The imaginary of a modern city: Post-politics and Myanmar's urban development

Abstract

Theories of 'post-politics' provide a lens through which to analyse contemporary urban development. Yet empirical studies examining this 'age of post-politics' are few, especially outside of Europe and North America. This article examines the promise and limits of notions of post-politics through the case of planning for New Yangon City, a multi-billion dollar urban development in Myanmar (Burma). While the 2021 military coup has made the future of the project uncertain, , revealed similar dynamics at play to those described more broadly in the literature on post-politics. We highlight familiar processes of delegation of decision-making, a proliferation of governance actors, and an individualisation of policy issues. What is distinctive in Myanmar is the way a coalition of elite decision-makers have diluted and defused policy disagreements through the construction of a utopian vision of a modern international city. We see this imaginary of the modern city as a tactic to support the broader efforts of depoliticization. This diverges from arguments that the imagination of social change is curtailed through the pragmatic post-political notion that 'there is no alternative'. Instead, in the context of New Yangon City, utopian vision is integral to depoliticization and limiting dissent. We conclude that attention to processes of depoliticization is crucial in relation to mega project planning in Asia, and that a productive way forward for studies of urban development is not wholesale acceptance or dismissal of the notion of post-politics, but robust engagement with its critiques and promise.

Acknowledgments

Introduction

Theories of 'post-politics' have invigorated debates about urban development over the last two decades. What makes this analysis distinctive is the insight that depoliticization is not necessarily a result of government repression. Rather, democratic principles of inclusion and participation can be inherent to ways in which policy disagreements are diluted and dispersed. Swyngedouw (2005, 2017, 2018) argues that an increasingly technocratic and consensual form of democracy is emerging which at the same time eschews ideological contest—denying 'the political'. These insights have sparked valuable new theoretical debates about urban development (Beveridge and Koch, 2017a, 2017b; Davidson and Iverson, 2015; Swyngedouw, 2014, 2017). Yet, importantly, empirical studies examining this supposed 'condition of post-politics' are few, particularly in authoritarian and post-authoritarian and non-European contexts.

In this article, we address this knowledge gap by examining processes of urban development in Myanmar (Burma), where the authors have worked for the past two decades. After five decades of overt government repression and a lack of development and investment in the urban, Myanmar gained increasing international attention and aid over the last decade as it was seen to be making significant strides towards democratic rule. Our research was conducted in 2019-20 during this period. The recent military coup in February 2021, however, has now underlined uncertainty for the political and economic future of Myanmar.[1]

During the rule of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy government, from 2016 when she was appointed state counsellor to the February 2021 coup, Myanmar made massive new investments in projects for urban development and infrastructure. Examining the country's largest and perhaps most ambitious urban development proposal during this

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[1] Before the February 2021 military coup, COVID-19 had already brought uncertainty to Myanmar's political and economic prospects.

period, the multi-billion USD 'New Yangon City' to be located on the periphery of Yangon, we identify processes and practices akin to those described in literature on post-politics. For us, the notion of a post-political condition is valuable in this context. It acknowledges the insight that 'denying the political' in Myanmar may not just have been a result of government repression, but rather, can also be linked to processes and tactics of depoliticization of supposedly democratic planning processes in urban development. This is important because it reveals less overt tactics to curate consensus and diminish dissent in a context where scholars and activists might focus on the more obviously overt oppression of the past and present. While Myanmar's political future is uncertain, it is feasible that similar tactics could be used if the New Yangon City project continues under authoritarian, democratic or hybrid governments in the coming years.

At the same time, we identify limits of 'applying' a post-political lens to examine urban development in Myanmar. To simply describe Myanmar's urban politics as under a post-political condition during the period of NLD government would be to gloss over significant differences in the dynamics of depoliticization and the country's contested history, not only of government repression but of historical urban under-development and relocation, as well as the different mechanisms of remaking urban Yangon. In identifying these limits, we contribute to an understanding of the precise processes and tactics of depoliticization that emerged in the Myanmar context. For scholars of post-politics, alternate visions for society are marginalised in favour of what is portrayed by elites as a more realistic, practical, anti-utopian, pathway of liberal democracy and the market economy. In contrast, in the Myanmar context, we describe how a positive, utopian *imaginary of a modern city* was articulated by project elites. This imaginary had an almost limitless scope and vision which served to defuse contests over the project and urban development, while simultaneously providing legitimacy for a coalition of project elites.

To develop these arguments, we first examine existing literature on an 'age of post politics', highlighting the promise and limits of such approaches. Section two describes the New Yangon City project and the background of urban development in Yangon. In the third section we then identify the ways in which the planning processes for New Yangon City both align with, and diverge from, accounts of post-politics in the existing literature. We particularly highlight differences in the production of a utopian imaginary of a modern city – with positive appeals to 'international standards' and a 'world class city' – as a tactic of

depoliticization, both curating consensus and limiting dissent. Finally, we conclude that while theories of post-politics can invigorate studies of urban development beyond Europe, they are simultaneously worthy of critique. We contend that a way to move forward in examining New Yangon City, and other ambitious development projects the region, from Colombo to Phnom Penh, is not a wholesale acceptance or dismissal of notions of the post-political, but robust engagement with its critiques and promise.

