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# **Myanmar's other struggles for democracy: narratives and conceptual contest in the Burmese democracy movement**

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## **Candidate's Declaration**

This thesis is my own original work toward the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.  
Due acknowledgement has been made where other materials are used in the text  
and the thesis is fewer than the maximum word limit in length.



Tamas Wells

## Abstract

Democracy inspires many social movements around the world. Yet there is no consensus about its meaning. This thesis examines the Burmese democracy movement in the years leading up to the 2015 election victory of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy. I argue that attention to the ways democracy was given meaning amongst activists, opposition leaders and aid workers in Myanmar reveals important conceptual contests. These were struggles not between military elites and the Burmese democracy movement but *within* the democracy movement, and with its Western supporters – what I have described as 'other' struggles for democracy.

The concept of narrative can unlock new perspectives on the way democracy is given meaning by political actors, and especially in the construction of meaning through conceptual contest. Drawing on fifty formal interviews and three months of observation in Myanmar (in 2013 and 2014) - within activist networks, aid agencies and the National League for Democracy - this study revealed three contrasting narratives. An *institutional* narrative, prominent amongst Western aid workers, emphasised the problem of personalised politics and the need for capacity building to develop formal democratic institutions. A *benevolence* narrative, common amongst activist leaders, highlighted the problem of dictatorial leadership and the need for unity, discipline and selfless leadership in the country's democratization. Finally, an *equality* narrative, prominent in other activist networks, stressed the problem of hierarchy in Burmese culture and a vision of democracy as relational equality.

As simplified stories containing diverse visions, challenges and strategies, these narratives were important means through which democracy was understood and communicated. Yet activists and aid workers also used narratives of democracy to position themselves in relation to rivals - to establish themselves, and their allies, as experts who could define what 'genuine' democracy was, and was not. Conceptual contests in the democracy movement were not only over

contrasting visions, challenges and strategies; they were also over the construction of 'characters'. In other words, narratives were not neutral but a way in which activists, opposition leaders and aid workers could exercise power in a discursive form. Finally, while narratives were in some ways a means for the exercise of power, these struggles were not always overt in the democracy movement, and in fact the nature of narratives and their associated practices often served to obscure conceptual contests.

Myanmar has freed itself from military rule. Yet as democracy is increasingly held up as a valued political concept, it is crucial to unpack the many ways in which it is given meaning. This study extends the democratization literature by explicitly addressing the plurality of meanings of democracy. It also furthers the agenda of interpretive studies of democracy, and studies on the transmission of global norms, by highlighting the role of context specific conceptual contests in creating meaning. I conclude that uncovering these other struggles for democracy, and inevitable contests over democracy's meaning, also challenges prevailing notions of how democracy can be 'promoted'. Democracy may be a widely valued concept, yet it will remain impossible to pin down.

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## Chapter 1 Introduction: Myanmar's other struggles for democracy

Democracy is central to the global political lexicon of the twenty first century. Democracy is, as Dunn (2014, 12) suggests, the 'the single most powerful political formula in today's world' and is the inspiration for many social movements. While cognisant of many challenges Diamond (2008, 291) even puts forward the bold expectation that 'the whole world can become democratic'.

Yet for all the ubiquity of the word 'democracy', limited attention has been given to the diversity of meanings, and actually existing practices, that are attached to it by citizens in social movements. For activists, or advocacy groups, to what values, practices or institutions does the word 'democracy' refer? How do citizens in democracy movements around the world make sense of their actions toward 'democracy'?

These questions are particularly important in Myanmar, which over the last three decades has been home to one of the world's most prominent struggles for democracy.<sup>1</sup> Burma, as it was officially named until 1989, became an international 'pariah' in the 1990s and 2000s as its citizens endured the restrictive authoritarian rule of the country's military forces, or *tatmadaw*.<sup>2</sup> The military had what Callahan (2004, 207) vividly describes as a 'choke hold' on political power in the country. During this period, public use of the word 'democracy' by citizens often resulted in suspicion from the authorities, arrest or worse (Fink 2001).

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<sup>1</sup> In international circles during the 1990s and 2000s, the name of the country itself became a site of contest - between 'Burma', as the name of the country at independence in 1948, and 'Myanmar' as the name given to the country by the military led State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in 1989. Since the liberalising reforms began in 2012, most governments and aid organisations now recognise 'Myanmar' as the name of the country and almost all of the international participants in this study used the term 'Myanmar'. This contest was however, less of an issue in Burmese language. Amongst Burmese participants in this study the country was most commonly referred to as *myanma nainngan*. Reflecting participant reference to the country I therefore use the name 'Myanmar' to refer to the country since 1989, 'Burma' to refer to the country prior to that and I use Myanmar and Burmese interchangeably to describe nationality or language.

<sup>2</sup> The Romanisation of Burmese words in this thesis is according to the BGN/PCGN system.

Since liberalising reforms began in 2011 however, Myanmar has now become a place where 'democracy' is a central part of everyday political vocabulary. In his inaugural speech in 2011 former President, and ex-military officer, U Thein Sein (2011) stated his hope that the country would become a 'modern democracy'. A 'Journal for Democracy and Human Rights' began to be sold in street side stalls and political parties, with the word 'democratic' in their name, proliferated around the country. This shift culminated in 2015 with the emphatic victory of Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party in national elections.<sup>3</sup> Within the space of a few years, the word democracy went from being virtually absent from the public sphere to be seemingly everywhere. Yet the widespread use of the word does not mean there is a consensus amongst political actors in Myanmar, or in other transitional countries, about its meaning.

The first question of this thesis is *what meanings are given to the word 'democracy' in Myanmar's democracy movement?* If we assume, along with Whitehead (2011), that meanings of democracy do not simply emanate out unchanged from the 'modern' world, but rather grow in different cultures, languages and political contexts, then the task of investigating meanings of democracy becomes crucial. In order to make sense of 'democracy' - and the actions of political actors in the name of democracy - researchers need to unpack its multiple inflections. When used by Burmese activists or political leaders, what values, institutions or practices does 'democracy' refer to?

Further, beyond the illumination of different inflections of the word democracy, is the deeper question of what explains differences in meanings? Why do different groups adopt contrasting meanings of democracy? Why do networks of activists in Myanmar speak about democracy in one way, while international aid agencies use the word in a different way? Why do opposition leaders put forward particular meanings of democracy in their speeches, while in donor

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<sup>3</sup> The National League for Democracy (NLD) won 390 out of 664 seats in national parliament - giving them a majority in both the upper and lower houses of parliament. A majority gained even in spite of twenty five percent (or 166) of those seats being automatically allocated to members of Myanmar's armed forces. Meanwhile the previous ruling party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) went from holding 388 seats after the 2010 elections (which were boycotted by the NLD) to only 42 in the new parliament.

partnership meetings other meanings are emphasised? Why are certain aspects of democracy given centre stage, while others are ignored?

In scholarship that does examine contrasting meanings of the word democracy around the world, there is commonly an emphasis on cultural explanations for difference. Using public opinion survey data Shi and Lu (2010) argue that the 'shadow of Confucianism' unavoidably influences understandings of democracy in East Asia. Using a more fine-grained interpretive approach in her research amongst Tibetan exiles in India, Frechette (2007) argues that local understandings and practices of democracy are influenced by the prominence of particular Buddhist teachings. Similarly Michelutti (2008) argues that caste and ideas of kinship shape popular understandings of democracy amongst the Yadav in northern India. Language, religion or cultural practices, in specific contexts, inform the way democracy is understood. These explanations are valuable, and the connection between particular languages, histories and cultures, and contrasting meanings of democracy is strongly supported in this thesis. However, I explore another line of explanation for why contrasting meanings of democracy may be adopted – one which has received less scholarly attention.

The second question I ask in this thesis is *how do conceptual contests construct meanings of democracy?* For example, how might democracy activists adopt particular understandings in order to oppose or outflank their political rivals? Do opposition leaders, as Schaffer (1997) suggests, emphasise certain aspects of democracy to counteract the arguments of leaders in power? More than simply being connected to certain cultural traditions such as Confucianism or Buddhism, are meanings of democracy also a product of conceptual contests, where different actors are competing to gain influence? The first question of this thesis examines different meanings of democracy in Myanmar. But the second asks how these meanings might be constructed through conceptual contest.

This study explores these questions in the context of the democracy movement in Myanmar during the Thein Sein administration of 2011-2016. Significantly this was a period of sweeping political, economic and social reforms in the

country. After spending most of the previous twenty years under house arrest, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was released shortly after the 2010 general elections. 2012 then saw the release of hundreds of prominent political prisoners - including 88 Generation activist leader Ko Min Ko Naing - and a broadening of freedoms of speech and association. These reforms allowed a set of new relational interactions to take place both within the democracy movement and between local and international actors. For the first time in decades, local activists, opposition party leaders and international aid agencies were able to communicate openly about democracy in Myanmar.

This transition made it possible for my study to examine new debates and discussion between these key political actors. The particular historical trajectory of Myanmar - with a long period of authoritarian government and then rapid liberalisation - brought different meanings of democracy into contest in a way that is unique from many other countries in Southeast Asia. For example, Thailand and Indonesia have had longer periods of civic freedoms, and opportunities for engagement with international actors. The trajectory of political change during the Thein Sein period made it possible to unpack emerging meanings of democracy and, as will be described in the coming chapters, to trace out the struggles in which they were embedded.

## **Other struggles for democracy**

My argument in this thesis is that attention to the ways democracy is given meaning amongst activists, opposition leaders and aid workers in Myanmar reveals important conceptual contests - what I have described as 'other' struggles for democracy. These are struggles not between 'authoritarians' and 'democrats' but struggles *within* the democracy movement - struggles over the meaning of democracy. They are struggles not over material resources but struggles over who gets to define what 'genuine' democratization will entail. They are struggles that are not always overt but often obscured, even from political actors themselves.

Crucially, exploring other struggles for democracy brings a different emphasis to that of mainstream democratization scholarship. 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 democratization scholarship has been to portray a worldwide struggle between 'democrats' and 'non-democrats'. Whether analysing the global or regional progress of democracy (Gat 2010, Doorenspleet 2005, Diamond 2008, Karatnycky 1999, Croissant 2004) or transitions in specific countries (Hui 2015, Gershman 2015, Brown and Shahin 2013), the focus of democratization studies has been on shifts from various forms of authoritarianism – whether communist, totalitarian or pre-modern - to liberal democracy.

Gat (2010) argues that democracy 'won' the twentieth century and yet is still 'imperiled' by 'non democratic great powers'. Diamond (2008) similarly describes the persistent problem of authoritarianism, for example in Russia and Venezuela, and the 'struggle to build free societies around the world'. Drawing on Huntington's (1990) earlier image of 'waves', Doorenspleet (2005, 2) examines the 'impressive wave of democratization' since the end of the Cold War during which 'many non-democratic countries made a transition to democracy'. Meanwhile, many studies exploring political struggles in particular contexts – for example, in Hong Kong (Hui 2015), the Ukraine (Gershman 2015) and the Middle East (Brown and Shahin 2013) – frame a contest between authoritarianism and liberal democracy.

To be sure, there has been considerable attention within this literature on analysing complexities within processes of democratization. Democratization scholars have critiqued earlier notions of a linear progression of countries from totalitarianism to liberal democracy (Carothers 2002, Linz and Stepan 1996). Carothers (2002) stresses that there is no simple 'transition paradigm' and Diamond (2002) highlights that regimes often take on a 'hybrid' form, mixing features of both liberal democracy and authoritarianism. Teti (2012) highlights however, that while the simplistic 'transition paradigm' (Carothers 2002) may

have been rejected within democratization scholarship, the underlying emphasis has remained largely the same. For Teti (2012), simple linearity has been replaced by a 'complex linearity'. The tendency in democratization studies is still to focus on democratic struggles as those between liberal democrats and authoritarians.

There undoubtedly remains a place for analysis of democratic struggles against authoritarian regimes. Yet my argument here is that as the word democracy becomes a point of wide consensus in international politics, it is crucial to also examine contests over its meaning. As Meckstroth (2015, 2) explains, the struggle for democracy is 'not only the struggle to realise "democracy" but also...the struggle for the right to decide what it will mean'. The questions of this thesis, about meanings of democracy and their construction through conceptual contests, open up examination of these other struggles for democracy.

Myanmar may be the example *par excellence* of scholarly focus on the contest between authoritarians and democrats. Holliday (2011, 183) observes that Burma, since 1988, 'is often cast as a modern variant of morality plays' - the virtuous Suu Kyi against a 'brutal military machine'.<sup>4</sup> Zollner (2012) similarly argues that 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 Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as the democratic 'beauty'. This image, of the 'beast and the beauty', has been used explicitly in works by Ash (2014)<sup>5</sup> and Ruiter (2010), and also popularised in *Vogue* magazine (Rubin 2011).

Yet even in many more nuanced scholarly works on Myanmar from the 1990s and 2000s (Steinberg 1990, 2001, Rotberg 1998, Fink 2001, Thawngmung 2004, McCarthy 2006, Houtman 1999), the civil-military axis of analysis is still

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<sup>4</sup> Popular works on Myanmar by Rogers (2010) and Popham (2014) reflect this moral tone that Holliday (2011) describes.

<sup>5</sup> Ash (2014) does nuance his use of the term 'Beast and Beauty' by briefly introducing the issues of ethnic tensions and international actors.

central.<sup>6</sup> Houtman's (1999) detailed exploration of 'mental culture in Burmese crisis politics' highlights the Buddhist practices of NLD leaders and their resistance to the regime. Fink's work 'Living Silence' (2001) gives a grim portrayal of citizens under the military regime in the 2000s. Similarly, Steinberg (1990, 2001) describes Burmese politics largely through the prism of citizen resistance to the *tatmadaw*.<sup>7</sup>

The civil-military struggle in Myanmar has indeed been pivotal in the country's political trajectory, and these ongoing contests reverberate through many of the points made in this thesis. My central point however, is that there is a 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 for analysts to unpack conceptual contents which have received less attention.

My study of the Burmese democracy movement reveals ways of understanding and communicating about democracy that defy easy categorisation. As will become apparent in the coming chapters, not all meanings of democracy put forward by Burmese activists aligned with liberal democratic expectations. Yet neither could illiberal meanings given to the word democracy by activists or opposition leaders be easily dismissed as cynical, or simply a 'cloak for authoritarianism' (Lawson 1995, 3). During the period of military government under General Than Shwe (prior to the quasi-civilian Thein Sein administration), many democracy activists faced arrest, detention as political prisoners, or threats to family members by police or intelligence personnel (Fink 2001). Many Burmese participants in this study had demonstrated considerable personal commitment to the cause of 'democracy'. Analysis of the Burmese democracy movement highlights that simple lines cannot be drawn between 'democrats'

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<sup>6</sup> Along with analysis of struggles between the Burman dominated democracy movement and the military regime a number of authors in the 1990s and 2000s also introduce the issue of ethnic conflict (see Smith 1994, South 2008 and Tin Maung Maung Than 2005). However, the focus of these works is still on resistance to the military government.

<sup>7</sup> In their more recent analysis of Myanmar's political party system Stokke et al. (2015, 20) also characterise a 'cleavage' between 'authoritarian' and 'democratic' parties. Also see Kipgen's (2016) analysis of the democratic transition and the struggle between military and opposition.

and 'authoritarians'. Some meanings given to democracy were not liberal, yet neither could they be dismissed as cynical (Morozov 2013).

My core concern in this thesis is that as the word democracy becomes a point of agreement between political actors in Myanmar, the more pressing contests may not be those between 'authoritarians' and 'democrats', but those over the meaning of democracy itself. In this thesis 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, this study also explores the interactions and underlying contests between Western aid agencies and the democracy movement. I describe the connections of the movement to agencies such as the British Department of International Development (DFID) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and their governance and democracy promotion programs.<sup>8</sup> In this way, this thesis reveals new lines of contest over meanings of democracy, not only those within the Burmese democracy movement, but also those between local and international actors.

