuable in the task of *exposing* the political use of concepts. Through stories, political actors can position themselves in certain ways and advance their own agendas.

This task of elucidating meanings of democracy is not an esoteric endeavour but has deep relevance to everyday issues. A significant amount of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) donor funding continues to be invested in democracy and governance programs around the world. Whether or not the ‘good governance’ or ‘democracy assistance’ agendas of these donors are valued by domestic or international critics, it is almost inconceivable that these vast programs will not continue in Myanmar and other transitional countries in the future. Yet despite the resources allocated to these programs, democracy-promotion scholarship and practitioner reports often pay little attention to the democratic visions of the domestic political actors that these programs engage with. The everyday practice of democracy promotion is often hamstrung by the inability of OECD aid agencies to engage with concepts of democracy that diverge from an imagined liberal ideal.

Further, the *other* struggles for democracy that I examine in this book were closely related to some of the country’s most pressing questions of public policy and leadership. As I have described, the period of the Thein Sein government brought greater freedom to communicate between activists, democratic leaders and international aid workers, who were all seeking to progress the country’s democratisation. Yet it did not reveal a consensus



in visions of what a new democratic Myanmar ought to look like. In fact, the new openness revealed puzzling differences between different actors about appropriate responses to key issues in the country. These differences are starkly revealed through responses to the issue of violence between Buddhist and Muslim communities, the place of Western capacity building for 'good governance', peace negotiations with ethnic armed groups, and the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi. Throughout this book, I refer back to these tangible issues of policy and governance and how they relate to contests over narratives of democracy.

Book overview

The book draws on research material from the lead-up to the 2015 election victory of the NLD and then follow-up research in late 2018. It involved 65 formal interviews, almost evenly divided between three groups: Burmese activists in Yangon (from activist organisations such as 88 Generation and local NGO Paung Ku), leaders and members of the NLD, and Western donor agency representatives. Fifty of these interviews were conducted in Myanmar between 2013 and 2015 with fifteen additional interviews in late 2018. Burmese participants all identified as Burman (or *bamar*) and Buddhist. The research for this book also involved observation and informal interactions with over a hundred individuals who were engaged in the democracy movement between 2013 and 2015. Formal interviews and informal interactions were in either the English and the Burmese languages, or a mixture of both. The Burmese-language interviews were transcribed into Burmese script by a native speaker who was familiar with the context of activism, political parties and aid programs. I then translated this text into English, in consultation with the transcriber. In certain instances, translations were also checked with the participants.

While emphasising the particular context of participants in this research, it is also important to clarify the particularity of my own experience. This book and its interpretations of Myanmar's politics are influenced by my own experience of working in and on Myanmar over almost fifteen years, first as an aid practitioner – for seven years based in Myanmar (2006–2012) – and then as a researcher. I return to explore this positionality further in the next chapter.

This book is divided into three sections. The first section (Chapters Two through Four) establishes the theoretical and historical basis for my arguments about *other* struggles for democracy. The middle section (Chapters



Five to Eight) examines three contrasting narratives – which I describe as *liberal*, *benevolence* and *equality* narratives – using examples of Burmese activists, democratic leaders and aid workers. In the final section (Chapters Nine and Ten), I then highlight the implications of these *other* struggles for democracy for both the study of democratisation and democracy promotion, and for the future of activism, aid agencies and democratic political parties in Myanmar.

As opposed to the assumption of an ‘ideal type’ of democracy – which is present in much mainstream democratisation scholarship – the next chapter in this book begins by drawing on W.B. Gallie’s (1956: 167) notion of the ‘essential contestability’ of democracy. Meanings given to the word ‘democracy’ are inevitably open-ended and dependent on context. Recent interpretive studies have established the context-specific nature of meanings of democracy and sought to ‘elucidate’ meanings of democracy on their own terms. Chapter Two extends this work to show how attention to narratives can ground and locate meanings of democracy and expose the ways in which they can be wielded as political tools.

To understand the dominant narratives described in this book, they need to be situated within the context of Myanmar’s modern history and the ways different political actors – whether independence leaders, colonial administrators, military leaders or activists – have narrated that history. This is not an attempt to construct a unitary history of Myanmar, but rather to locate and uncover struggles over the meaning of democracy during these different periods and how they shape contemporary political uses of the word ‘democracy’ amongst the networks of activists and democratic leaders that I studied. The third chapter explores the example of contrasting meanings of democracy between British colonial administrators and the Thakin independence leaders in the late colonial period in Burma. The fourth chapter follows by examining other examples of conceptual contest over the meaning of democracy in Myanmar’s history through the periods of parliamentary and military rule in the twentieth century, and then through the recent transition to democracy. This highlights how key conceptual contests in Myanmar’s history informed the contrasting ways democracy is understood and communicated amongst activists and democratic leaders today.

In Chapters Five, Six and Seven, I then describe three contrasting narratives of democracy – a *liberal* narrative, a *benevolence* narrative and an *equality* narrative – that were prominent amongst activists, democratic leaders and their Western donor supporters in the lead-up to and following the 2015 elections. In these chapters I seek to *ground* and *locate* these



narratives in their own terms. My intention is to present the internal logic of these interpretations and the way that they, in different ways, construct forms of common sense. Chapter Eight then examines these three storylines more critically, exposing the different ways in which they were used by activists, aid workers or democratic leaders to outmanoeuvre political rivals.

What, then, does this analysis of other struggles for democracy mean for the endeavour of promoting democracy? In Chapter Nine, I argue that a narrative approach challenges prevailing assumptions about the promotion of democracy, from both mainstream and critical scholars. On one hand, by largely focussing on issues of how to promote democracy, rather than what kind of democracy is being promoted, mainstream approaches often fail to recognise activists or opposition leaders as sophisticated democratic actors in their own context. On the other hand, the example of Myanmar also challenges critical democracy-promotion scholarship by highlighting that there are limits to the agenda of making democracy promotion a more inclusive and participatory endeavour.

Given the significance of contests over the meaning of democracy, how might we view the future of Myanmar's democracy? Over three decades as political prisoner, opposition leader and State Counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi has played a role as central protagonist in contrasting narratives of democracy. The final chapter of this book reflects on the twilight of her political leadership and the future of Myanmar's political transitions. While most analyses track Myanmar's progress toward a liberal democratic vision, I ask what the prospects are for alternate visions of democracy in Myanmar. I conclude that it is through greater sensitivity and attention to *other* struggles for democracy that scholars and practitioners can make greater sense of the beliefs and actions of political actors in Myanmar and other transitional countries.

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