Section 1: Post politics and urban studies: Promise and limits

Since the end of the Cold War there has been a profound shift in urban politics. The city, in the idealised Greek sense of the *polis*, has been historically linked with 'the political'. The city is a site of 'contestation and agonistic engagement' (Swyngedouw and Wilson, 2014: 6) and for public debate, deliberation and negotiation. In recent decades however, a stream of scholarship has observed how, with new forms of governance, public political engagement in the city has been constrained. As opposed to the agonistic engagement within the *polis*, policy decision-making in urban contexts is increasingly shaped through technocratic and managerial procedures (Swyngedouw and Wilson, 2014).

It is not simply that powerful governance actors can run roughshod over the marginalized through force. Rather it is that conflicts often do not arise as certain ideas or alternate options are never placed on the table. Democratic consensus is *curated* rather than enforced. Decisions, Ranciere (1999: viii) argues, simply 'make themselves'. Terminology and emphasis varies within literature on post-politics in use of the terms 'the political', 'the police' and 'politics'. Yet a central theme is that an increasingly technocratic and consensual form of democracy is emerging in Europe and North America, which forecloses ideological contest and denies 'the political'.

This occurs through processes such as delegation of decision-making to consultancies and technical bodies, proliferation of governance actors across government departments, private sector and civil society and through individualisation of responses which prevents collective opposition to projects. Importantly, Swyngedouw and Wilson (2014) also highlight how this narrowing of possible outcomes occurs not only in the Symbolic register – through institutional mechanisms and practices, but also through the register of the *Imaginary* –

through discourses around urban development.[2] In the third section of this paper we describe dynamics of depoliticization across these registers of the Symbolic and the Imaginary, in particular highlighting an imaginary of a modern, world class, international city.

In taking such an approach, we acknowledge that post-politics is one of multiple lenses that scholars of urban studies have developed to study depoliticization in governance (Beveridge, 2017).[3] For our purposes, we see promise in the post-politics lens not only to take a more critical stance in relation to representative liberal democracy (Beveridge, 2017: 589), but for what we see as providing a promising conceptual understanding of the depoliticising processes within the context of the NLD government in Myanmar, where consensus (and dissent) was being curated differently and processes of depoliticization were key. This is an important shift from the more obvious analysis of oppression in Myanmar's political history. However, we also want to acknowledge upfront the limits of theories of post-politics. In particular we engage with two key critiques that are most relevant to a regional context in the global south.

First, critics rightly highlight the Eurocentricity of post-politics literature[4]. The disruptions to the post-political 'condition' through street protest and direct action—which are valorised by Swyngedouw and Ranciere—may be considered differently through empirical examples in other contexts. In their edited volume, Lam-Knot et al. (2019), for example, highlight the less overt work of civil society organisations in Asia and their resistance of depoliticization in areas of heritage and environmental governance.[5] While that volume focuses most on the perspective of civil society actors, additional Asia-focused scholarship identifies how discourse and imagination play key roles in both pushing forward and depoliticising urban development (Elinoff 2014; Nam 2011; Gillen 2016; Kim 2017). For instance, in Saigon,

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[2] Here Wilson and Swyngdouw (2014, 7) draw on Lacan's notion of intertwined registers of the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real.

[3] Beveridge (2017) contrasts the lens of post-politics with two other approaches to depoliticization which have a primary focus on either 'politics as the institutions of governance' which is largely limited to statecraft (Beveridge 2017, 589) or 'politics as choice and contingency' (Beveridge 2017, 589).

[4] The lack of empirical work in non-European contexts might mean that as a theory post-politics is, as Roy (2009, 819) suggests, 'unable to analyse multiple forms of metropolitan modernities'. But there are some recent additions in the literature exploring post politics in other contexts. Some of the recent additions include, Jenkins (2011) work exploring the case of grassroots women's leadership in Peru, and an edited volume on post-politics in Asia, by Lam-Knott et al. (2019).

[5] In that volume, chapters by Matijasevich and Wells, for instance, outline key issues of accountability and politics in authoritarian and post-authoritarian contexts in Asia that underline the need for further work in this area.

Vietnam, Kim (2017, 689) refers to the deployment of a 'wish image' for advancing urban development where 'a number of political, social, economic, and legal orders can be called upon in simplified and universalized form, claimed and promised.' Meanwhile, in South Asia, Ghertner (2015) describes a discursive dynamic in urban development in Delhi of 'rule by aesthetics' rather than through technoscientific processes. A distinction arising from our empirical work in Myanmar—that we detail in the third section—is in the utopian appeals of political elites to a modern world class city. Project elites frequently invoked images of successful Asian cities and appeal to international standards and expertise to both claim legitimacy and limit dissent.