It is important also to stress the relevance of meanings of democracy to everyday issues faced by the democracy movement in Myanmar. I argue in this thesis that these other struggles for democracy were closely linked 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, opposition 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 within the democracy movement (and within aid agencies) in responses to key issues in the country.

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<sup>8</sup> While sharing the aim of building capacity for democratic governance, United States Agency for International Development (USAID) tends to favour use of the phrase 'democracy promotion', while European agencies, such as U.K.'s Department for International Development (DFID) more commonly refer to 'governance'.

These differences were starkly revealed in the period of this study through responses to the issue of violence between Buddhist and Muslim communities, the place of Western capacity building, and the leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. In the coming chapters, I return to these issues and argue that contrasting responses to them were embedded in conceptual contests over how democracy was given meaning.

In 2012 and 2013 there were a number of outbreaks of violence between Buddhist and Muslim communities, first in the volatile Rakhine state in the west, but then spreading to other centres around the country. While many international agencies (and the Western media) expressed their concern about the protection of Muslim minority communities, the response from many prominent activists and leaders - including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi - was more muted, with little public condemnation of the violence. Despite their mutual commitment to the cause of 'democracy', this study revealed that international aid workers and local activists often reached very different conclusions about the place of human rights and the need for protection of Muslim minority groups.

Meanwhile, the Thein Sein period of government also revealed contrasting assumptions - between aid agencies and activists - about the need for capacity building for democratic governance. Many Western aid agencies, seeking to promote democracy in Myanmar, emphasised training opportunities for Burmese political parties and activist organisations to build their understanding of democratic governance, for example, in ways to reform regional parliamentary systems. Aid agencies considered this to be a priority in the years leading up to the 2015 elections as it was widely anticipated that the National League for Democracy (NLD) would soon be thrust into the responsibilities of government. Yet, as will be described in the coming chapters, the NLD and many activist networks expressed only limited interest in these activities. Why did Burmese opposition leaders and activists not place more emphasis on technical knowledge of democratic procedures?

Further, within the democracy movement itself there were deep divisions over the leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. This study revealed that many activists and members of the NLD saw her as the movement's legitimate leader - someone who had demonstrated considerable selflessness and commitment to the country. Yet, within other activist networks there were deep concerns over her leadership, some participants even suggested to me that she was just another 'dictator' and that her leadership may in fact be a barrier to genuine democratization. How could democracy activists - who had recently emerged from isolation or imprisonment under a repressive regime - reach such different conclusions about the movement's most prominent leader? I return to each of these issues later in this thesis and argue that different responses amongst aid workers and activists were in fact embedded in contrasting wider *narratives* of democracy.

## **A narrative approach**

I use the word 'narrative' here intentionally as in this study I use an interpretive approach drawing extensively on narrative as a concept, and narrative analysis as a methodology. In this section I introduce interpretivism and then turn more specifically to three crucial insights from narrative theory which help to reveal other struggles for democracy.

The key distinction of an interpretive approach is in seeking to unearth rich accounts of beliefs and meaning as a way of understanding the actions of political actors. At the core of an interpretive approach is the insight that understanding political practices and institutions requires researchers to examine relevant meanings and beliefs (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, Wagenaar 2014). At one level, this assumption leads to an emphasis on particular research methods - for example, using extended interviews or ethnographic observation rather than standardised surveys - a topic that will be addressed in detail in Chapter 3. This study draws on fifty extended interviews, and over one hundred informal interactions, with Burmese activists, Western aid workers, and members of the National League for

Democracy. The field research was conducted in Myanmar over three separate trips - in October/November 2013, February 2014, and August 2014.

Yet beyond methodological considerations, interpretivism makes a more far-reaching claim. The beliefs of political actors are not simply useful to consider in understanding democracy. They do not, as Wagenaar (2014, 4) suggests, 'merely put a particular affective or evaluative gloss on things'. Rather, beliefs and meaning are in fact 'constitutive' of democratic actions and institutions (Bevir and Rhodes 2003). An interpretive approach emphasises the way in which meanings given to the word democracy by political actors serve to *construct*, or *create*, democratic practices and institutions - a point I will return to in the coming chapters.

Narrative analysis is used in this study as a particular interpretive approach. In addressing the questions of this thesis – about meanings of democracy and their contests – narrative theory adds three crucial dimensions to the broader foundations of interpretivism. I give a brief description of these insights here before addressing them in more detail in chapter 3.

### *Narratives as simplified stories*

First, narrative analysis has been used widely in the social sciences with the core insight that 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). As 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. I argue that 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 in this study I

seek to unpack the way visions of democracy are embedded in wider stories. This entails uncovering the ‘counter positions’ that meanings of democracy are reacting to (Hajer 1995). What are the problems that democracy is intended to solve? Further, within a narrative’s plot there are also explicit or implicit strategies or interventions to address the central problem (Labov 1972, Boswell 2013b). My contention is that unpacking these wider plots – and especially their counter positions and strategies – can bring richer understandings of how democracy is given meaning.

### *Narratives and conceptual contest*

Another distinctive feature of narratives is that they are not just an interpretation of events, but also construct ‘characters’ in the story. Narratives inevitably create certain actors as ‘villains’ who are responsible for the main problems or challenges, others are ‘heroes’ who can help to reach the vision, while others still are portrayed as passive bystanders, peripheral to the main flow of the story (Boswell 2013a). Narrators inevitably construct themselves, and their rivals, in certain ways within the story (Andrews et al. 2008). In this sense, narratives are not just neutral interpretations but are closely associated with the positioning of actors and attempts to outmanoeuvre their rivals.

In the third chapter I describe how my narrative approach draws on the concept of *discursive* power<sup>9</sup>. In recent decades, the concept of discursive power has been applied in a range of fields and settings. For the purposes of my study the concept of discursive power is important in that it highlights that 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 (Wagenaar 2014). Power is not only material and coercive, but also discursive, in the ability of political actors to position themselves or others as ‘experts’, set the agenda of action, or define what are reasonable, and unreasonable, courses of action in a particular

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<sup>9</sup> Chapter three explores overlaps and distinctions between discourse analysis and narrative.

situation. Central to this thesis is the insight that the way narratives are constructed can serve to produce, or undermine, the discursive power of political actors. Political actors not only attempt to push forward their own version of the 'plot' but also position themselves and other actors in certain ways (Hajer 1995, 54).

Narrative analysis is valuable in being attentive to how stories are used to outflank political rivals. Or as Hajer (1995, 54) suggests, story-lines are embedded in an 'argumentative struggle'. Narratives are a means through which power, in a *discursive* form, can be exercised. 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.

### *Narratives and the obscuring of contest*

Narrative is a means through which power is exercised in a discursive form. Yet beyond this, narrative theory offers another important insight; that story-lines can also obscure conceptual contest. Embedded within narratives are subtle mechanisms for masking their political role (Boswell 2013b) and obscuring debate. For example, narratives can be characterised by 'boundary words' such as cooperation or integration which establish points of shallow agreement (Boswell 2013b) while at the same time masking underlying disagreements. Narratives may not be perceived as political, either by the audience, or narrators themselves, but simply 'the way one talks' in particular situations (Hajer 1995, 57).

Further, discursive power is not only exercised through language but also through associated social practices. Analysis of narratives, and how they are constructed through conceptual contest, cannot be uncoupled from the social context in which narratives are used. Hajer (1995) argues that the dominance of particular 'story-lines' – and masking of difference - is often due to the way they are reinforced by everyday policies and practices. Narratives contain implicit or

explicit strategies, or ‘calls to action’, which make particular social practices inseparable from the narratives themselves – a point I explore in more detail in chapter three.

In sum, a narrative approach highlights the way that meanings of democracy are constructed, not just as reflections of particular cultural contexts, but through conceptual contests. Narratives are a means through which power can be exercised in the discursive form. I argue in the coming chapters that an interpretive approach, and narrative analysis in particular, is crucial in understanding how meanings of democracy are formed and contested.

## **Thesis chapter structure**

This thesis is divided into two parts; part one (chapters two, three and four) lays out the theoretical, methodological and contextual foundations of the study, the part two (chapters five to nine) then turns to my own analysis of the Burmese democracy movement and the nature and implications of other struggles for democracy.

The next chapter (chapter two) of this thesis situates my study within literature on meanings of democracy. As opposed to the ‘linearity’ (Teti 2012) present in much mainstream democratization scholarship, I establish the foundation of my approach in Gallie’s (1956) idea of ‘essentially contested concepts’.

Acknowledging the open-ended and internally complex nature of the concept of democracy is a crucial first step in considering meanings of democracy *on their own terms*. Yet Gallie’s (1956) work does not give a detailed account of what ‘meaning’ itself consists of, nor how conceptual contests take place. I therefore turn in more detail to the emerging set of *interpretive* studies introduced above, and highlight their value in uncovering what Schaffer (2014, 329) describes as the ‘circumstance-attached’ nature of meanings of democracy. Finally, to further examine the way in which conceptual contests construct different meanings, I turn to broader literature on the ‘conceptual politics’ of democracy promotion, and the ‘vernacularisation’ and ‘framing’ of global norms such as human rights.

In chapter three I argue that a narrative approach provides an analytical framework that can unlock new perspectives on the questions of this study. As I described above, meanings of democracy are embedded in wider narratives containing visions, challenges and strategies. These stories serve to promote, or undermine, the influence of actors and yet this political role of narrative is also often obscured. Chapter three also describes the methods - of extended interview, observation and participation and document review - that were employed in the study.

The narratives analysed in this thesis were formed within the particular circumstances of the Burmese democracy movement and the experience of enduring and opposing repressive authoritarian rule by the *tatmadaw*. To understand these narratives they need to be situated within the context of Myanmar's modern history. Chapter four traces Myanmar's history through periods of colonial, parliamentary and military rule in the twentieth century and highlights the way that conceptual contests, between, for example, the British colonial administration and the independence movement, were crucial in informing the contrasting ways democracy has been understood and communicated.

In chapters five, six and seven I outline my study's findings, describing three different narratives of democracy from within the democracy movement, and amongst its Western donor supporters. An *institutional* narrative (Chapter five), was prominent amongst Western aid workers, and emphasised the problem of personalised politics and the need for capacity building to develop formal democratic institutions and liberal values. A *benevolence* narrative (Chapter six), was common amongst activist leaders, and highlighted the problem of dictatorial leadership and the need for unity, discipline and selfless leadership in the country's democratization. Finally, I identify an *equality* narrative (Chapter seven), used within some other activist networks - a narrative that stressed the problem of hierarchy in Burmese culture and a vision of democracy as relational equality.

Chapter eight examines these three storylines through the narrative analysis lens (described in chapter three). The first section of chapter eight explores the contrasts between the narratives and how *other* struggles for democracy were illuminated through divided responses to issues of communal violence, capacity building and the leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The second section unpacks the construction of plots and characters through these three narratives and how they were used, in different ways, to forward the influence of activists, aid workers or opposition leaders and outmanoeuvre political rivals. The third section then highlights the ways in which the political role of these narratives was often masked, or disguised, through use of vague 'boundary words' (Boswell 2013b) and routinized practices in aid agencies or political parties.

What then does this analysis of other struggles for democracy mean for democracy promotion? In the concluding chapter of this thesis I reinforce the central contentions of my study and also argue that a narrative approach challenges prevailing scholarly assumptions about the promotion of democracy. My findings reveal limits to both mainstream and critical perspectives on democracy promotion. On one hand, by largely focussing on issues of how to promote democracy, rather what kind of democracy is being promoted, mainstream approaches to democracy promotion often fail to recognise activists or opposition leaders as 'able players' (Schaffer 1997) in their own context. Yet on the other hand, my findings also challenge critical democracy promotion scholarship by highlighting that there are limits to the agenda of making democracy promotion a more inclusive and participatory endeavour.

Uncovering other struggles for democracy is crucial if aid agencies and scholars are to make sense of the actions and beliefs of democracy activists around the world. I argue that greater understanding of these struggles, and their circumstance-attached nature, must be at the heart of future efforts to foster democracy.

## **Part 1 FOUNDATIONS**

## Chapter 2 Meanings of democracy and their contests

What meanings are given to the word ‘democracy’ around the world? How is democracy understood in Senegal or Cambodia, or amongst Tibetan exiles in India, or activists in the Middle East? Furthermore, what role do conceptual contests play in constructing these meanings of democracy? This thesis explores such questions by drawing on the context of the Burmese democracy movement in the years leading up to the 2015 election.

In this chapter I describe how these questions have been addressed within different bodies of literature. To begin, in considering a topic related to meanings of democracy around the world it is necessary to address the influential works of mainstream democratization scholars. I argue that the common emphasis on an ‘ideal type’ of democracy means that democratization scholars often overlook the actually existing plurality of beliefs and meanings surrounding the ‘D-word’. To distinguish my study from the approach taken in these works I outline an alternative foundation based on Gallie’s idea of ‘essential contestability’. I stress that meanings of democracy in different contexts can only be explored *on their own terms* if there is recognition that the word has no single intrinsic, or taken-for-granted, meaning.

This is not to slip into an extreme relativism where, as Whitehead (2002, 14) cautions, ‘anything goes’. Rather I seek to highlight that ‘essential contestability’ is a necessary platform from which to examine the plurality of meanings of democracy. The idea of ‘essential contestability’ contains the important insight that contest can take different forms. At one level there may be contest over normative commitments associated with democracy. Yet at a more fundamental level, there may also be contests over the components that make up the concept of democracy itself, and it is this second level of contest that makes a concept *essentially* contestable.

I then step from these conceptual foundations to describe several interpretive studies of meanings of democracy around the world, and especially in Asia. In the

next chapter I describe my own interpretive, and more specifically narrative, approach. But here I outline several studies that reveal connections between meanings of democracy and linguistic, religious and cultural context. At a fundamental level, interpretive studies such as these help us to consider what we mean by 'meaning'. In this study I recognise that meanings are not the same as *beliefs*. In contrast to more readily accessed beliefs, meanings are held by people, 'even if they are not always aware of the full import of those meanings' (Wagenaar 2014, 25). Meanings and beliefs are also, as Schaffer (2014, 329) describes, 'circumstance attached'. Political actors give meaning to the word democracy in different ways depending on the context in which it is used.

Focussing on Asia, I describe several interpretive studies from the region that reveal alternative ways of considering democratic leadership. 'Genuine' democratic leadership can be based in moral conduct and motivations rather than simply in formal institutions such as elections – themes which feature strongly in my own findings. Yet while these interpretive studies are valuable in revealing alternative inflections of the word democracy within different cultural contexts, they give relatively less attention to the place of conceptual contests in constructing meaning.

I then turn to the question of how conceptual contests serve to create meanings of democracy - exploring *who* these contests are between, *what* they are over, and *how* they take place. Within critical democracy promotion literature, there is growing attention given to what Hobson and Kurki (2012) describe as the 'conceptual politics' behind meanings of democracy. Politics is not only played out through the control of resources. There can also be everyday political struggles over ideas and meaning, and democracy promotion programs are an important site for these struggles.

Democracy is of course not the only concept to be contested in this way. In order to further explore the nature of conceptual contests I draw, in the final section of this chapter, on literature on the transmission of global norms, such as human rights. The work of Sally Engle Merry (2009) in particular provides insights into

the ways that organisations or individuals can influence how norms are understood and communicated in local contexts – insights that go beyond the democracy specific literature. Levitt and Merry (2009) highlight the crucial role of intermediaries, such as activists and aid workers, who translate between global and local discourses about human rights. They play a role as ‘knowledge brokers’, promoting particular ideas and meanings. Authors who analyse the role of social movements in these processes (Benford and Snow 2000, Merry 2006) also highlight how political actors engage in ‘framing’ or packaging of norms, in order to influence the way they are understood by their constituencies. Meanings of democracy, whether articulated by aid workers or activists, are more than simply neutral reflections of cultural context, they are closely tied to conceptual contests. In chapter three I move from this literature on meanings and contests of democracy to argue that narrative, as a *concept*, and narrative analysis, as a *methodology*, provide a sharper tool through which to address the central questions of this study.