This attention to utopian images in urban development in the region is significant because we cannot see a clear parallel with what Swyngedouw (2014, 2017, 2018) shows us of Europe's 'disappearance of the political'. In the European context, consensus is portrayed as emerging largely through links to the effect of neoliberal economics and upholding of the elite status quo. For Swyngedouw and Wilson (2014) the end of the Cold War ushered in a new era where commitment to global markets and liberal democracy was unquestioned. Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher famously used the phrase 'there is no alternative' to end debate about whether or not the market economy was the desired economic model for the United Kingdom. For Swyngedouw and Wilson (2014) therefore, a central component of post politics is a *rejection* of utopian visions of societal change. Utopic visions for society are marginalised in favour of what is portrayed by elites as a more realistic and practical pathway of liberal democracy and the market economy. Swyngedouw and Wilson (2014: 8) draw on Zizek in describing a discursive (or Imaginary) 'mental block', preventing the imagination of fundamental social change 'in the interest of a "realistic" and "mature" attitude'.

We argue in the third section of this article that the dynamic in the context of Myanmar is different. Rather than a 'mental block' to considering forms of social change, project elites in New Yangon City pointed toward a horizon of utopian change away from memories of isolating and oppressive military rule, toward a wealthy, internationally connected and sustainable future. In contrast to Thatcher, project elites promoted the project by arguing that 'there *is* an alternative' to the status quo. In the third section of this article we highlight how this vision of New Yangon City is *utopian* in the original sense of Thomas More—as a perfect (and unrealisable) imaginary place. Our research reveals how this utopian imaginary

of an internationalised city has served to constrain dissent and debate around policy choice in relation to New Yangon City.

Second, along with underlining the specific empirical aspects of this case, we also contribute to a body of work challenging the notion of a singular post political 'condition'. Along with Beveridge and Koch (2017a) we argue that it is imperative to explore the contingency of 'politics as it is', rather than assuming an all-encompassing 'condition'. Or as Postero and Elinoff observe, 'while the effacement of politics by economic logics has been a critical feature of the neoliberal period, the notion of a *postpolitical world* was never empirically accurate' [emphasis added] (Postero and Elinoff, 2019: 6; see also, Li, 2019). Rather than being a 'condition', Beveridge and Koch argue that post-politicization is a particular 'form of depoliticization', a contingent strategy that needs to be examined in specific contexts (Beveridge and Koch 2017a, 40). To be fair, Swyngedouw (2014, 2017) emphasizes the contingent nature of the post-political and its inevitable incompleteness, and in his more recent work he examines 'insurgent cities' around the world where activists attempt to challenge the status quo (Swyngedouw, 2018). However, the danger for Swyngedouw's approach to a post-political 'condition' is that the 'condition' becomes the launching point for analyses of politics, rather than an empirical exploration of 'the political', or its absence. It also assumes a rather homogenous notion of what is 'truly political' across time, space, history and political context.

Thus, in this article, we acknowledge both the promise and limits of scholarship on the post-political and its value in helping to explain contemporary changes in urban contexts in Myanmar. Notions of post-politics are important in illuminating new lines of inquiry into democratic principles and practices and how they can also be a means by which choice and debate are curtailed. Yet describing an 'age' or 'condition' of post-politics can, on the other hand, constrain our empirical examination of diverse processes of depoliticization around the world. Drawing on the context of Myanmar and the planning for New Yangon City, provides an alternate window into both the promise and limits of theories of post-politics.

Central to our ability to outline the specifics of New Yangon City developments was the research we conducted in 2019-2020 as part of a funded project focusing on New Yangon City and Yangon's urban development. At one level, we acknowledge that our analysis of the case is influenced by our own experience as long-term practitioners and researchers in the

field of international aid and civil society in Myanmar. Our firsthand experiences of Myanmar's transition since the 2000s undoubtedly shapes our examination of the planning of New Yangon City. Our findings in this article are based on both document analysis – including planning documents, news reports, press releases, and blogs related to the New Yangon City project –and two weeks of targeted field research in June 2019. Our field work had three components. First, we conducted forty semi-structured interviews with residents, activists, planners and members of government. NYDC did not agree to an 'on the record' interview, however, our team did meet with staff at the New Yangon City Development Corporation offices. Second, we held a 1-day workshop with local NGO staff, activists and academics that highlighted the social, cultural, political, and ecological facets of the project. Some of these activists and NGOs work on issues related to environment, investment, informal settlement and the impacts of development; academic participants had, for instance, expertise in the physical geography of Yangon as well as environmental consulting processes. Third, we visited and observed Phase 1 of the proposed site, conducting additional informal interviews with residents, boat drivers, and monks. Interviews (informal and semi-structured) were conducted in Burmese and English by a broader team of seven researchers, three of which are native Burmese language speakers. We have not identified interviewee names or organisations due to fears of reprisal for critiquing government projects in the increasingly sensitive political context in Myanmar.

Section 2: New Yangon City: Introducing project background and actors

Our research was conducted during the period of NLD governance in Myanmar, which was marked by both liberal, and highly illiberal, political processes. During this period, from 2016 to the February 2021 coup, the New Yangon City project was part of a plan to develop the low-lying land to the west of the city as phase one of 'an urban industrial district that will initiate creation of 2 million jobs' (NYDC 2020). The implementation of New Yangon City has been presented as the responsibility of the New Yangon Development Company (NYDC), which was incorporated by the Yangon regional government in March 2018. The project is a public-private partnership, where NYDC claims to be '100% owned by the Yangon Regional Government' (NYDC, 2020). The face of the project, Serge Pun, is a

Burmese businessman with ties to China and Hong Kong and ranked 35 of 'Singapore's 50 Richest' (Forbes 2017).[6]

The Yangon Regional Government only supplied around $US 6 million of funding to NYDC, which is a fraction of what is required for the multibillion-dollar project. Substantial external investment was therefore solicited and in April 2018, the Yangon regional government signed a framework agreement for the development of phase one of the project, worth $US1.5 billion, with the controversial China Communications Construction Company (CCCC). As we discuss in detail below, the role of international experts and 'expert' consultants was also crucial to the project as they engaged with government and private sector actors in addressing the challenge of constructing a new urban centre in a low-lying area. Thus at the centre of this project was an uneasy coalition involving the National League for Democracy, a Burmese businessman, a Chinese construction company and an array of international consultancy firms.

Making this coalition particularly uneasy were the connections between national and international entities, but went beyond the number of entities involved. The increasing involvement of CCCC and other Chinese companies in the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, and the broader Belt and Road Initiative (Oliviera et al. 2020), has been welcomed by Myanmar successive governments, yet met with scepticism by many Myanmar citizens who have historically been wary of Chinese influence in the country. Therefore, the decision to sign an agreement with CCCC for the New Yangon City project without a public tender process was controversial, especially given CCCC's negative reputation in the region and globally – being sanctioned by the World Bank from 2009-2017 under its fraud and corruption policy (World Bank, 2011). New Yangon City project accountability was thus not only obscured by the involvement of multiple Myanmar actors but also through interlocking international and regional partnerships and commitments – whereby the Myanmar state were also constrained in its approaches.

The project plans promise to address Yangon's urgent need for housing and infrastructure. Between 2000 and 2014, Yangon's population grew by 23 percent (Heeckt et al. 2017) yet

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[6] Serge Pun is a key figure; he is the chief executive of NYDC and owner of one of Myanmar's largest business groups, Serge Pun and Associates Group (SPA group). The SPA group was established during the authoritarian period of the Than Shwe government).

infrastructure had not developed at sufficient pace. Hemmed in by rivers on the south, east and west sides, the progressive stages of urban development largely proceeded north of the 'central' old city. The outer suburbs of Yangon now stretch more than twenty kilometres north from the downtown area. Plans for New Yangon City therefore represent a different trajectory of growth with the new development proposed less than two kilometres southwest of the city centre, across the Yangon River. Much of this land is not currently developed; it is held by different authorities, including the military, it is difficult to access in the rainy season, and the area remains largely under-serviced (as much of the periphery) and is primarily used for farming paddy.

For our purposes in this paper, there are two further areas that we outline to help position the New Yangon City project in its historical and geographical context. First, while this development of the city's periphery certainly represents a departure from the past, and an opportunity for improved housing for some, for others it also continues a history of relocation and displacement in Yangon. Rangoon (now Yangon) was established by the British colonial administration as a key administrative and commercial centre in 1853. What is clear is that in this period and since, over successive regimes, residents have been at risk of displacement and relocation to the periphery, with lack of basic services, and without clear rights or recourse. For instance, as the city grew in the colonial period, residents were repeatedly at risk of forced relocation as more central areas were designated for new commercial or residential development. Residents were often forced to move to the periphery of the city, which lacked basic services (Seekins, 2014).

Similar practices of forced eviction and relocation continued after independence in 1948 (Rhoads, 2018), and in successive authoritarian governments, such as when General Ne Win's caretaker government intervened in Rangoon's urban planning in 1959, to force one sixth of Yangon's population of one million to move into new poorly serviced peripheral suburbs (Seekins 2014). In 1988, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) government then relocated almost half a million people to peripheral suburbs (Seekins 2014), including Hlaing Thayar. Media censorship and restrictions on freedoms speech and association during this period meant that there was little recourse for affected communities. In some cases, relocation was even designed to dilute and divide communities that had mobilised against the SLORC government (Rhoads 2018). As Rhoads (2018, 281) argues, the 'prototypes' of urban planning in Yangon are almost exclusively authoritarian and over more

than a century of urban development there had been little regard for the voices and visions of the urban poor.