## **Democratization literature**

Since emerging in the twentieth century, democratization scholarship has proliferated and tackled an impressive array of questions aimed primarily at understanding how and why countries democratize. The last century saw profound political changes across the world - as the numbers of ‘democratic’ countries contracted and expanded significantly at different times. Over the decades, democratization studies has built up a set of models and categories for conceptualizing these transitions - from Moore’s structural preconditions (1966) to Schmitter and O’Donnell’s (1986) ‘elite pacts’. Within this diverse body of literature there have also been considerable efforts to explore the meaning given to the word ‘democracy’ around the world (Jamal and Tessler 2008, Bratton 2010, Dalton, Shin and Jou 2007).

Yet in this section I argue that the core ontological assumptions within this literature – about the existence of a universal ‘ideal type’ of democracy – mean that alternative meanings are rarely engaged with on their own terms. I

described in the introductory chapter how there is commonly a 'linearity' (Teti 2012) in democratization scholarship. There is a tendency for democratization scholars authors (Doorenspleet 2005, Diamond 2008, Gat 2010) to portray struggles for democracy around the world as primarily ones between liberal democrats and authoritarians, rather than along other lines of contest. Here I argue that this linearity stems, in part, from deeper ontological assumptions. These assumptions are ontological in the sense that they deal with the *existence* of a universal 'ideal type' of democratic institutions and values. While there is acknowledgement of remaining gaps in knowledge or information, within democratization studies the common ontological starting point is that there is an 'ideal type' of democracy that exists in a way that is broadly independent of cultural, or historical, context.

Rather than being analysed according to their own context specific logic, meanings given to the word democracy - whether by citizens in the Arab Middle East (Jamal and Tessler 2008), in China (Shi and Lu 2010) or in Africa (Bratton 2010) - are commonly considered in comparison to the 'ideal type'. This 'ideal type' is sometimes implicit, for example in Croissant's (2004) sweeping analysis of countries in Asia against liberal democratic ideals. Yet it is also often made explicit. In his introduction to the volume *The Global Resurgence of Democracy*, Diamond (1996) outlines his own liberal definition of democracy in detail and this definition then plays a central role in his analysis of democracy's 'global resurgence'. Meanwhile, in his examination of democracy in South East Asia, Case (2013, 5) spells out a similar 'ideal type' of democracy based around civil liberties and competitive elections. How then is this universal 'ideal type' justified within democratization studies? I now briefly outline three distinct arguments drawn on by democratization scholars, and the limitations of these arguments.

The first prominent justification<sup>10</sup> for the 'ideal type' is that history has yielded a single shared understanding – that since the end of the Cold War world opinion

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<sup>10</sup> The structure of these three justifications is based in Dryzek's (2016) critique 'Can there be a human right to an essentially contested concept? The case of democracy'.

has coalesced around a liberal meaning of democracy. Schmitter and Karl (1991, 75) suggest that a 'remarkable consensus' has emerged about what is required to 'merit the prestigious appellation of "democratic"'. Yet I agree with Dryzek (2016, 359) that to argue that 'history has decided' on a universal liberal meaning of democracy is to ignore the fickle nature of democracy's own conceptual history over the last few centuries. Further, the empirical justification for this 'remarkable consensus' (Schmitter and Karl 1991, 75) rests on public opinion survey results that give only 'thin descriptions' (Schaffer 2014) of meanings that citizens give to democracy. For example, drawing on public opinion surveys, Dalton, Shin and Jou (2007, 146) argue that a common understanding of democracy as 'freedom' has 'diffused widely around the globe'. Schaffer (2014) however, is right to point out that identifying democracy with 'freedom' merely raises further questions about the meaning of 'freedom'.

The second justification then is that the concept of democracy can be logically reduced to a minimum definition. For scholars of democratization this minimum definition is most commonly drawn from the work of Joseph Schumpeter (1947), and Robert Dahl (1971). Schumpeter (1947) confined democracy's meaning to what he saw as its most basic procedural core (Kurki 2010) - as 'institutional arrangements for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote' (Schumpeter 1947, 269). Two decades later, Robert Dahl (1971) sought to round out this procedural definition from Schumpeter (1947) by outlining a wider set of criteria including both institutions and basic civil and political rights.<sup>11</sup> Yet the design of such 'minimal definitions' is based on an assumption that there is an objective and neutral way of 'boiling down' democracy to a logical core. In the next section I argue that democracy is in fact 'essentially contested' (Gallie 1956). There is no universal logic that can be employed to reach a 'minimum definition'. Further, any articulation of a 'minimum definition' of democracy is

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<sup>11</sup> Dahl's (1971, 2) logic was that if democracy is the 'responsiveness of government to the preferences of its citizens' then citizens would have to be able to 'formulate their preferences', 'signify' those preferences and have them 'weighed equally' by government (Dahl 1971, 2). And further, for these opportunities to exist there needs to be a certain set of institutional 'guarantees' - including rights to vote and stand for election and broader civil and political rights including 'alternative sources of information' (Dahl 1971, 3).

necessarily entwined in certain normative commitments and context specific logic.

Finally, within democratization studies, the third justification for an 'ideal type' of democracy is an empirical analysis that liberal democracy has certain valued consequences. Through 'measurement' of democratization in the world it may be possible for scholars to demonstrate its 'positive correlation with particular moral goods' (Dryzek 2016, 362). Toward this end, the Freedom House index (Freedom House 2014), Polity IV (Doorenspleet 2000) and the Democratic-Dictatorship (DD) index (Alvarez et al. 1996) all attempt to rank countries according to core liberal democratic criteria. Yet as Dryzek (2016) suggests linking a summary index such as Freedom House with certain outcomes is inherently problematic. Such indexes cannot escape 'arbitrariness in the aggregation of components' (Dryzek 2016, 361) and the components themselves are almost always based in the previous justification of a minimal definition.<sup>12</sup>

My point here is that these justifications play a central analytical role in democratization studies, and support the use of a 'precise definition' (Tilly 2007, 7) or 'ideal type' from which empirical cases are measured.<sup>13</sup> Describing and explaining democracy around the world is seen by many scholars to require an established yardstick. 'To take democracy seriously', Tilly (2007, 7) argues, 'we must know what we are talking about'. Huntington (1990, 9) even suggests that the serious empirical study of democracy and democratization requires *less* debate about meanings. 'Fuzzy norms do not yield useful analysis', he concludes (Huntington 1990, 9).

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<sup>12</sup> Davis, Kingsbury and Merry (2012) also describe indexes such as Freedom House as inherently political, as a 'technology of global governance'.

<sup>13</sup> This is not to suggest that these authors always apply the liberal model of democracy simplistically. Diamond warns that 'Americans should be careful not to identify the concept of democracy too closely with their own institutions' (Diamond and Plattner 1996, xi) and Schmitter and Karl (1991, 39) highlight that the 'specific form democracy takes is contingent upon the country's socioeconomic conditions as well as its entrenched state structures and policy practices'. Yet while recognising that there may be subtle variations in forms of democracy according to different contexts, many scholars of democratization explicitly or implicitly take the position that democracy does have an intrinsic or taken-for-granted meaning.

What is at stake here is the question of what entails ‘useful’ analysis, and this is where my own study diverges from the mainstream democratization literature. Where Huntington (1990), Tilly (2007) or Freedom House (2014) may be concerned with drawing country level comparisons about democratization, I take a different view of what may be ‘useful’ analysis. I seek to emphasise that a ‘precise definition’ of democracy inevitably involves certain normative commitments and context specific assumptions, and therefore any attempt to define democracy is in itself a political act, an engagement in conceptual contest.

Where Tilly (2007) argues that taking democracy ‘seriously’ means ‘knowing what *we* are talking about’, I suggest that taking the study of democracy seriously means knowing what political actors themselves are talking about. What I mean by this is that the way we understand democratic actions and institutions in a country like Myanmar cannot be uncoupled from the beliefs and meanings of the political actors involved. Rather than assuming that movements around the world are reaching toward the same ‘ideal type’ of democracy, I argue that the various meanings that political actors attach to democracy are constitutive of democratic actions and institutions. Rather than beginning with a precise definition of democracy and analysing different contexts, in this study I begin with interpretations drawn on by actors in the Burmese opposition movement, and then unpack various meanings of democracy and contests between them. In attempting to understand processes of democratization in Myanmar I suggest that this approach brings richer, and more ‘useful’ insights than comparing and rating Myanmar against an ‘ideal type’.

My core concern is that a liberal-centric starting point can lead to an underestimation of the value and context specific logic of local meanings, and thus obscure important *other* struggles for democracy. This concern also extends to scholarship on democracy promotion, which I return to in more detail later in this thesis when I explore the implications of my research findings. There is a tendency in the democracy promotion literature to debate program success through the implicit framework of progress toward the ‘ideal type’ of liberal democracy (Ethier 2003, Burnell 2008). To be sure, Carothers (2004, 2006,

2012) presents many nuanced critiques of the practice of democracy promotion around the world. Yet his emphasis is primarily on issues of implementation or strategy - the question of how democracy promotion programs can more effectively foster liberal democracy. This means that questions about meanings of democracy, and how they may vary in different contexts, receive relatively less attention. In short, the focus in democracy promotion literature is largely on questions of *promotion*, rather than those of *democracy*.

In exploring meanings of democracy in Myanmar, and their construction through contests, the foundations of democratization studies are inherently limiting. Evaluating or measuring meanings of democracy from Burmese activists against the 'correct' yardstick of liberal democracy necessarily limits their consideration *on their own terms*. The 'ideal type' of liberal democracy can play, as Koeble and Lipuma (2008, 1) argue, a problematic 'a-historical and a-cultural' role in understanding democratic progress around the world. The various ways that activists understand and communicate about democracy need to be considered as more than simply deviations from a liberal democratic core.<sup>14</sup> Yet if democratization scholarship is limited by its core assumptions, what alternative framework can be used to consider meanings of democracy and their construction through contest?

## **The essential contestability of democracy**

To pursue this investigation of meanings of democracy on their own terms, I draw on W.B. Gallie's (1956) seminal idea of 'essential contestability'. The first relevant insight from Gallie is that certain words - such as 'democracy' or 'justice' - do not have an intrinsic meaning. Essentially contested concepts are ones that

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<sup>14</sup> In the last two decades there has been a proliferation of clarifying labels for countries that are perceived to have entered a 'gray zone' (Carothers 2002, 8) - moving away from authoritarianism but not yet qualifying as liberal democracies. Categories of 'competitive authoritarianism' (Levitsky and Way 1997), 'hybrid regimes' (Diamond 2002), or 'feckless pluralism' (Carothers 2002) have emerged to identify particular variations against liberal expectations - what Collier and Levitsky (1997) describe as 'democracy with adjectives'. My concern with this approach is that diverse meanings of democracy - for example within the Burmese opposition movement - are not considered as potential alternate forms of common sense, but are described by as 'deviant' (Seeberg 2014) from the liberal model.

‘inevitably involve endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users’ (Gallie 1956, 169). Or as Patent (2010, 205) suggests, they are ‘concepts which by nature invite disagreement over their meaning’. It is possible, when disagreeing over these concepts, for the dispute to be unresolvable and yet ‘sustained by perfectly respectable arguments and evidence’ (Gallie 1956, 169). In other words, for Gallie, democracy has no taken-for-granted meaning. The liberal theoretical lineage of Schumpeter, Dahl and Diamond is not the only logical possibility for what meanings might be attached to the word ‘democracy’.

For Gallie (1956), meaning relates to both normative commitments, but also to the components deemed to be part of the concept itself. In this way, contestation over a word such as ‘democracy’ can involve more than a simple normative contest. For example, there may be disagreement over the best way for elections to be conducted, and the question of whether voting should be voluntary or compulsory. To this point, democratization scholars would agree with Gallie about the contestability of democracy. Yet Gallie goes further to suggest that concepts like justice or democracy can be both normatively contested in their application, but also contested in the very components that make up the concept.

This means that contestability of concepts is on two levels. Freedman (1996, 59) makes the distinction that ‘the obvious contestability of value-judgments will coexist with the equally important contestability of the range of components deemed to contain the empirically ascertainable units of the concept’. It is this dimension that distinguishes contestability from *essential* contestability. In the kinds of everyday conceptual contests that are described in the coming chapters these two dimensions of contest – over normative commitments and over the components of concepts themselves – often intersect. Yet my point here is that the idea of *essentially* contestable concepts, and the challenging of the ‘ideal type’ of democracy, is a crucial contribution of Gallie and underpins my own investigation.

Gallie is, of course, not the only author to have concerns about the way meanings are attached to words.<sup>15</sup> However, I am drawn to Gallie's work in this study for his central concern that if concepts, such as democracy, are *not* recognized as being essentially contested in this way, it will lead to the 'chronic human peril' (Gallie 1956, 193) of underestimating the arguments of others. Rather than acknowledging that rival uses are 'logically possible' and 'humanly "likely"' they can be portrayed as 'anathema, perverse, bestial or lunatic' (Gallie 1956, 193). As described earlier, my concern with the core assumption of an 'ideal type' of democracy is that meanings of democracy – especially ones that do not easily align with the 'correct' liberal components - can be dismissed as deviant. Gallie's plea is for recognition that rival meanings can also be forms of common sense. Further, Gallie argues that rival uses can be of 'permanent potential critical value to one's own use or interpretation of the concept in question' (Gallie 1956, 193). When considered on their own terms, rival meanings can help to sharpen one's own interpretations. Thus the 'peril' of not recognising the essential contestability of concepts is not only in failing to understand the logics of others, but also in losing the opportunity to critically develop one's own interpretations.

In order to make the important distinction between 'essentially contested concepts' – such as justice or democracy – and other concepts, Gallie outlines several criteria. Of most relevance to this thesis are Gallie's first four criteria – 'appraisive' character, 'internal complexity', 'diverse describability', and 'openness'.<sup>16</sup> In this section I briefly describe each of these criteria before

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<sup>15</sup> For example, in the next section I outline Schaffer's (1997) work which draws on the work of Austin and Wittgenstein to develop an 'ordinary language' approach to examining meanings of democracy.

<sup>16</sup> Gallie's second group of attributes deal with the nature of contest – 'reciprocal recognition', 'exemplars' and 'progressive competition'. Having established the basic foundations of essential contestability Gallie outlines another three criteria yet each of these have faced considerable criticism. Gallie's fifth criterion, 'reciprocal recognition', refers to different parties actively acknowledging the contestability of a concept. Gallie (1956, 172) suggests that actors 'recognize that one's own use of [a term] has to be maintained against...other uses'. While in many cases of essential contestation there may be such mutual recognition of the contest, this is not necessarily always the case. Freedman (1997, 60) argues that 'it is quite possible for a concept to be contested with no awareness, or limited awareness, on the part of the contesters'. Gallie (1956, 180) then turns to the place of 'exemplars' (Criteria VI) in essential contestation- where the 'authority' of a particular example 'is acknowledged by all the contestant users'. However, following on from the previous point about 'mutual recognition' both Freedman (1997) and Collier et al. (2006) argue that the presence of a mutually recognised 'exemplar' is not a necessary criterion for a concept

addressing the charge – from Sartori (1987), Gray (1977) and others - that acknowledgement of essential contestability of democracy necessarily leads to an extreme relativism.

The first criterion is the ‘appraisiveness’ or ‘normative valency’ of concepts (Gallie’s criterion I) – whether it ‘signifies or accredits some kind of valued achievement’ (Gallie 1956, 171). In the case of democracy, it is clearly not just employed as an analytical term but is also normatively potent – evoking positive responses even across a range of different contexts. For Gallie (1956, 184) ‘democracy’ is the ‘appraisive political concept *par excellence*’. In this way, there is a paradox where democracy is highly valued and yet at the same time the very components of the concept itself are disputed. For Hidalgo (2008, 196) these two dimensions are connected – democracy remains so highly valued in part *because* of its ‘underdetermination’. Democracy is a banner under which different activist groups, political parties and citizens can articulate their diverse visions.