After 2010, as Myanmar moved through a distinct political and economic transition, Myanmar citizens, and international donor agencies and investors began to expect higher levels of inclusion and consultation of local communities in urban planning decision making. The increased economic activity in Yangon after 2011 in turn had the effect of increasing urban migration and informal settlements, with the area of highest concentration of informal settlements in Hlaing Thar Yar, the suburb adjacent to the planned New Yangon City (Presentation at research workshop, June 2019). The new investment and loans also brought increased interest in Yangon's urban planning from international development agencies (Matelski and Sabrié 2019). The Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA), for example, commissioned a *Strategic Urban Development Plan of Greater Yangon* in 2013, UN Habitat released a set of 'Guidelines for Urban Planning' for Myanmar (UN Habitat 2016), and the Asian Development Bank has published a range of reports on urban transport, water, and housing. In contrast to much of Yangon's urban planning history, a key theme in these international reports is the importance of 'participatory inclusion' of poor communities in order to enhance urban 'development improvements' (ADB 2016).

Second, linked to the position of this project, there are also several very concerning logistical and geographical challenges. The more than 80 square kilometres of the proposed project area is flood prone; it currently serves as a site of 'drainage' for downtown Yangon, which is located just across the river (Presentation at research workshop, June 2019). Phase 1 area of the proposed project is only 3-5 metres above sea level, lower than the downtown which lies 10 metres above sea level. This presents an enormous practical challenge for the project, and a massive land reclamation effort would be required for the project to proceed, especially with rising sea levels as a result of climate change (see also, Chitra 2021, for an assessment of how climate change and urban rivers have their own 'technopolitical orders'). Significant investment in constructing a new suburb could potentially also mean that Yangon's existing electricity, water, and sanitation infrastructure - which are in dire need of improvement – could continue to be neglected. Thus along with a history of repeated forced relocation of Yangon's urban poor, there are tangible challenges to the basic implementation of the project on the proposed site.

Section 3: New Yangon City and a Condition of Post-Politics?

Having introduced the context of the project, we now describe how project planning was depoliticised in ways that both align with and diverge from those processes expected in a post-political condition. On one hand, we observed similar processes to those we find in analyses of post politics. In the first part of this section we describe delegation of decision-making to technical bodies, opaque networks of governance actors, and a focus on individualised, rather than collective, responses from those affected by the project. On the other hand, we then identify a utopian imaginary of a modern city which serve to depoliticise project decision-making in a way that diverges from the dynamics of a post-political condition (and that also serves to obscure the concerns we note above). We conclude that while New Yangon City's urban planning has incorporated new practices of consultation and participation, local communities in Yangon, like the generations before them, ultimately have little voice in urban planning decisions that affect them.

New Yangon City and the post-political

Delegation of decision-making to consultancies and technical bodies is a common process of depoliticisation observed in theories of post politics. There were many examples of this in New Yangon City with, for example, Dutch consultancy Royal Haskoning DHV engaged in 2018 to study the controversial flood risk in the project. Meanwhile, the SocioEconomic Master Plan for the New Yangon City project was produced by international consultancy firm McKinsey in 2018 and Oriental Consultants from Japan were engaged in 2018 to consult on the challenges of transport planning and a traffic impact assessment. Attention to this 'rendering technical' aspect of depoliticization reveals both what project proponents sought to change and control, and what was excluded (Li, 2007: 123). This effectively framed project challenges, whether around traffic, flooding or environmental damage, as technical ones to be solved by international experts. At the same time, larger political or economic concerns about the viability or desirability of the project were passed over. Elected representatives, the public and advocacy organisations were one step removed from decision-making while multiple international consultancy groups shaped the direction of the project.

Planning processes also involved a diffuse and complex constellation of governance actors at both local and international levels. New Yangon City's planning process was supported by U Phyo Min Thein in the executive of the Yangon regional government, a government owned company (NYDC), international consultancy firms such as McKinsey, international aid agencies such as UK's Department for International Development (who funded the Socio Economic Master Plan), Chinese company CCCC, and local professional bodies and businesses. Yet within this mix of actors there was little clarity for the public over where core responsibility for the project's decision-making lay. This proliferation of governance actors and obfuscation of decision-making processes resonates with observation of planning processes for Yangon's Thilawa Special Economic Zone where responsibility was often deferred between Myanmar government and private sector actors (Wells 2018). Such diffuse forms of governance align with what might be expected in a post-political condition.