While democracy has a strong ‘appraisiveness’, not everyone attaches the same meaning to the word. For a concept to be ‘essentially contested’ it not only has to have ‘normative valency’ but also be ‘internally complex’ and have ‘diverse describability’ (Gallie’s criteria II and III). Democracy is a concept that is inherently multi-faceted. Gray (1977, 338) summarizes that an essentially contested concept is one where ‘in principle it is impossible to conclusively decide on the correct application of the concept’ - as any definition must appeal to a range of other concepts which may be equally disputed. While words such as ‘freedom’, or ‘equality’ may be used to define democracy, these words themselves are also contested in their meaning both across different languages,

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to be essentially contested. Finally, Gallie (1956) highlights that ‘progressive competition’ (criteria VII) is another criterion for essential contestability – where conceptual disputes will gradually refine the quality of arguments. While it may be impossible for contesting parties to come to some general principle upon which they all agree, it may be possible ‘to explain or show the rationality of a given individual’s continued use...’ (Gallie 1956, 189). Thus Gallie shows some optimism that the contest between parties is productive in clarifying and acknowledging different arguments. This dimension of Gallie’s idea is widely disputed. In particular, Freedon (1996) suggests that conceptual contest is not necessarily always progressive and could feasibly also be regressive. He stresses that ‘it is quite conceivable that such a concept may be impoverished during competition over its interpretation, that some aspects of its meaning may be lost or abandoned, or that the level of debate may be of low quality’ (Freedon 1996, 60).

and also in English (Whitehead 2002). In other words, there is no way to reduce democracy to its 'primitives' (Robinson 1996, 62) - there will always be diverse ways in which it can be given meaning.

This insight is crucial in distinguishing between *confusion* and *contestation* between meanings. At one level there may be confusion when there is no clear relationship between a word and its meaning (Collier et al 2006). Due to difficulties of interpretation or insufficient clarification there may be discrepancy in the ways in which a word is understood – a problem that it may be possible to resolve through more accurate communication. Yet if concepts are 'internally complex' and have 'diverse describability' then it is more than simply a lack of clearly specified relationship between a term and its meaning. It is a clash of concepts themselves (Collier et al 2006). 'Essential contestability' thus portrays 'democracy' as a word that actors can fill in a range of contrasting ways.

Gallie's fourth criterion is of 'openness' (criterion IV) - where the components contained within a concept may vary, not only due to different forms of logic, but also different cultural or historical contexts. As Gallie (1956, 186) suggests 'democratic targets will be raised or lowered as circumstances alter, and democratic achievements are always judged in the light of such alterations'. All concepts or political issues are of course evaluated by political actors from within particular circumstances. Yet due to the internal complexity and normative valency of the concept of democracy, meanings vary between temporal or cultural contexts in a different way to meanings given to a word such as 'obesity' (Boswell 2013a). As activists or aid workers give meaning to the word democracy, the components included in the concept will be determined not only through the use of logic, but also through political actors' specific circumstances.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Freedden (1996) also highlights the history of political thought. As Freedden explains, 'historical continuity plays an important role in organising the political thinking of the members of a society, as well as in selecting the political words they employ' (Freedden 1996, 52). Political thought, and the meaning given to words like 'democracy', is organised, in part, through the history of the way in which the word and concepts have been used in that context over time – a point that will be taken up in detail in chapter four of this thesis.

Gallie (1956) idea of essential contestability has not been without criticism. Most prominently, the criteria of internal complexity, diverse describability and openness have attracted explicit critique from scholars concerned about their application in relation to democracy (Sartori 1987, Gray 1977, Clark 1979, Lawson 1995). The key concern for these authors is that the idea of essential contestability leaves us with an extreme relativism where democracy has no defensible core. As Sartori (1987, 3) pointedly asks, 'can democracy be just anything?' In this view, acknowledgement of essential contestability allows unchecked misuse of the word 'democracy' by authoritarian leaders – the word democracy can become simply a 'cloak for authoritarianism' (Lawson 1995, 3).<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Gray (1977, 343) concludes that 'any strong variant of an essential contestability thesis must precipitate its proponents into a radical (and probably self-defeating) skeptical nihilism'.

Such a concern is valid. From Putin's Russia (Okara 2007) to Pol Pot's Cambodia it is an 'historically undeniable fact', as Whitehead (2002, 21) suggests, that political leaders have used the 'garb of democratic respectability' while pursuing other objectives. In Cambodia's case, the period of 'Democratic Kampuchea' resulted in the deaths of millions of citizens. The word democracy can indeed be debased or abused. However, critics of Gallie set up an unnecessary dichotomy where one must either accept a universal meaning of democracy or descend to a view of democracy where *any* meaning is acceptable.

Valuable insights from Whitehead (2002) suggest that such a dichotomy is unnecessary. He employs the metaphor of meanings of democracy being 'floating but anchored'. They are 'floating' in the sense that, as Whitehead (2002, 14) explicitly notes, democracy is an essentially contested concept. Democracy 'is not a concept with a timeless single meaning that is intrinsically derivable either from logical analysis or from empirical reference' (Whitehead 2002, 14). Yet while there is no taken-for-granted meaning of democracy this does not mean that 'anything goes' (Whitehead 2002, 14). There is a stream of discourse about

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<sup>18</sup> Okara (2007) critiques the use of 'sovereign democracy' by Russian elites concluding that this meaning of democracy itself is simply a 'utilitarian political technology' (Okara 2007, 20).

democracy which is mutually intelligible across languages and places, though there is no clear way that this 'anchor' can be defined.<sup>19</sup> The anchor has 'neither an indispensable stand-alone core element (the 'minimum' definition) nor an immutable outer boundary of meaning' (Whitehead 2002, 14). In this sense, one can hold to the essential contestability of the concept of democracy, and yet still argue that Pol Pot's brutal 'Democratic Kampuchea' was not a democracy. Democracy is not a scientific term with a logically precise meaning yet neither is it a vessel into which anything can be poured. This idea of course raises further questions about what this mutually intelligible 'stream of discourse', that Whitehead (2002, 14) refers to, might include, and not include. Yet for the purposes of addressing the questions of this study I agree with Freedman (1996, 92) that 'the absence of a view from nowhere does not endorse the view from anywhere'.

Gallie's criteria of essential contestability provide a central orientation to this exploration of meanings of democracy, and their construction through contests. In contrast to the ontological assumptions of democratization studies, the idea of essential contestability creates a foundation for recognizing the varied uses of the word 'democracy', raising concerns about 'the chronic human peril' of underestimating the value of rival positions (Gallie 1956). Yet while the idea of essential contestability forms an important starting point, it does not provide specific tools to address the questions of this thesis about meanings of democracy. In particular, Gallie's work is limited in its portrayal of what 'meaning' itself might entail – a point which is addressed in the next section on interpretivist studies. Further, Gallie does not give an account of the nature of conceptual contests, and how they take place, a point that I return to later in this chapter. The next section describes a number of interpretive studies that extend these foundational insights from Gallie (1956) and especially highlight the role of

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<sup>19</sup> Frechette (2007) and Schaffer (1997), in their respective work on meanings of democracy in India and Senegal, usefully draw on Wittgenstein's metaphor of 'family resemblances'. Family resemblances - for example in build, facial features or eye colour - are a 'complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing' (Wittgenstein 1953, 67). In relation to democracy, while there may be no essence which is common to all meanings, there is the same pattern of overlapping and criss-crossing similarities (Schaffer 1997). There are recognisable resemblances between meanings of democracy, for example between Burmese activists and international aid workers, even though it may be impossible to identify a single common essence.

cultural, religious and linguistic context in constructing meaning. These insights inform my own approach to examining meanings of democracy in the context of the Burmese democracy movement.

## Meanings of democracy

Despite the voluminous literature exploring the concept of democracy, there has been a relatively little attention on meanings given to the word by citizens in non-Western contexts. As I have described in this chapter, where this question has been addressed within democratization studies, it is most commonly through the lens of public opinion surveys and examining deviations from a liberal democratic ‘ideal type’ (Dalton, Shi and Jou 2007, Welsh 2016).<sup>20</sup>

In contrast, there is also an emerging set of studies using interpretive approaches to examine meanings of democracy. In the last two decades, a number of authors (Schaffer 1997, Frechette 2007, Michelutti 2008, Walton 2012, Browers 2006, Bell 2009, Baaz and Lilja 2014, Sadiki 2009, Paley 2001) have developed country, or region, specific studies of meanings of democracy. Though not making explicit links to Gallie’s idea of essential contestability, these studies are all grounded in an assumption of the diverse describability, internal complexity, and openness of the concept of democracy.<sup>21</sup> These studies are *interpretive* in that they are based in the insight that understanding political practices and institutions requires researchers to examine meanings drawn on by relevant political actors (Bevir and Rhodes 2003).

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<sup>20</sup> For example, in relation to Myanmar, Welsh et al. (2016) draw on the Asian Barometer Survey data to highlight that, despite widespread support for democracy, Myanmar citizens hold to many ‘traditional’ and ‘illiberal’ values. They conclude that Myanmar citizens have a ‘lack of understanding’ of what democracy means, and only a ‘shallow’ commitment to it (Welsh et al. 2016, 135).

<sup>21</sup> Frechette (2007) does not completely accept the foundation of Gallie’s (1956) essential contestability and seeks to develop a ‘middle ground’ path - between interpretive approaches, like that of Schaffer (1997), and mainstream approaches. Her study brings valuable insights on meanings of democracy in India. Yet she creates an unnecessary dichotomy, one that I described above, where she assumes that any rejection of a universal ‘ideal type’ of democracy necessarily descends to a view of democracy where any meaning is acceptable.

The interpretive approach will be described further in the next chapter, but at this stage it is important to point out that rather than assuming the existence of a universal 'ideal type' of democracy, these studies seek to describe 'circumstance attached' (Schaffer 2014, 329) meaning. Therefore an interpretive approach is also methodologically different from most mainstream democratization scholarship in seeking to develop rich accounts of meaning - through ethnographic approaches of extended interviews and observation and participation, as opposed to the use of public opinion surveys.

In this section I explore the way that interpretive studies emphasise the role of linguistic, religious and cultural contexts in constructing meanings of democracy. A seminal example of these studies is Frederic Schaffer's 'Democracy in Translation' based on his field research in Senegal. Schaffer (1997, 2014) draws on the works of J.L. Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein to develop an 'ordinary language' approach to understanding the word 'democracy'. He emphasises that the meaning of democracy shifts as it moves across different languages, in ways that public opinion surveys may not detect.<sup>22</sup> In this sense, he suggests that 'speaking of *the* concept of democracy may be misleading' (Schaffer 1997, 10).

Schaffer stresses that though people may participate in the formal liberal institutions of democracy, there may be different 'purposes or meanings'. In this sense, Schaffer builds on the interpretivist assumption that understanding political actions requires researchers to uncover the intentions, beliefs and motivations of the actors involved in those actions. For example, he argues that in Senegal the Wolof word *demokaraasi* sometimes refers to the institutions of government, yet also includes other meanings such as collective security. This is

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<sup>22</sup> In Schaffer's (1997) work he strongly emphasises the differences between meanings of the English word 'democracy' and the Wolof word '*demokaarasi*'. I agree with Schaffer at one level that languages are important dimension of context, and serve to convey concepts in different ways – and in the coming chapters I make some similar observations to Schaffer. However, in this thesis I do not make as sharp a point as Schaffer that concepts are bound in language. I do not consistently refer to an English 'democracy' and a Burmese '*demokarazi*'. For many Burmese participants in this study, I found language to be more interchangeable than Schaffer (1997) notes in his work. In several interviews in this study participants would move between English and Burmese languages. Language was certainly important for the ways concepts were communicated but at the same time language was not rigidly linked with the way words were given meaning.

important in highlighting that false assumptions can easily be made about democratic practice if the context in which democratic concepts are formed is not taken into consideration. Schaffer argues (1997, 44) that:

While the ideals embedded in the two concepts [English 'democracy' and Wolof 'demokaraasi'] overlap at points, they diverge insofar as *demokaraasi* refers to collective security in ways that democracy does not. To ignore this divergence blinds us to the fact that many illiterate Senegalese voters are playing a different game, with different aims and rules. Where an institutionalist is likely to see incompetent democrats, we discover able players of *demokaraasi*, a discovery that changes our understanding of the nature and purpose of Senegalese electoral institutions.

This perspective is central to the approach of my thesis, and echoes Gallie's central concerns about underestimating the value of rival positions. One endeavour of interpretive studies is to uncover the ways that political actors are 'able players' within their own context. I argue in this thesis that for aid agencies to engage strategically in Myanmar, it is imperative that meanings of democracy are examined on their own terms rather than through an external lens that emphasises 'incompetence'. In this sense, Schaffer's work provides a valuable grounding for the approach of this study. His 'ordinary language' approach overlaps with my own, especially in highlighting the varied meanings of the word democracy. However, the primary focus of my study on the role of conceptual contest in constructing meanings of democracy, has led me to a focus on *narratives* surrounding the word democracy, rather than Schaffer's specific emphasis on the usage of word itself – a topic that will be taken up in more detail in the next chapter.

Having outlined Schaffer's seminal work, we are still left with the question of how an interpretive approach to meanings of democracy might be applied in contexts that are more relevant to my own study of the Burmese democracy movement. To uncover some of the more context specific dimensions of meanings of democracy I now turn to explore several interpretive studies that

have been conducted in Asia (Frechette 2007, Baaz and Lilja 2014, Rodan and Hughes 2014, Walton 2012). These studies apply a broadly similar approach to that of Schaffer and reveal inflections of democracy that are particularly relevant to the findings of my own study. I outline several studies that explore moral, as opposed to procedural, perspectives on meanings of democracy – especially connected to religious teaching. This emphasis on personal morality leads to varied ways of understanding legitimate democratic political leadership - themes that feature strongly in this thesis.

In her 2007 work, Frechette investigates how democracy is understood and operationalized within the Tibetan exile community in India - a community with a Buddhist 'ideological base' (Frechette 2007, 99). She emphasizes the importance of Tibetan Buddhism in framing approaches to democracy and how the resultant emphasis on an 'enlightened mind' does not connect easily to liberal forms of governance. For example, the dominant meaning of democracy in the exile community provides an 'all-powerful' leadership position to the Dalai Lama, where he can act to dissolve the legislative assembly at any time. Popular democratic participation is also limited by political elites through appeals to the Tibetan cause of independence. Frechette (2007, 124) concludes that political elites in the Tibetan exile community make unique justifications for a 'guided' form of democracy by reference to Buddhist principles of an enlightened mind and the limitations of being a community in exile.

Turning to the context of Cambodia, Baaz and Lilja (2014) explore understandings of 'democracy' amongst local political actors in government and in aid organisations. Baaz and Lilja (2014) similarly suggest that liberal notions of democracy do not match well with local assumptions about representation. In particular, within models of liberal democracy there is a priority given to representation of ideas and ideologies – the focus is on *what* is represented. The formal institutions of representation are thus depersonalised. In contrast, they suggest that activists or politicians in Cambodia stress a personalised view of representation that is more concerned with *who* represents than what is

represented (Baaz and Lilja 2014, 7).<sup>23</sup> What matters are the ‘personal qualities’ of the representatives (Baaz and Lilja 2014, 8). An insight that resonates closely with my study of the Burmese democracy movement is that the legitimacy of representatives is established not so much through formal institutions such as elections, but through personal conduct and connections. Baaz and Lilja (2014) conclude that this moral dimension of democracy has greater resonance with Cambodian political actors than notions of liberal democracy (Baaz and Lilja 2014). Yet we are left with the question of how this emphasis on personal qualities of leaders might shift understandings of democratic systems, and failures within them.

Rodan and Hughes (2014) take the insights of Baaz and Lilja (2014) further in their description of a moral ideology of accountability in governance in Southeast Asia.<sup>24</sup> They argue that there is a prominent ideology of government accountability based on ‘received understandings of correct conduct’. These notions of accountability do not assume the same separation of public and private spheres as in, what they describe as, ‘liberal’ ideologies of accountability (Rodan and Hughes 2014, 12-13). Similar to the arguments of Baaz and Lilja (2014), Rodan and Hughes (2014) suggest that in a moral framework of accountability the private or personal sphere remains prominent in assessing the legitimacy of political leaders. They highlight that:

the character of the political system is frequently viewed as a product of the sum of different individual’s morality, taking focus away from political arrangements. Abuses of power are attributed principally to personal wrongdoing, not institutional arrangements. (Rodan and Hughes 2014, 13)

The evaluation of public office occurs through a personalised lens. The legitimacy of leaders is established through perceptions of the moral conduct of the individual. In what is highly relevant to answering the first

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<sup>23</sup> Baaz and Lilja (2004) draw on Anne Phillips (1995) work on a ‘politics of presence’.

<sup>24</sup> Rodan and Hughes (2014) examine meanings and practices of accountability in Southeast Asia, though this has considerable overlap with meanings and practices of democracy.

question of my own study, they suggest that within this moral notion of accountability there is significantly less attention given to 'appropriate political institutions' (Rodan and Hughes 2014, 13). Citizens are able to raise concerns to moral leaders but wider participation is limited by an expectation that leaders will make decisions based on the collective interest of the community or nation. Where this moral notion of accountability is seen to fail, this is attributed to individual moral failings rather than a problem with the framework itself (Rodan and Hughes 2014, 13).

These are crucial insights and ones that I draw on in the coming chapters, yet Rodan and Hughes (2014) in particular are highly critical of the way moral meanings of accountability are used by political leaders in countries such as Cambodia to support their own positions of power. This leads them to give relatively less weight to the underlying circumstance attached logic that may give rise to these moral notions of accountability or democracy.

In contrast, exploring the meaning of 'democracy' in Myanmar, Matthew Walton (2012) gives a detailed account of the historical and contemporary influence of Theravada Buddhism. Walton's argument is that religious beliefs profoundly influence meanings of democracy, but also underlying conceptions of what is *political*. Within Buddhist thought he argues that the *political* is a sphere of moral action based in certain assumptions about human nature, moral cause and effect, and an understanding of human existence as 'fundamentally unsatisfactory' (Walton 2012, 1). Within the moral universe of Theravada Buddhism, the personal moral qualities of leaders are considered to be crucial in avoiding the corrupting influence of political life. Thus between Western aid agencies and local activist movements or political parties, contrasting perspectives on democratic leadership can be grounded in deeper contrasts in assumptions – assumptions about what it means to engage in political life itself.

Walton's work is valuable for its detailed account of historical and religious background of the 'Buddhist moral universe'. In his conclusion, he also traces out some contrasting 'notions of democracy' and their contemporary use, especially amongst religious leaders. Yet overall his work gives relatively less attention to the everyday communication and understanding of democracy by political actors, especially those outside of circles of religious leaders. My study seeks to complement the work of Walton (2012) by emphasising meanings of democracy 'in action' (Wagenaar 2014) in the Burmese democracy movement, exploring how activists and opposition leaders draw on these historical and religious themes in their everyday interactions about democracy.

The works of Frechette (2007), Baaz and Lilja (2014), Rodan and Hughes (2014) and Walton (2012) describe the prominence of moral, as opposed to procedural, understandings of democracy and accountability in Asia. They especially highlight that moral and personal dimensions of democracy can bring alternative perspectives on legitimate democratic leadership. Their insights are valuable in relation to the first question of this thesis about identifying different meanings of democracy in Myanmar. In the coming chapters, as I trace out contrasting narratives from my own study, these personalised and moral understandings of democracy feature prominently.

The interpretive studies highlighted in this section also provide some examples of conceptual contests related to meanings of democracy. Schaffer (1997) describes how ruling political parties in Senegal are more likely to adopt procedural meanings of democracy in order to protect their political position. As described above, Rodan and Hughes (2014) emphasise the ways that leaders in South East Asia use moral ideologies of accountability to position themselves as legitimate leaders. Meanwhile, Walton (2012) outlines competing meanings of democracy between the military, activists and religious leaders. However while these studies serve to illuminate certain conceptual contests, they leave several questions underexplored - about the nature of these contests and their relationship to meanings of democracy. What role do conceptual contests play in

constructing meanings of democracy? In what ways might these moral understandings of democracy be tools for political actors in their struggles against rivals? In what ways might political actors use meanings of democracy to position themselves or others in certain ways?

## **Meanings of democracy and conceptual contest**

Turning to how meanings of democracy are constructed through conceptual contests raises questions about the *nature* of these contests. *Who* are these contests between, *what* are they about, and *how* do they take place? I now outline different approaches to these questions beginning with emerging scholarship on ‘conceptual politics’ (Kurki 2010, Hobson and Kurki 2012, Bridoux and Kurki 2014, Wolff 2012) in democracy promotion. Politics is not only over the control of material resources. It can also be over concepts - involving contests over ideas and values such as democracy. Further, these contests over the concept of democracy are not necessarily overt, but can be embedded in the everyday language and practices of political actors.

In the final part of this section, I then turn to scholarship on the transmission of global norms. Democracy may be the ‘appraisive political concept *par excellence*’ for Gallie (1956, 184) but it is not the only concept that is both highly valued and also contested in its meaning. The ways that other concepts such as ‘rights’ or ‘justice’ are adopted and adapted in different contexts can bring insights about meanings of democracy, and the way they are contested. In particular I highlight observations from Sally Engle Merry (2009) about the ‘vernacularisation’ of rights, and the role of ‘intermediaries’ and processes of ‘framing’. These are valuable insights into the nature of contest - especially *who* contests are between, and *how* they take place.

### *The ‘conceptual politics’ of democracy promotion*

As described earlier, much of the literature related to democracy promotion emphasizes matters of programming or implementation rather than questions

about meanings of democracy itself. In other words, the focus of democracy promotion scholars is commonly on practical issues, concerned with how liberal democracy can more effectively be fostered. In contrast, an emerging stream of scholarship focuses on what Hobson and Kurki (2012) describe as the ‘conceptual politics’ of democracy promotion (Kurki 2010, Hobson and Kurki 2012, Bridoux and Kurki 2014, Wolff 2012).<sup>25</sup>

In her article, ‘Democracy and Conceptual Contestability’, Kurki (2010, 363) explicitly draws on Gallie (1956), and questions why European or American aid agencies most commonly emphasise variations of liberal democracy. ‘It is curious’, Kurki (2010, 374) suggests, ‘that exploration of the deep theoretical and conceptual contestation over this concept [“democracy”] in democratic and political theory is made relatively little of in existing studies on democracy promotion, or in policy practice’. Even within the Euro-American ‘canon’ of political thought, she argues that there is a great deal of variety in ways in which democracy is defined – from deliberative or participatory, to liberal and radical models of democracy. Why then does democracy promotion, both in scholarship and practice, almost exclusively emphasise liberal meanings? Kurki (2010, 374) concludes that taking the essential contestability of democracy seriously requires acknowledgment, within democracy promotion studies, of alternative ways of understanding democracy itself.<sup>26</sup>

This stream of critical democracy promotion literature introduces two important insights that are relevant for this study of meanings of democracy. First, Hobson and Kurki (2012) stress that politics can be conceptual - involving contests over ideas and values, such as democracy. Politics is not simply about the control of material resources. In their edited volume on the *Conceptual Politics of Democracy Promotion*, they highlight that ‘defining and understanding

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<sup>25</sup> Hobson and Kurki (2012) explicitly differentiate their approach from radical critics of democracy promotion such as Robinson (1996) and Smith (2000), suggesting that it presents too binary a picture of Northern and Southern countries and meanings of democracy.

<sup>26</sup> This is supported by the work of Bridoux and Russell (2013) on democracy promotion in the Iraq and the Middle East where they argue that a rigid focus on the model of liberal democracy within U.S. democracy promotion programs in fact hampered the flexibility and effectiveness of the approach. They suggest that Western democracy promotion responses in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya ought to take lessons from policy failures in Iraq (Bridoux and Russell 2013).

democracy is an unavoidably political and normative act' (Hobson and Kurki 2012, 5-6). Importantly, this is in direct contrast to the common assumption within democratization studies of an 'ideal type' of democracy that sits above circumstance-attached conceptual contests.

Second, conceptual contests over meanings of democracy are not necessarily overt, but can be embedded in everyday language and practices of political actors. The most powerful methods of control of meanings of democracy are not through overt or coercive means but rather are achieved through cooptation and consent. Smith (2000, 82) observes that certain features of democracy – such as its separation from the sphere of economics – are often presented by democracy promoters as being 'natural'. This implies a form of contest that is not overt argumentation, but rather a contest over who gets to define the 'correct' way to talk about democracy.

These insights about 'conceptual politics' can be usefully clarified through the lens of Kerkvliet's work on 'everyday politics'. Kerkvliet (2009, 227) defines politics not only as 'the control, allocation, production, and use of resources' but also contests over the 'values and ideas underlying those activities'. He then distinguishes between three different types of politics - as 'official', 'advocacy' and 'everyday'. The *official* form of politics takes place between people who are authorised to 'make decisions or have a substantial hand in an organisation's decision making and implementation processes' (Kerkvliet 2009, 231). In contrast, the *advocacy* form of politics is 'direct and concerted efforts to support, criticise, and oppose authorities, their policies and programs' (Kerkvliet 2009, 231). In other words, these are deliberate efforts by organisations or individuals to influence the decision making of those with authority.

Kerkvliet then distinguishes these forms of politics, which are most often the focus of political studies, from *everyday* politics. Everyday politics involves, 'people embracing, complying with, adjusting, and contesting norms and rules regarding...resources' yet through 'quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions and acts that are rarely organised or direct' (Kerkvliet 2009, 231). The key

distinction is that political actions of this type are not necessarily considered to be 'political', even for those involved. They can be seemingly mundane or non-controversial activities that still seek to support or shift particular 'norms or rules'.<sup>27</sup> These insights about the everyday realm of conceptual politics in democracy promotion programs are crucial in my study of the Burmese democracy movement and I return to these insights in the next chapter as I outline the narrative approach taken in this thesis. However, the emerging 'conceptual politics' literature is still limited in several crucial ways.

First, conceptual contests are primarily constructed by authors such as Hobson and Kurki (2012) as being between Western democracy promoters, and local organisations or governments in the 'South'. More radical critics of democracy promotion such as Robinson (1996) even portray a global contest between 'Northern' democracy promoters (who foster liberal democracy) and poorer countries (where 'participatory' democracy is favoured). Whether from radical critics like Robinson (1996), or more nuanced scholars such as Kurki (2010), there is limited consideration of the dynamics of conceptual politics between local actors who are involved in fostering democracy. In contrast, my study of Myanmar particularly reveals the importance of conceptual politics *within* the democracy movement over the meaning of democracy, not just with international actors.

Second, the emphasis in this stream of literature is primarily on the contest between different forms of democracy as they are categorised within EuroAmerican democracy literature – for example between social and liberal democracy, or between radical and deliberative democracy. There is less emphasis on other potential contests that may be generated with reference to local norms and institutions, for example related to the moral meanings of democracy outlined in the previous section. Finally, while making valuable contributions in highlighting the realm of conceptual politics - as opposed to

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<sup>27</sup> Thawngmung's (2004) work on the paddy farmers in Myanmar and their responses to government agricultural policies gives insights into this kind of 'everyday politics' under the authoritarian military regime.

politics as simply the control and use of resources - this literature provides limited insight into how this conceptual politics takes place.

### *The 'vernacularisation' and 'framing' of global norms*

To extend exploration of how conceptual contests take place it is necessary to move beyond literature explicitly related to democracy or democracy promotion, and turn to wider scholarship on the transmission of global norms. Democracy is not the only concept that is highly valued by citizens and political actors and yet also contested in the very components that make up the concept. Examination of conceptual contests over concepts such as 'rights' can illuminate new dimensions of struggles over democracy.

Over the last two decades there has been increasing attention on how global norms, such as human rights, travel around the world - how are they adopted or adapted as they move through different countries and cultures and languages. There is growing recognition of a process by which international norms are not wholly transplanted but rather, in specific contexts, norms are 'localised and translated to fit the context and need of the norm-takers' (Acharya 2013, 467). The meanings attached to, for example, human rights, are contested between different groups and contexts. A range of words have been used to describe this process - norms are 'vernacularised' (Merry 2006), or 'diffused' (Borzel and Risse 2004), or 'indigenized' (Merry 2006).

Some of this scholarship falls within the field of international relations (Acharya 2013, Cortell and Davis 2000, Borzel and Risse 2004, Prantl and Nakano 2011, Martinsson 2011) and emphasises international or national level processes of 'diffusion'. Other studies focus on the 'diffusion' or 'translation' of law (Foster 2014, Twining 2004, Wan 2007). Of most relevance to my own study are works describing local dimensions of vernacularisation and the conceptual contests involved in the way norms, such as human rights, are given meaning (Merry 2006, Sarfaty 2007, Levitt and Merry 2009, Boesenecker and Vinjamuri 2011). They provide insights into the nature of contest, especially *who* contests are

between, and *how* they take place – insights that extend the democracy specific literature.

First, in her work on ‘vernacularisation’ of rights, Sally Engle Merry (2006, 39) highlights the important role of intermediaries, such as activists or NGO workers, who act as ‘knowledge brokers’. They are ‘people in the middle’ who move between global discourses and particular local contexts (Merry 2006, 39) - they take ideas from one place and then adapt or redefine them in another. They ‘translate’ in both directions, from the arenas of international law and legal institutions to local communities and back again. In this sense, rather than seeing meanings of democracy as being contested between ‘North’ and ‘South’, the acknowledgement of ‘people in the middle’ reveals a far more complex conceptual contest.

Merry (2006) also emphasises that while intermediaries occupy a privileged position of influence as ‘knowledge brokers’, they also face certain conceptual constraints. On one hand they are constrained by global discourse, for example about human rights, in that they need to ‘speak the language’ of international agencies if they are reliant on international support or funding (Merry 2006, 39). Yet on the other hand they are also constrained by the cultural context in which they are working. They present their initiatives in terms that will be, at least to some degree, acceptable to their own local constituency (Merry 2006). Intermediaries such as activists and aid workers, who are the focus of this study, face both opportunities and constraints in the ‘vernacularisation’ of global norms.

How then, are meanings of democracy or human rights constructed and contested? One approach used by authors seeking to answer these questions about ‘vernacularisation’, is through the concept of ‘frames’.<sup>28</sup> Initially drawn from the work of Goffman (1974) ‘frame analysis’ has been applied in policy studies (Schon and Rein 1994, Creed et al. 2002), and particularly in analysing

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<sup>28</sup> Frame analysis was originally drawn from the cognitive science literature and applied to social movements by authors such as Snow et al. (1986). Frames have also been used extensively in public policy literature (Schon and Rein 1994).

social movements (Benford and Snow 2000, Snow et al. 1986, Tarrow 1998). Creed et al. (2002, 37) argue that all texts 'are comprised of packages of integrated idea elements held together by some unifying central concept, called a frame'. Frames are not concepts themselves but are ways of packaging and presenting them (Levitt and Merry 2009).

Activists or movement leaders engage in an active process of framing ideas so as to 'organize experience and guide action' (Benford and Snow 2000, 614). Frames affect how norms such as human rights are understood and communicated by linking the norm to particular contextually embedded reference points, for example in pre-existing religious ideas or particular local institutions. Norms may be framed by activists as being resonant with local norms and institutions, or alternatively in ways that might present radical challenges to accepted norms. The way ideas are framed will determine whether or not those ideas are adopted or adapted by different groups. Frames make ideas appealing to certain actors while also leading others to reject them.

The framing of global norms, in resonant or radical ways, is a means through which conceptual contest takes place. Norms such as rights do not have a taken-for-granted universal meaning, but are contested as different political actors use them. Different groups of actors, especially intermediaries such as activists and aid workers, compete over how global norms are framed in particular contexts. In the next chapter I argue that narrative brings another crucial dimension to the understanding of conceptual contest – a contest of the construction of plot and characters. Yet the idea of framing is valuable especially for the way it describes the relationship between cultural context and conceptual contest.