Finally, along with this delegation and the construction of a diffuse array of governance actors, policy issues in the New Yangon City planning were frequently cast within the private sphere rather than as collective social challenges. Public concerns or questions were constructed by project elites as problems relating to *particular* circumstances or individuals rather than collective questions about the project. The mechanisms of public engagement served to enhance this individualisation. Most prominent were a series of 'townhall meetings' held in Yangon from June 2018 and involving high profile members of the project including Serge Pun, and other prominent commentators from civil society groups. While Serge Pun claimed to be providing inclusive meetings for stakeholders, our interviews with residents who would be impacted by the project underlined just how difficult their participation would be. Not only were language and 'formality' noted as barriers for the slum communities and local farmers who were affected but travel to the meetings themselves seemed impossible: many who farm or work in factories explained that travel to the meeting would take time and money that they lacked. These consultation meetings also separated stakeholders—where civil society elites and investors held separate conversations to local government officials which were in turn separate to meetings with local residents. This stratification allowed issues to be rendered as particular rather than universal concerns. As Rancière suggests, the post-political condition is not challenged by a diversity of views rather it can be 'nourished' by difference (Rancière, 1999: 95) and elites can draw on the variety of perspectives in constructing the 'sensible'.

An imaginary of a modern city

These examples of delegation, proliferation of governance actors, and individualisation of responses align with what we might expect in a post political 'condition'. However, we now highlight what we consider to be different dynamics to those we might have anticipated through a lens of post politics. In particular we highlight a utopian imaginary of a modern, internationalised city, which served to diffuse and constrain debate about policy choices in New Yangon City. Studies of post politics often describe the discursive or Imaginary register in a pragmatic and anti-utopian way; the prime example is Swyngeouw's analysis of the Thatcher-esque discourse that 'there is no alternative' (2014) to the neoliberal market economy. As described above, to some degree we see this pragmatic techno-managerial emphasis reflected in the example of New Yangon City. Yet in this section we argue that there is also a different dynamic where an imaginary of a modern city serves to awaken the imagination of all – from investors to the urban poor – around the possibilities for transformation.

Importantly, this is not a rejection of neoliberalism. The difference rather is through rejection of a purely 'realistic' or practical approach to planning. For instance we highlight that many parts of the New Yangon City plans are highly questionable. New Yangon City planning processes did not rely on realistic approaches but instead pointed toward a horizon of utopian change away from the poverty and oppression of the past toward a wealthy, stable and internationally connected future. As described earlier, Ghertner's (2015) description of urban development in millennial Delhi presents a parallel to this where he suggests planning relied less on technoscientific procedures and more on 'rule by aesthetics' – where a vague notion of a 'world class city' was a central guide to decision making. Or similarly Kim's (2017) analysis of Saigon shows how various political, economic and legal orders can be flattened through a universalised 'wish image.' In the example of New Yangon City, we argue that the utopian imaginary of the modern city services is used by project elites to manage dissent and to paper over crucial concerns of citizens about the project.

Supporting this imaginary of a modern city in Yangon is common reference—across press releases, in meetings and articles—to an ideal type of 'successful' city. Importantly, this is not reference to any modern city, but particularly to economically successful cities outside

Myanmar that have emerged from recent humble beginnings due to government planning and decisive intervention. Singapore in particular was presented as an example of this ideal type of modern Asian city. Singapore is a 'success story', says Serge Pun (July 25 2018), where 'good planning' created a 'thriving, modern city that had been slums 50 years ago'. Shenzhen in China was also a common reference point. Singapore's former foreign minister George Yeo (also a NYDC board member) said that New Yangon City could spur growth for Myanmar, just like what 'Shenzhen city did for China' (NYDC 2018). Serge Pun (Pun 2018a) similarly reflects how:

> 'Shenzhen was once a village of 30,000 people. Today, the city has grown and developed in line with the world's insatiable demand for electronic goods. It is now one of China's largest cities as well as its wealthiest.'

According to NYDC, New Yangon City takes inspiration from other regional cities 'like China's Shenzhen and Shanghai Pudong' (New Yangon Development Company May 2 2018). Like these other cities – and with the same planning and decisive intervention from government - New Yangon City can 'leapfrog into the future' (Pun 2018b). Serge Pun (2018c) concludes that, 'we could turn the dream into reality'.

In our analysis then, when Serge Pun enthusiastically states his hope that 'one day Yangon will be ranked among the Top Ten cities [in the world in in the Economist Global Liveability Rankings]' the feasibility of the statement is less important than its discursive appeal within the imagination of the public (Pun May 24 2018). Crucially, if this imaginary of a 'world class' (NYDC 2018, 33) New Yangon City is broadly established amongst key stakeholders, then the discursive realm is potentially foreclosed as a site of contest, or at least the terrain for debate and dissent is shifted.

Along with reference to successful Asian cities, the notion of 'international standards' was also frequently invoked in the processes of construction and planning. This is crucial to mobilising support and trust for new development projects and is part of the interplay between *both* the discursive construction of a 'world class city' and the processes by which project elites move to proliferate and internationalise the project stakeholders. Yangon Chief Minister and project proponent, U Phyo Min Thein, for instance, announced that the project will be conducted in line with 'international best practices' (NYDC 2018, 4). Serge Pun

similarly stresses in his blog that the project will comply with 'international standards' (Sept 4 2019) although the particular standards are not specified.