Earlier in the chapter I highlighted several studies that unpack the influence of cultural, religious and linguistic context on meanings of democracy. For example, they describe the way that Buddhism influences moral meanings of democracy in certain contexts in Asia. Yet how does cultural context relate to the 'framing' and contests outlined in this section? Benford and Snow (2000) argue that rather than culture determining the meaning that global norms take, cultural material

such as beliefs, traditions and practices form a 'resource base' (Benford and Snow 2000, 629) from which frames are formed. Cultural contexts provide particular resources which can be selectively drawn on, by for example activist leaders, in framing global norms. In this way, activist movements are 'both consumers of existing cultural meanings and producers of new meanings' (Tarrow 1998, 189).

While not dealing explicitly with democracy, these works on 'vernacularisation' and 'framing' give an important account of the nature of conceptual contests. The role of intermediaries, such as activists and aid workers, and the contests between them, are recurring themes in this thesis. Likewise the concept of framing shares several similarities with the narrative approach I outline in the next chapter – particularly in the emphasis on the varied and contested ways in which seemingly universal global norms can be employed in different contexts. However, the literature on 'vernacularisation' and 'framing' of global norms also reaches certain limits related to questions of *who* contests are between, *what* is contested, and *how* contests take place.

As in works on the conceptual politics of democracy promotion, the emphasis on the 'global to local' axis means that contests between local groups or coalitions receive relatively less attention in this literature. My analysis of the Burmese democracy movement highlights the extent of contest *within* the movement. Yet if the study of 'vernacularisation' and norm contestation is primarily interested in the analysis of the local embedding of global norms, then this dimension of contest between local actors can be overlooked.

Second, in relation to *what* is being contested, the work of Levitt and Merry (2009) portrays these norms as having a global 'source'. The focus of analysis is on how concepts such as human rights circulate across geographical and language barriers and the ways in which the 'source' meanings are adopted or adapted within different contexts, especially by intermediaries. Such an analysis is most relevant when exploring concepts, such as women's rights, that may have been adopted only relatively recently into global aid or development programs.

However, for my analysis of Myanmar – where notions of democracy have been circulating for more than a century – there is far less certainty about a ‘source’ meaning. Are contemporary global norms of liberal democracy the ‘source’ from which meanings in Myanmar are ‘vernacularized’? Or are British colonial notions of democracy from the 1920s the ‘source’? Or alternatively, is the ‘source’ from re-interpretations of Buddhist teachings from within the independence movement in the 1930s? Chapter four of this thesis gives a more detailed historical account of meanings of democracy in Myanmar but at this point it is necessary to highlight that the assumption of a ‘global to local’ axis of norm transition - even in its carefully nuanced application by Levitt and Merry (2009) - sits awkwardly with my study of Burmese democracy.

Finally, though the concept of framing provides several crucial insights into how meanings contest, it has faced criticism for being overly ambiguous (Wagenaar 2014) and for giving insufficient attention to the role of power (Levitt and Merry 2009) in constraining what frames might be possible to use. These criticisms of frame analysis have been addressed to some degree by Benford and Snow (2000), Johnstone (2013) and Creed et al (2002). Yet I argue in the next chapter that narrative – with an emphasis on construction of plot and character – provides a sharper tool through which to explore conceptual contests over democracy. The wider literature on transmission of global norms adds certain insights that go beyond the democracy specific literature. However, for addressing the questions of this thesis I argue that the concept of narrative allows us to take several additional, and important, steps.

## **Conclusion**

What meanings are given to the word ‘democracy’ around the world, and how are these meanings constructed through conceptual contests? In this chapter I have argued that mainstream democratization literature, with its assumption of an ‘ideal type’ of liberal democracy, is inherently limited in its investigation of these questions. Gallie’s (1956) idea of essential contestability provides a valuable alternate starting point for this investigation – one that facilitates the

examination of meanings of democracy *on their own terms*. Building on this perspective are several interpretive investigations of meanings of democracy that describe the links between meanings of democracy and cultural, religious and linguistic context. Of most relevance to this thesis are several studies from Asia highlighting moral understandings of democracy and accountability and the way these present alternate notions of legitimate democratic leadership.

This chapter then turned to the question of how meanings of democracy are constructed through conceptual contest - *who* these contests are between, *what* they are over, and *how* they take place. Culture, religion or language alone does not determine the way democracy is given meaning. As Kurki (2010) highlights, there is an everyday 'conceptual politics' surrounding the adoption, or rejection, of different meanings of democracy. Politics is not only played out through the control and use of resources, there can also be everyday struggles over ideas and meaning. Finally in order to further unpack the nature of conceptual contests in this chapter I drew more widely on literature on the transmission of global norms, such as human rights. This highlights the crucial role of intermediaries, such as activists and aid workers, who translate between global and local discourses about human rights. They play a role as 'knowledge brokers', promoting particular ideas and meanings which help them to position themselves and others. These intermediaries also engage in 'framing' or packaging of norms, in order to influence the way they are understood by their constituencies. Meanings of democracy, whether articulated by aid workers or activists, are more than simply neutral reflections of cultural context, they are closely tied to conceptual contests.

Yet while offering valuable perspectives on the way democracy is given meaning, I have also argued that these various bodies of literature have certain limitations. How then can narrative, as a concept, and narrative analysis, as a methodology, extend our understanding of meanings of democracy and how they are constructed through contest? What is it about stories that reveal meanings of democracy in a new light?

## Chapter 3 A narrative approach

How does the concept of narrative unlock the questions of this study about meanings of democracy and their construction? What is it particularly about the nature of stories, and their ‘narrativity’, that helps us to address questions about democracy? In the last few decades, the idea of narrative has emerged as a popular ‘portmanteau’ (Andrews et al. 2008, 2) stretching across fields as diverse as psychology (Lieblich et al. 1998), education (Polkinghorne 1995), international relations (Miskimmon et al. 2013) and politics (Patterson and Monroe 1998). Therefore it is necessary in this chapter to first distinguish my own particular use of the concept of narrative from the many other ways it has been employed by scholars.

To begin with, I approach narrative analysis from within the interpretive tradition. As described in the introduction, an interpretive approach seeks to unearth rich accounts of beliefs and meaning as a way of understanding the actions of political actors (Bevir and Rhodes 2003). To explain something in an interpretive manner is, as Wagenaar (2014, 23) suggests, ‘to situate it in its proper context’. Political actors give meaning to the word democracy in different ways depending on the context in which it is used. Meanings are ‘circumstance-attached’ (Schaffer 2014, 329).

The danger in the dominant approach in democratization studies lies in assuming that, for example, activists or opposition leaders in Myanmar share a set of beliefs and motivations that correspond with the ‘ideal type’ of liberal institutions and values.<sup>29</sup> There is a danger of what Wagenaar (2014, 32) describes as the ‘egregious error of ascribing to subjects experiences and intentions they don’t have’. In other words, from an interpretive perspective it is deeply problematic to assume that activists in democracy movements around the world are all running toward the same finishing line, toward building the

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<sup>29</sup> For authors such as Diamond (1996), the beliefs and meanings that activists, opposition leaders and citizens attach to democracy are certainly of interest – and considerable efforts have been made within democratization studies to examine these through public opinion surveys.

same 'ideal type' of democracy. Meanings given to democracy by relevant political actors are necessarily the starting point to any consideration of democratic institutions and actions. As I argued in the previous chapter, what is crucial in taking democracy 'seriously' is not so much knowing what 'we are talking about' (Tilly 2007, 7) but what political actors in that context themselves are 'talking about'. The way we understand democratic actions and institutions in Myanmar cannot be uncoupled from the beliefs and meanings of the political actors involved.

Therefore beyond recognition of the 'circumstances attached' (Schaffer 2014, 329) nature of the concept of democracy, interpretivism makes a further claim – that beliefs and meaning are not just useful points of data but are in fact *constitutive* of democratic actions and institutions (Bevir and Rhodes 2003). An interpretive approach emphasises the way in which meanings given to the word democracy by political actors serve to construct, or create, democratic practices and institutions. Whenever we communicate about democracy we are inevitably employing particular categories and understandings that are not universally shared. By uncovering the meanings that political actors themselves attach to the word democracy we might discover alternative ways of understanding 'democratic' actions and institutions (Wagenaar 2014).

Within the broader tradition of interpretivism I specifically employ a narrative approach. Yet here I distinguish my own approach from others ways that narrative is used to investigate meaning. For many studies employing a narrative approach (Roe 1989, Van Eeten 2006, Bridgman and Barry 2002), narrative is used to represent the stories of different groups of actors about particular policy problems. This is based on the premise that different actors may have contrasting perspectives on complex issues. Wagenaar (2014, 41) describes this as the hermeneutic 'face' of meaning. While my own narrative approach similarly aims to reveal contrasting ways in which political actors make sense of political issues or concepts, I also explore the discursive 'face' of meaning. I use narrative analysis in a way that not only acknowledges different actors' points of view but also gives attention to the exercise of discursive power – a concept that I unpack

in detail in this chapter. I ask not only what different ways democracy may be narrated in Myanmar, but also the question of how these narratives are constructed through conceptual contest. I argue that it is this dimension of narrative theory in particular that steps beyond the concept of 'frames' I described in the previous chapter.

The first half of this chapter concentrates on three elements of narrative that illuminate new perspectives on meanings of democracy and their construction through conceptual contest. First, as simplified stories, narratives are an important means through which political ideas are understood and communicated. They help to bring order in complexity by drawing together a simplified plot which contains key elements of visions, challenges and strategies. Second, political actors can use the construction of plot and character in narratives to position themselves in relation to rivals, and to establish themselves and their allies as 'experts'. In other words, narratives are not neutral but can be used by political actors for the exercise of power in a discursive form. Third, while narratives are a means for the exercise of power, these struggles are not always overt, and in fact the nature of narratives and their associated practices serves to obscure conceptual contests.

The second half of the chapter turns to describing how narrative analysis is used as a methodology in this study. I position my own use of narrative analysis in relation to three relevant themes in the narrative literature - about the level of aggregation, specificity versus flexibility, and issue of the 'embeddedness of the observer'. Finally, I describe the specific methods used in the study.

## A. The concept of narrative

### **Narratives as simplified stories**

This section highlights the importance of narrative as *simplified stories*. Stories are an everyday form through which political concepts such as democracy are

understood and communicated. As 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. There has been relatively little systematic use of narrative theory in relation to democracy or democratization.<sup>30</sup> I argue here that specific attention to features of ‘narrativity’ within simplified stories can unlock new perspectives on how democracy is given meaning.

### *Simplified stories*

A common thread through narrative literature is that narratives play a role in making sense of the ‘flux of everyday experience’ (Polkinghorne 1995, 16). It is not possible for people to deal with the world ‘event by event’ (Bruner 1990, 64); therefore experiences are necessarily given meaning within the ‘larger structures’ (Bruner 1990, 64) of narratives. Narrative can serve to impose, as Kaplan (1986, 768) suggests, some ‘order on complexity’. In this sense, when aid workers or activists communicate about meanings of democracy, these meanings are often embedded within stories, where the complexity of events and phenomenon are drawn into a ‘temporally organised whole’ (Polkinghorne 1995, 5). Stories provide ‘cognitive shortcuts’ - they are the form through which complex political ideas are carried (Jones and McBeth 2010, 344).

In this way, narratives can help perform what Hajer (1995, 42) describes as a ‘communicative miracle’. Using the example of acid rain policy Hajer highlights how clear policy narratives can emerge despite the fact that they invoke complex and perhaps conflicted sets of information. He describes how a single policy paper on acid rain might use elements of a range of disciplines such as ‘physics, tree physiology, terrestrial ecology, mathematical modelling, economics, accounting, engineering, and philosophy’ (Hajer 1995, 44). Likewise, any

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<sup>30</sup> There are some examples of the application of narrative theory in studies of democracy and democratization. For use in historical analysis see Gassert (2008), ‘Narratives of Democratization’. In his work ‘Rethinking Arab Democratization’, Sadiki (2009) also uses ‘narrative’ to describe differing interpretations of democracy. However, these works use ‘narrative’ in a broad sense (interchangeably with words such as ‘discourse’ or ‘frame’) and thus do not draw explicitly on the aspects of ‘narrativity’ that I seek to highlight in this chapter.

narrative about democracy in Myanmar is an extraordinary simplification of insights cutting across an equally bewildering array of different disciplines. Myanmar's (and the region's) history, politics, languages, cultures and religions all connect to its democratization in a way that it would be impossible for any individual, or even coalition of actors, to comprehend. Nevertheless, individuals and coalitions are readily able to narrate a story of the country's democratization. The process of 'emplotment' (Polkinghorne 1995) takes enormous diversity of experiences and ideas and provides a story which can be used for understanding and communicating amongst political actors. A good story, as Wagenaar (2014, 216) highlights, can be 'an Archimedean point in an otherwise indeterminate world'.

Further, and resonating with Gallie's (1956) ideas of essential contestability, Van Eeten (2006) argues that each of these simplified narratives may be 'valid on its own terms' (Van Eeten 2006, 254). For example, there may be a plurality of different narratives about democracy in Myanmar, all of which may be coherent within its own context. Yet outside of that particular setting, the logic portrayed within narratives may be less apparent (Hajer 1995) - and therefore the content of each 'story-line' is important in revealing the ways in which common sense may differ.

This insight, of narratives as simplified stories through which to make sense of complex phenomena, has some overlap with the 'frame' analysis described in the previous chapter. Within social movements or activist organisations, Benford and Snow (2000, 614) highlight how 'frames' are employed to 'organize experience and guide action'. They are ways of presenting or packaging concepts or ideas help activists to make sense of them. However, I now turn to a unique dimension of narrative theory - that these simplified stories contain identifiable *plots*.

## *Narrative plot: visions, challenges and strategies*

Plot is a central part of what makes a story a story. For something to be a narrative, as opposed to simply a list of events, there needs to be a plot which unifies these events together. The narrator builds connections between experiences or events and provides them with meaning (Wagenaar 2014). The narratives described in this thesis provide contrasting accounts of democracy in Myanmar. They link together key narrative elements - visions of democracy, challenges, and strategies by which these challenges can be addressed – into a unified whole

Along with a vision, a key dimension of narrative plot is a portrayal of how the vision is threatened through particular challenges. Bruner (1991) describes this as the 'breach' from an expected situation or vision. Or for Labov (1972), there is a 'complicating action' that disrupts the norm or vision. Hajer's (1995) work on *The Politics of Environmental Discourse* unpacks this dimension of narrative in particular. He develops what he describes as an 'argumentative' understanding of 'story lines'. In this view, 'story lines' not only contain visions, but also reactions against particular 'counter positions'. Hajer suggests that in order to understand the meaning of a word, such as democracy, it is not enough to unpack the vision that the speaker has in their mind. It is also crucial to understand what position they are criticising. What are they reacting against?

John Dunn (2014, 92) reflects this perspective in his description of democracy movements around the world as movements of 'rejection'. He argues that 'the primal appeal and force of democracy in the form in which it has survived into the modern world lies in that moment of rejection' (Dunn 2014, 92). As diverse sets of people come together within democracy movements - whether at Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, or Tahrir Square - what is 'hypnotically concrete' is what they are rejecting (Dunn 2014, 92). It is important to analyse not only activist or aid worker visions of democracy, but also the targets of their rejection.

Hajer also stresses that ‘counter positions’ in narratives are not always self-evident. He argues that ‘whether or not a situation is perceived as a political problem depends on the narrative in which it is discussed’ (Hajer 1993, 44). A particular challenge to democracy – such as personalised political culture – might be emphasised in one narrative, and ignored in another. Thus, the meaning of democracy in a certain setting is not only accessed through the question ‘what is democracy?’ but also through the identification of the problem that ‘democracy’ is intended to solve. What are visions of democracy *opposed* to?

Plot, however, involves more than just visions and challenges, it also contains certain strategies for dealing with the ‘breach’ (Bruner 1991) from the expected situation or vision. Within a narrative’s plot there are also explicit or implicit interventions that are considered to be necessary to restore, or reach, the vision. Labov (1972) describes this as a ‘resolution’ which addresses the central challenge. Yet like Hajer’s notion of ‘counter positions’, these strategies may not be self-evident, even if the vision and challenge are made clear. In the coming chapters I describe how there is no taken for granted strategy for fostering democracy in Myanmar.