'International standards' or 'international best practice' can of course refer to specific United Nations declarations or to detailed standards for development projects outlined by institutions such as the World Bank. However, we argue that in this case, the notion of 'international standards' is used by project elites less in reference to specific standards and more to appeal to detractors and to support the construction of an imaginary in which Myanmar is a legitimate participant in global urban development. Myanmar's history as an authoritarian state with decades of exclusion from trade and political relationships with wealthy countries, stands in contrast to the country's imagined participation in 'world class' (NYDC, 2018, 33) projects implemented with 'international standards.'

An example of how international standards are invoked is the socioeconomic master plan (SEMP) produced by McKinsey for the New Yangon City project (NYDC, 2018). The SEMP contains not only an overview of the planning of the new city but a vision encompassing health, education, transport, crime and environmental sustainability. Despite its lack of direct accountability to citizens through the regional parliament, New Yangon City will be 'a model organisation adopting and upholding world-class governance mechanisms' (NYDC, 2018, 33). In relation to health, the plan aims for life expectancy to be above 80 years (from Myanmar's current life expectancy of 67). The plan also states that New Yangon City will have a ratio of 14 hospital beds per thousand people which would give the city one of the highest densities of hospital beds in the world – compared to only 2.5 hospital beds per thousand people in Singapore. The plan has similarly ambitious targets related to education, crime, and transport (NYDC, 2018).

These planning documents can, on the one hand, be viewed as technocratic plans and targets relating to the design of the new city. Yet they can equally be viewed as texts through which the utopian notion of the modern city is nurtured. The actual feasibility of the targets or 'KPIs' is less important than the vision of the modern city that is fostered. Ghertner's (2015) description of urban planning in Delhi reflects a similar de-prioritisation of practical benchmarks, in favour of grand visions of a 'world class city'. Crucially, if this imaginary of a 'world class' (NYDC, 2018: 33) city that meets international standards is broadly adopted amongst key stakeholders, then critics of the project must either argue against this vision of

achieving international standards, or alternatively, must concentrate only on the technical dimension of its implementation. More robust critiques by detractors of the project were, for example, called out in townhall meetings for not being 'socially appropriate' (Interview, activist, June 2018).

This appeal to 'world class' services and amenities also allows the project plan to elide obvious tensions or trade-offs. For example, planning documents state that the city will have world class health care and education, green spaces and low crime all of which would appeal to Yangon's wealthiest. Yet at the same time the new city will also have affordable housing for Yangon's urban poor. There is no need for trade-offs or compromises as AECOM's smart city framework 'will satisfy the New Yangon City's sustainable development goals, and will focus on transport, healthcare, economy, security, education, utilities and environment' (Pun Jul 23 2019). Our point here is not to question the feasibility of specific New Yangon City plans or indicators in detail, but rather to highlight that the function of the planning documents and information may be less about feasibility and more about nurturing the imaginary of a new 'world class' city (NYDC, 2018, 33).

A further example of this appeal to the imaginary of a modern, world class city is the reliance on a particular set of international actors. As noted above, the proliferation of consultancy agencies and other actors in governance is linked to a technocratic and depoliticising effect which obfuscates accountability. There is also, we contend, a discursive emphasis by elite actors on a particular set of international consultancy agencies – such as McKinsey or Royal Haskoning DHV – which strengthen the imaginary of a modern, world class city.

This tactic has also been used to provide legitimacy to the project in a context where many political institutions are lacking. In Myanmar this is particularly important as a large proportion of past development projects with links to China, such as the Myitsone dam, are seen by citizens as mired in corruption and with benefits accruing to the military rather than the country's citizens (Chan 2017). New Yangon City project elites such as Serge Pun work to demonstrate international links as a way to keep themselves as one-step-removed not only from corruption and authoritarian government rule but from 'politics' more generally. This is seen when observers position Serge Pun in virtuous terms, they highlight that he is *not* a political elite, but as working to bring development for the good of Myanmar people. In Serge Pun's weekly CEO blog he stressed that he is 'not in any way interested to indulge in

debates containing political flavours' (March 18 2019). The project and its leadership are portrayed as being *above* 'politics'.

When taken together: we see this imaginary of the modern city as a tactic to support the broader efforts of depoliticization, a tactic that is produced and reflected between a coalition of local and international actors. Through appeals to modern Asian cities, international standards, and international consultancy and private sector experience, it presents an utopian, and likely unrealisable, future for New Yangon City. A 'mature' and 'realistic' (cf. Swyngedouw and Wilson, 2014; Zizek 2000) approach to New Yangon City planning would question the feasibility of whether Yangon can be in the world's top ten most liveable cities, whether New Yangon City can really develop a healthcare system that surpasses that of Singapore, or whether a low-lying flood plain can avoid problems of sea level rises in the coming decades. The NYDC planning approach depoliticises the project, not by the post-political notion of pragmatism, but rather than through fostering a utopian imaginary of a future modern city. Ghertner (2015, 8) describes how urban developers in Delhi shifted from a 'postcolonial anxiety around catching up' toward, in the last two decades, a 'far bolder fantasy futurism'. In a similar way, during the NLD period of government, project elites in New Yangon City pointed away from memories of isolating and oppressive military rule, toward a horizon of a wealthy, internationally connected and sustainable future. This future now appears far bleaker than hoped however, with the recent return to military authoritarian rule.