These plot dimensions of challenges, visions and strategies are central to my analysis of the way democracy is given meaning in Myanmar. This categorisation of challenges, visions and strategies also gives shape to chapters five, six and seven of this thesis where I describe three contrasting narratives of democracy. Yet Boswell makes the important point that while these are key elements of narrative plot, political actors do not always communicate them in a ‘neat, linear fashion’ (Boswell 2013b, 77). Key elements of the narrative may not be recounted sequentially, and some elements may be explicitly emphasised while others are only implied.

The interpretive studies of democracy outlined in the previous chapter, from Schaffer (1997), Frechette (2007) and Walton (2012) give valuable accounts of how meanings of democracy are constructed with reference to cultural, linguistic and religious context. Yet they do not explicitly trace out these broader story

lines – including challenges and strategies - within which visions of democracy are set. A crucial feature of a narrative approach is in intentionally unpacking the way meanings given to the word democracy by political actors are embedded within these wider stories. When different challenges, visions and strategies are traced out, this can illuminate new and perhaps unexpected areas of overlap, and conflict, between different meanings of democracy.

## **Narrative and conceptual contests**

How does narrative theory help us to understand conceptual contests, and how do conceptual contests construct meanings of democracy? In the previous chapter I described the emerging literature on the ‘conceptual politics’ of democracy promotion which made the point that politics is not only played out in the control of resources, but in contests over ideas and values. ‘Defining and understanding democracy’, Hobson and Kurki (2012, 5-6) argue, ‘is an unavoidably political and normative act’. In a narrative sense, this conceptual politics could be related to both the construction of *plot* and *characters*, and in this section I address both of these in turn.

At one level conceptual contest may be contest over narrative plot. An activist network, for example, might put forward one version of challenges, visions of strategies, while political party leaders put forward another. Further, political actors may construct narrative plots in direct opposition to the narratives of their rivals. This is well highlighted in Boswell’s (2013b) account of narratives of obesity in Australia and the U.K. He first describes a dominant ‘facilitated agency’ narrative where obesity is portrayed to be a result of social changes where individuals have lost touch with healthy lifestyles, and need to be encouraged to change their behaviour.

Others describe a counter ‘regulatory reform’ narrative of obesity (Boswell 2013b). This narrative, often constructed by health professionals and academics, portrays obesity as result of a skewed marketplace and lack of government regulation. A further ‘moral panic’ narrative is a reaction to both of these other

narratives, stressing that obesity is overrated as a societal problem, and concerns are driven by the medical or pharmaceutical industry (Boswell 2013b).<sup>31</sup> Of course in Gallie's terms, obesity is not essentially contested in the same way as justice or democracy. Yet in this example, coalitions of actors constructed the 'regulatory reform' and 'moral panic' narratives in opposition to key tenets of the dominant story. The dominant narrative was the key 'counter position' for other narratives. In this sense, organisations or individuals can shape narratives in response to conceptual contests.

### *A contest over characters*

Attention to contest over *plot* adds an additional dimension to the 'conceptual politics' of democracy promotion described by Hobson and Kurki (2012), and the examples of 'frame' analysis by Benford and Snow (2000). Yet narrative theory brings a further insight that conceptual contests not only relate to narrative *plot*, but to the ways in which *characters* are constructed through narrative. When describing political issues, narratives inevitably create some of these actors as central to the story, while others are more peripheral. There may be 'villains' who are responsible for the main problems or challenges, 'heroes' who can help to reach the vision, while others still are portrayed as passive bystanders, at the margins of the main flow of the story (Stone 1997, Boswell 2013b). In this sense, 'the storyteller does not tell the story, so much as she/he is told by it' (Andrews et al. 2008, 3). Narratives are not just neutral interpretations but are closely associated with the positioning of actors, for example, within the democracy movement, and their level of influence.

In order to explain how narratives 'position' actors in different ways it is necessary to describe how my use of narrative connects to the concept of *discursive* power. As I suggested in the introduction to this chapter, policy oriented narrative analyses (Roe 1989, Van Eeten 2006, Bridgman and Barry 2002) often emphasise narrative as simplified stories, yet give less attention to

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<sup>31</sup> Similar policy studies by Van Eeten (2006) and Roe (1989) have also revealed the role of conceptual contest in the construction of opposing narratives.

issues of power. My contention in this thesis is that it is the combination of the concept of narrative as simplified stories, and narrative as a means for the exercise of discursive power, that makes it analytically valuable.

In recent decades, the concepts of discourse and discursive power have been applied in a range of fields – most prominently by Michel Foucault in areas such as sexuality and mental health (Foucault 1990) but also in international relations (Milliken 1999), health (Lupton 1992) and the environment (Buhr and Reiter 2006). For my own study the concept of discourse is important in that it highlights that 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 (Wagenaar 2014). Power is not only material and coercive, but also discursive. Power can relate to the ability of political actors to position themselves or others as 'experts', set the agenda of action, or define what are reasonable, and unreasonable, courses of action in a particular situation. Discursive power allows certain political actors to define the 'truth' about a particular issue. They can control, for example, how words like 'democracy' are used in certain settings, and at the same time position rival uses of the word as either relevant, or irrelevant. In turn this allows certain actors to reinforce their own position. In narrative terms there is power associated with the trust and credibility of the narrator (Jones and McBeth 2010, 344) – certain people can hold an 'authority to speak' (Foucault 1972).

Central to my thesis is the insight that the way characters are constructed in narratives can serve to produce, or undermine, the discursive power of political actors (Michelutti 2007, 641). Activists or aid workers in Myanmar not only attempt to push forward their own version of the 'plot' of the democracy story but also position themselves and other actors in certain ways (Hajer 1995, 54). Narrative is a mechanism through which discursive power is exercised. The way stories are used to communicate about democracy is a powerful means through which actors can establish or reinforce their own influence. If discourse is

related to the use of language and construction of meaning how might 'discourse' differ from the concept of 'narrative'?

### *Narrative and discursive power*

The concepts of 'narrative' and 'discourse' are described in two diverse respective bodies of literature. At times, 'narrative' and 'discourse' are distinguished from one another, such as in the work of Boswell (2013b) or Miskimmon et al. (2014). Yet at other times the terms are used seemingly interchangeably (Bruner 1991). As I have noted, one key overlap between discourse and narrative analysis is in emphasising the role of discursive power. Moon (2006) and Hajer (1995) in particular both draw on concepts of discourse analysis in their use of narrative (or 'story lines' in Hajer's words). In my own use of narrative in this thesis however there are also important points of contrast with discourse analysis.

On one hand, narrative theory often particularly emphasises the way simplified stories are used in everyday communication. Narratives lay out a story-line from challenges of the past, to visions of the future, describing a transition from one state to another. Part of what makes a story a story is this temporal dimension. In the words of Bruner (1991, 6) narrative is an 'account of events occurring over time'. I was drawn to narrative as a concept for this study in that this emphasis on simplified stories resonated closely with the way meanings of democracy were expressed by study participants.

In contrast, 'discourse' is most commonly used in reference to wider 'constellations of meaning' (Foucault 1972), rather than to simplified everyday communication. Hajer (1995) suggests that people do not draw on these 'comprehensive discursive systems' in the way they understand issues but rather these wider systems are 'evoked' through 'story lines' (Hajer 1995, 56). Discourses are the 'raw material of communication' (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 7) that actors draw on in forming narratives. Further, as 'constellations of meaning', discourse does not have the same temporal dimension as narrative - discourse

cannot 'orient audiences to the future' (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 7) in the same way as narrative. In this sense there are important contrasts between narrative and discourse. At the same time I do not want to imply that narrative and discourse are rigidly separate. For the purposes of this thesis, I see narrative and discourse as having both overlapping and distinct features.

This linking of narrative and discursive power is illustrated well in the work of Moon (2006) and Hajer (1995). Moon (2006) uses the concept of narrative to explore meanings given to 'reconciliation' through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa. Drawing on Foucault (1972), Moon (2006) suggests that discursive power is dependent on the credibility of the narrator, but also on the site or context that the narrator is in. In relation to the credibility of actors, she describes how certain political actors (such as the South African government) were placed at the centre of the 'reconciliation' story, while others (particularly those who may have dissenting views) were placed on the periphery. Not every individual, or coalition, is afforded the same authority to speak 'truth' about a particular word. In the case of the South African TRC the 'victim' and 'perpetrator' were given a privileged position to speak 'truth about the past' (Moon 2006, 261). There could have been other relevant categories such as 'bystanders' or 'beneficiaries' of apartheid, yet the dominant narrative of 'reconciliation' excluded these identities or 'subject positions' as being relevant to 'reconciliation' (Moon 2006).

Finally, the authority to speak is dependent on more than just the 'prestige' or credibility of the narrator – it is also dependent on the site of interaction. A political actor may be afforded the right to speak 'truth' within particular social settings and yet be given little credibility in other spheres of interaction. For example in the South African TRC there were certain arguments that were impossible to make within those particular spheres of interaction (Moon 2006). Or in the realm of environmental politics, Hajer (1995, 61) observes that the credibility of an individual or coalition may require them to align their arguments with the vocabulary of 'ecological modernisation'. Narratives are a mechanism by which political actors can construct a plot or interpretation of

events. Yet they are also a mechanism for constructing ‘characters’ in the story. The construction of narratives is also part of a struggle between rival actors – a struggle over power in a discursive form.

Overall, Moon (2006) and Hajer’s (1995) work are valuable examples of making the link between narrative and discursive power. Yet they give relatively less attention to what I have described above as other key elements of ‘narrativity’, for example narrative as simplified stories. In this study I argue that drawing together these different elements of narrative theory provides crucial insights into meanings given to democracy and their construction through conceptual contest.

## **Narrative and the obscuring of contest**

The previous section established that conceptual contest is related to both narrative plot and the construction of characters. Conceptual contests, as Hajer (1995, 54) suggests, are struggles where actors ‘not only try to make others see the problems according to their views but also seek to position other actors in a specific way’ (Hajer 1995, 54). Narrative is a means through which power is exercised in a discursive form. Yet beyond this, narrative theory offers another important insight; that story-lines are also a means by which conceptual contest is obscured.

### *The obscuring of conceptual contest*

Boswell (2013b) describes how the performance of narrative can obscure points of difference in meaning between actors. For example in public meetings, he observes that the way the issue of obesity is narrated masks deeper disagreements between actors. He notes the common use of ambiguous ‘boundary words’ where narratives can seemingly intersect over ‘shallow points of agreement’ (Boswell 2013b, 161). In relation to the issue of obesity, political leaders make calls for ‘integration’ and ‘coordination’ in responses and recognition that the issue of obesity is ‘complex’. Yet use, by political actors, of

'boundary words' such as these in fact serves to obscure the more profound differences between narratives (Boswell 2013b).

Further, conceptual contest can be obscured not only through language but also through social practices. Analysis of narratives, as Wagenaar (2014) suggests, cannot be uncoupled from the routines and practices they are associated with. In particular, narratives contain implicit or explicit strategies, or 'calls to action', which make certain social practices or policies inseparable from the narratives themselves.

Hajer (1995) argues that the unquestioned dominance of particular 'story-lines' is often due to the way they are subtly reinforced by these everyday policies and practices. Exploring the aid sector, Kerr (2008) argues that while project monitoring and evaluation systems in aid programs are often considered apolitical by donors or aid workers, they can in fact support particular discourses. For example, Kerr highlights that the use of logical frameworks in aid programs, can tilt the sphere of interaction toward the dominance of a 'new public management' discourse. In examining the increasing influence of indicators of governance Merry (2011) similarly argues that they can become their own form of 'knowledge production'. Despite being framed simply as technical instruments to support policy making, the use of these governance indicators can have 'implications for relations of power' (Merry 2011, 83).

Routinized and seemingly apolitical social practices and policies can serve to support particular narratives while also obscuring underlying conceptual contests. I agree with Hajer (1995, 47) that narrative analysis must include a focus on 'illumination of the smaller, often less conspicuous practices, techniques, and mechanisms' that contribute to the dominance of certain narratives.

## *Everyday politics of democracy*

Boswell (2013b) goes on to argue however that these means of obscuring contest - through use of 'boundary concepts' or through routinized practices - are not necessarily used consciously by political actors. Recalling the 'everyday politics' of Kerkvliet (2009), that was outlined in the last chapter, narratives and their associated practices may not be perceived as political, either by the audience or narrators themselves. Hajer (1995, 57) describes how certain 'story-lines' can be considered to simply be 'the way one talks' in particular situations.

In this way, while I have emphasised narratives as a means by which discursive power can be exercised, I am not suggesting that this dynamic is always propelled consciously by political actors, through a planned or coordinated marginalisation of rivals. On the contrary, this study highlights the contest over narratives as being characterised more by the unconscious practice of routines, rather than by conscious action. The nature of a dominant narrative may be clear, but the mechanisms of its dominance cannot be easily traced to the tangible plans of certain individuals or coalitions.

Narratives are often not 'invented' or 'formulated' (Foucault 1990, 95). Thus, conceptual contest may not always be dynamic and obvious, but is often routinized and almost imperceptible. Hajer (1995, 57) argues that not all actions are 'the result of an active process of taking up or denying of positionings'. Political actors often do not recognise 'moments of positioning' (Hajer 1995, 57) but rather assume that particular use of language is natural in that circumstance. For example, normalised 'ways of seeing' within activist networks or aid agencies can mean that the significance of a particular narrative – and its implications in constructing characters – can remain 'hidden' (Hajer 1995, 57). This means that the contest between different meanings is often not overt but rather 'dumb role-playing on the part of those whose action takes place within walls of routinized institutional structures' (Hajer 1995, 57). Discursive power is exercised not only through the way people communicate, but also through everyday social practices that reflect, and reinforce, particular dominant stories.

While the main focus of this thesis is on narrative as ‘text’, I also describe the ways that these narratives are often embedded in seemingly neutral everyday social routines.

At the same time, the obscuring of conceptual contest does not mean that the dominance of certain narratives is somehow fixed or inevitable. While interactions are often routinized, actors can also show agency in attempting to reshape narratives. Hajer (1995, 60) describes these moments where ‘routinized proceedings are interrupted’ as ‘interpellations’. Or, as Bevir and Rhodes (2003) highlight in their work on *Interpreting British Governance*, narratives or ‘traditions’ are invariably reshaped through ‘dilemmas’. New experiences or ideas can interrupt routinized practices and narratives can be reshaped or rejected. This can happen at the individual level, but also at the inter-subjective level as political actors respond to dilemmas. The challenge of analysing the discursive role of narrative is to identify both the ways in which contests are routinized and almost imperceptible, and these moments of flux (Hajer 1995).

Through bringing attention to the role of stories in the way democracy is understood and communicated, narrative analysis can unlock new perspectives on meanings of democracy and their construction. In particular, a narrative approach highlights the way that meanings of democracy are constructed, not just as reflections of particular cultural contexts, but through conceptual contests. Narratives can be used by political actors to outmanoeuvre rivals.

## B. Narrative analysis as methodology

Having described how narrative as a concept is used in this study, in the second half of this chapter I turn to describe narrative analysis as a methodology. Before outlining the specific methods used I first situate my use of narrative analysis in relation to three relevant debates within narrative literature; concerning the level of aggregation, flexibility and specificity, and the embeddedness of the observer.

## Level of aggregation

Of particular importance in differentiating between various approaches to narrative is the degree of aggregation of research data. In this thesis narratives are taken as stories drawn on at the level of coalitions of actors (Hajer 1995) rather than single accounts. Narrative is an intersubjective mechanism for understanding and communicating about political ideas and issues. This contrasts with individually oriented narrative research – for example through the writing of life histories (Lieblich et al. 1998) - which sees narrative as an ‘external expression of an individual’s own personal representations of phenomena’ (Andrews 2008, 7). Yet the approach taken in this thesis also contrasts with research focussing on the construction of ‘societal narratives’ (Van Eeten 2006, 253) that encompass national level ‘stories’ which may be drawn on by all citizens - for example in Dicke’s (2001) analysis of water management in Europe. Instead, this study takes narrative as a ‘middle ground’ concept – between meaning being formed on the individual level and at the level of overarching discourses (Hajer 1995).