Conclusion

In urban development in authoritarian or post authoritarian contexts, analysis often centres on the gradual transition in policy making from a context of oppression to one of democratic inclusion and participation. The primary analytical questions, therefore, often focus on examining how *far* countries may have moved through this transition. The danger in this however is to overlook the subtle ways in which ostensibly democratic planning processes can themselves stifle and curtail policy debate and disagreement.

In this article we have argued that theories of post-politics have value in illuminating how processes of depoliticization in Yangon's urban development may not only have been a result of government repression. Rather, the use of inclusion and participation in planning processes

can also be inherent to ways in which policy disagreements are dispersed. The example of the New Yangon City project during the period of NLD government reveals many of the same processes of depoliticization which are found in analyses of a post-political condition. While the language of participation and inclusion may have proliferated in Myanmar during the NLD period, along with new modes of consultation and use of technocratic bodies and consultancies, all of this may not have enhanced the voice of Myanmar's urban poor in decisions that affect them.

However, there is also much to learn from attending to the limits of the notion of the post-political. To simply describe Myanmar's urban politics during the period of NLD government as under a post-political condition would be to gloss over significant differences in the dynamics of depoliticization. We have argued that a crucial difference between the case of New Yangon City and the studies of post-politics in Europe is in the way New Yangon City project elites produced and nurtured a utopian imaginary of the modern city and how they used appeals to the 'international' and 'world class' as a tactic to diffuse opposition and criticism. This imaginary both mobilises utopian visions and at the same time forecloses dissent. It relies on an ideal type of a modern Asian city, a perception of a planning and construction processes that is in line with 'international standards', and the involvement of certain international actors.

Underlining these distinctions and understanding these tactics, both empirically and conceptually, is important for understanding New Yangon City, but also in considering urban developments in other unstable emerging market contexts as well. A subsidiary of CCCC is involved in the development of the Kyaukphyu deep sea port project on Myanmar's west coast, the controversial Hambantota port project in Sri Lanka, and Port City in Colombo, which is being constructed on reclaimed land in the Indian Ocean. The rhetoric of 'world class cities', which is attached to these projects, has striking similarities with the imaginary of the modern city that we have described in this article. The actual feasibility of the projects then becomes less important than the vision of the world class that is nurtured and imagined by key stakeholders. Because then debate and dissent is shifted away from feasibility and critics of the project must either argue against this vision of achieving world class or international standards.

We have argued that Myanmar's specific context has also contributed to the appeal of this imaginary. The New Yangon Project began after a transition away from more than fifty years of authoritarian rule during which time the country was isolated internationally, and urban planning was characterised by forced relocation, violence and neglect. In this context, a key aspect of producing consensus was appealing to people's fear of returning to the past and to authoritarian rule, and at the same time curating an imaginary of a modern, world class city. In contrast, in stable and wealthy established democracies of Europe or North America, depoliticization is shaped through appeals to a 'realistic', 'mature', anti-utopian discourse that 'there is no alternative' to the neoliberal status quo (Swyngedouw and Wilson, 2014). In this sense, the dynamics of depoliticization that we have described in the New Yangon City case diverge from what we might anticipate in a post-political 'condition'.

What examples from the UK and Myanmar have in common however, is the ability of coalitions of elites to forward their own development agendas and avoid public scrutiny. Both the utopian imaginary of a modern city, and the pragmatic post-political discourse that 'there is no alternative' serve to obfuscate the choices that citizens have, curating a consensus around urban planning and minimising dissent. We must be attentive to the ways in which government and private sector elites use inclusive and participatory processes and discourses to restrict the choices of citizens.

In terms of Myanmar's political and economic future, there is now deep uncertainty as the country reels from the military coup and the impact of COVID-19. The coalition of actors driving the New Yangon City project – and circulating the imaginary of the modern city – has now fractured, and it is not yet clear whether the new Myanmar State Administrative Council will proceed with such projects and how they would be implemented. A valuable focus for future research in New Yangon City would be detailing the ways in which citizens are working under the new authoritarian regime, with attention to the 'small acts of refusal' that may be possible (Li, 2019: 30). Examining dynamics of de- (and re-) politicisation is particularly important in contexts such as Myanmar, even under a new authoritarian government. A return to overt government repression since the coup in early 2021 should not obscure our attention from other less overt ways in which the choices of urban citizens are constrained.

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