In this way, I refer to ‘coalitions’ at the level of, for example, networks of activists within the democracy movement, or networks of donor representatives based in Myanmar. In contrast to my initial expectations, often different narratives did not map along formal organisational lines, but rather, primarily through informal connections. Particular narratives may have been prominent within certain organisations yet the more apparent narrative coalitions ran *across* organisational boundaries.

My decision to focus on narrative at this ‘middle ground’ level of coalitions is also based on a methodological tradeoff between generalizability on one hand, and attention to nuance on the other. Van Eeten (2006, 254) highlights that if the text is a ‘highly aggregate construction’, then there are ‘less meaningful specifics’. Yet on the other hand the aggregated narrative can also provide some ‘generalizability of conclusions’. The purpose of my own study is to uncover and examine different narratives that have been prominent within the democracy

movement in Myanmar. On one hand, the societal level of analysis would not allow sufficient attention to the contrasts and contests *within* the movement itself. Though alternatively, focussing only on narrative as life history of individuals would not allow wider generalizability about the dynamics and contests in the movement and in democracy promotion programs.<sup>32</sup>

In addressing the question of aggregation, Bevir and Rhodes (2003) emphasise the 'decentred' nature of narratives, or what they describe as 'traditions'.<sup>33</sup> Narratives do not have a core definition and one of the dangers of working at the aggregate level is that 'we can neglect the beliefs of the individuals lumped together in a tradition' (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 2). Decentring an aggregate concept like narrative is to highlight that within a particular coalition of actors there may be more nuanced strands. For Bevir and Rhodes (2003, 2) this means recognising the level of a 'British political tradition', then a lower level of a 'Tory' tradition, and then to 'One Nation' or 'statecraft' strands within the Tory tradition. In other words, narratives are not homogenous, but rather a cluster of interpretations.

Overall, the level of aggregation serves to differentiate between particular strands of narrative analysis methodology. In taking narrative as a 'middle ground' concept this study makes a 'tradeoff' between generalizability and attention to nuance. Further, while taking an aggregate approach to analysing the meaning of democracy I also recognise the 'decentred' nature of narratives.

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<sup>32</sup> Though at another level, I agree with Bevir and Rhodes (2003, 2) that any rigid distinction between aggregate and individual analysis is 'artificial'. Any analysis necessarily moves 'back and forth' between an individual level and an aggregate one (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 2). Bevir and Rhodes (2003, 2) argue that as individuals are not autonomous, and develop their beliefs within a particular social context, then researchers must make some reference to aggregate concepts. Yet on the other hand these aggregate narratives or traditions 'have no existence apart from the contingent beliefs of particular individuals' (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 2). Thus while the focus of my thesis is on the aggregate level of narratives, the analysis necessarily moves between the accounts of individuals and this constructed aggregate level.

<sup>33</sup> In outlining their interpretive methodology Bevir and Rhodes (2003) use the term 'traditions' rather than 'narrative', though it holds many assumptions with the way 'narrative' is used in this study.

## **Flexibility and Specificity**

Another relevant overarching debate in approaches to narrative methodology is between flexibility and specificity. The popularity of narrative inquiry in social research in recent years grew partly from a desire to move away from tightly defined, computational forms of analysis and allow for iteration in design and space for unexpected responses that may change the scope of analysis (Boswell 2013b). Flexibility gives immense value to narrative analysis in uncovering different ways in which actors make sense of words such as 'democracy'. Yet, this openness and flexibility has led some narrative research to be overly ambiguous in its methodology – with critics describing the approach as more 'more art than research' (Lieblich et al. 1998, 10). On the other extreme, a desire to use the concept in a more specific and replicable way has led others, such as Roe (1989), to develop a more prescribed approach.

In describing the methods used in this study, I recognise that there is a balance to be reached between over-defining the approach - and losing its strength as a flexible and iterative methodology – and on the other hand, under-defining the approach and making it appear as a work of interpretive 'magic' on behalf of the researcher. In other words, in narrative inquiry there is neither 'absolute freedom' (Lieblich et al. 1998, 10), nor any straightforward methodological formula. I agree with Lieblich et al. (1998, 10) that without the systematic processes associated with traditional methods, the most important thing for the researcher is 'self-awareness and self-discipline in the ongoing examination of text against interpretation, and vice versa'.

Central to this 'self-awareness' and 'self-discipline' is recognising the role of the researcher themselves – along with the participants – in constructing narratives. Any decision to use narrative in an aggregate way also involves some degree of interpretation by the researcher. Yanow (1995, 113) clarifies this by distinguishing between individual accounts (whether a speech, policy document or oral history) as being 'authored text' while a narrative - which is attributed by researchers to a coalition of actors - is a 'constructed text'. In other words, any aggregate approach to narrative takes personal accounts from study participants,

and groups them with other similar accounts, to then ‘construct’ and describe a narrative (Polkinghorne 1995).

Given the researcher’s own involvement in this interpretive process, there is no objective high ground from which research can be conducted. Rather, as Spencer suggests, ‘to see it and comment on it is, ipso facto, to be a part of it’ (Spencer 1997, 5). In studying democracy we cannot hope to separate ourselves from our own parochial positions. Dunn (2014, 12) puts this persuasively in relation to any study of democracy:

Every human being comes from a very small and hopelessly parochial setting and can scarcely hope to succeed dramatically in de-parochializing anything, still less the sources of the allure of the single most powerful political formula in today’s world.

In any interpretive research the researcher too is inevitably ‘part of it’ (Spencer 1997, 5). I also recognise that the study of democracy as the ‘the single most powerful political formula in today’s world’ (Dunn 2014, 12) serves to underscore the impossibility of ‘de-parochializing’ the researcher’s own interpretive role.

## **The ‘Embeddedness’ of the Observer**

Being unable to claim a ‘neutral’ position, Spencer (1997, 5) suggests that we need to emphasise the ‘embeddedness’ of all observers and our own role in shaping the research and its findings according to our own assumptions. In my own case, my experience of working in Myanmar with aid organisations - including one of the participating organisations in this study (Paung Ku) - necessarily influenced my own interpretations. The fieldwork for this study was conducted against the background of more than six years living in Myanmar.

Pure objectivity, with a supposedly exclusive focus on the interpretations of research subjects, is not tenable. In this study I therefore take the position that the researcher and the subjects have a shared, rather than exclusive, interpretative role (Bauman and Briggs 1990, 61). This allows what Herzfeld (2005, 26) describes as a ‘militant middle ground’ – rejecting the possibility of an

objective viewpoint, yet also rejecting the idea that interpretation must therefore only revolve around the researcher.

What this means in practice is that along with narratives themselves, narrative analysis is also a process of constructing coherence from complexity – building a simplified platform from which to make sense of and communicate about issues. This thesis is a critique of the overly simplified narrative of a ‘good’ Burmese democracy movement and its struggle against a ‘bad’ military dictatorship. Yet in identifying Myanmar’s *other* struggles for democracy this study itself is a selective simplification amidst the complexity of the democracy movement. Interpretations of Myanmar’s politics by the Burmese democracy movement and its supporters could be grouped or classed in other ways. The three narratives described in this thesis in the coming chapters could be further divided, or new categorisations formed. Therefore this study itself must also be seen to be a simplified ‘story-line’, one where the participants and researcher have a shared interpretive role (Bauman and Briggs 1990, 61)

Like all simplified narratives, this thesis too may also play a discursive role in reproducing certain assumptions about Myanmar politics. For example, the choice of focussing on the *bamar* dominated democracy movement – rather than the many other ethnic minority (or non *bamar*) groups – itself may reinforce already dominant assumptions about the centrality of ethnic perspectives. Likewise, the choice of participants in the study reflects, and perhaps reproduces, the dominance of male voices - with the very notable exception of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi - within the Burmese movement. The conclusions made are inevitably a combination of the interpretations of participants and my own construction of narratives.

## **Methods**

Having situated the approach of this study within relevant debates in the narrative literature – related to level of aggregation, flexibility and specificity, and the ‘embeddedness of the observer’ (Spencer 1997, 5) – I now turn to an outline of the methods employed.

## *Data Collection*

The field research for this study took place during a ten-month period from November 2013 to August 2014 and involved three separate field visits<sup>34</sup> involving a total of three months in Myanmar. In order to address the research questions, three main qualitative research methods were employed – semi structured interviews, document review and accompaniment.

Fifty extended semi structured interviews were conducted with activists, political party leaders and international aid workers in Myanmar. Semi structured interviewing was used as it allows flexibility while also directing content toward three broad questions related to accounts of the *challenges* to democratization, the *vision* of democracy and the *strategy* for promoting democracy. These fifty interviews were conducted with forty-four individuals<sup>35</sup>.

Interviews lasted between thirty and one hundred and twenty minutes and were conducted in Burmese and English languages – sometimes moving between languages where appropriate.<sup>36</sup> This flexibility in use of language presented some challenges in comparing use of vocabulary and revealed the extent to which the logic of narratives are embedded in particular languages (Schaffer 1997). For example, while the Burmese word *sedana* is translated as 'benevolence', 'goodwill' or 'good intentions' in English, the translation loses the word's overt moral and religious connotations. *Sedana* plays a key role in

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<sup>34</sup> The three research field trips were in October-November 2013 (six weeks), February 2014 (two-three weeks) and August 2014 (two -three weeks)

<sup>35</sup> The initial research plan was to conduct repeat interviews with all of the participants in order to build trust and rapport. Yet, due to practical circumstances related to the timing of research trips - and some choices to prioritise particular follow-up, or new, interviews - repeat interviews were only conducted with six of the participants. In some cases, due to the time constraints of participants, it was clear after a first interview that follow-up was not going to be possible. In other cases, where there was already a clustering of responses, new participants – for example within activist networks - were sought in order to broaden the base of data collection. Further, with several participants informal follow up, in person or on email, was possible but not repeat formal interviews. In cases where multiple interviews were possible and prioritised it provided an opportunity to follow up on specific issues or threads. The content of interviews could shift from general and accepted topics to more specific and controversial issues – such as religious violence - as trust and rapport allowed. Yet, while not part of the original research plan, opportunistic involvement of new participants - who could only be interviewed once - also enhanced the set of research material.

<sup>36</sup> For Burmese participants who had worked with aid agencies there were often high levels of familiarity with English vocabulary related to aid. In everyday speech, even between Burmese activists or NGO staff, sentence construction is often takes a hybrid form between English and Burmese.

conceptualising democracy, yet its inherent logic does not travel easily across languages. From the other direction, the word ‘accountability’ has no obvious direct translation into Burmese as the English meaning is often rooted in particular assumptions about the rights of individuals. Thus while the dual language approach of this study presented some challenges of comparison and translation, these challenges also revealed important differences in political thinking which will be highlighted in the coming chapters.

In the previous chapter I introduced Schaffer’s seminal work on meanings of democracy in Senegal (1997, 2014). While not adopting all components of his ‘ordinary language’ approach, I found his reflections on interviewing to be valuable in informing my own interview approach. Schaffer’s (2014) approach rests on the assumption that if, like the Global Barometer Survey, interviews are structured only around questions such as ‘what does democracy mean to you?’ then that may elicit only a narrow range of answers. In contrast, more ‘richly detailed responses’ (Schaffer 2014, 308) can be gained by ‘providing the person with occasions to use particular words of interest in ways that reveal their various meanings’ (Schaffer 2014, 308). Engaging with participants through a conversation where they use the word ‘democracy’ in a range of different ways can reveal a richer set of data about what ‘democracy’ means in its everyday use (Schaffer 2014). In the narrative approach taken in this study I sought to engage participants in relating a story of Myanmar’s democratization, thereby placing the word ‘democracy’ within wider narratives that included identification of core challenges, strategies and visions. As will be discussed in the coming chapters, drawing on this richer set of data can reveal important nuances of understandings about ‘democracy’ that are not revealed through public opinion surveys.

The approach to interviewing in this study was also informed by the work of Riessman (2008). While interview questions represent avenues into the broad research areas, Riessman suggests that it is also important to follow participants down ‘their trails’ (Riessman 2008, 24) – allowing the internal logic of responses to surface, even in unpredictable ways. For example, several international donor representatives made emotive references to the issue of religious violence,

which ultimately became more prominent in this thesis than expected. Meanwhile, the desire amongst some activists to describe 'democracy' at an organisational or even family level was surprising. Participants were allowed to follow 'their trails' (Riessman 2008, 24) even when the logic of their answers – in relation to democracy - was not initially obvious.

Along with semi-structured interviewing, this study involved a review of organisation documents, and articles written by participants or organisation leaders. The publicly available strategic plans of all major Western donor agencies, including the U.K., European Union, U.S., Australia and Sweden,<sup>37</sup> were reviewed along with project plans from participating aid organisations such as *Paung Ku* and Norwegian People's Aid. English language interviews, articles and books by senior figures who were not available for interview – such as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, former U.S. Ambassador Derek Mitchell and activist Ko Min Ko Naing – became valuable sources. Four relevant issues of the Burmese language *Journal of Human Rights and Democracy* - published by a participating organisation, Myanmar Knowledge Society – were also reviewed along with several Burmese language journal articles and books written by participating individuals. In total, over forty project plans, interviews, articles and books were analysed as data for this study.

Document review also provided an alternate reference point from which to analyse narrative, revealing contrasts with the material from interviews. For example, while donor documentation gave only limited reference to problems and barriers to democracy in Myanmar, interviews with donor representatives often revealed more candid criticisms. Donor policy was also often more flexibly presented within interviews than in donor documents. Where development of democratic institutions was often heavily emphasised in donor strategy, donor managers frequently stressed the need for flexibility and for Myanmar to design its own democratic procedures - albeit still based on a core set of liberal values.

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<sup>37</sup> Donor agencies and embassies also produced internal analyses of their governance and democracy programs. These were occasionally referred to in interviews, though original documents were not accessible.

Finally, this study also employed ethnographic research tools of participation and observation. At its core, ethnographic theory assumes that methods involving 'direct and sustained social context with agents' (Willis and Trondman 2000, 5) will provide a richer source of data. Thus during the field research period I worked for several weeks in local NGO offices, attended a number of donor and NGO workshops and travelled to attend a regional political party meeting of the National League for Democracy. This access to organisations was made possible through relationships that I had established in my years of working as an aid practitioner in Myanmar.

These periods of observation were important in providing a wider set of informal interactions, particularly with activists and leaders in the democracy movement. While only fifty formal interviews were conducted, these were supplemented with over a hundred other *informal* interactions related to perspectives on democracy.

While the focus of this narrative analysis is primarily on language - or narrative as 'words' - accompaniment also allowed for comment, where relevant, on the non-linguistic context. As highlighted earlier in this chapter analysis of narratives cannot be uncoupled from the social context in which they are performed. Field notes were taken during these periods to add context and perspective to interview and document material. Whilst formal interviews were the primary source of data for this study, it was important that this data could be supplemented and checked against a wider set of interactions and observations based on document review and accompaniment.

### *Sampling*

All of the participants in this study were, to use Merry's (2006) term, 'intermediaries'. As international aid workers or donor representatives, activists or opposition leaders they were 'people in the middle' or 'knowledge brokers' (Merry 2006, 39) who took ideas from one place and then adapted or redefined them in another. As will be described in the coming chapters, on one hand they were all exposed, though to different degrees, to global discourse about democracy and either worked for, or were engaged in project partnerships or

relationships with international aid organisations. Yet on the other hand, all of the participants in this study were regularly communicating with Myanmar constituencies who may not have had the same exposure to global discourses. Therefore, as Merry (2006) suggests, these intermediaries had opportunity to act as knowledge brokers, but also met certain constraints, in needing to narrate democracy in ways that at least to some degree resonated with different audiences, both local and international, elite and non-elite.

Based on a desire to focus on information-rich cases, I used purposive sampling of international donor representatives, members of activist groups, and the main opposition political party at the time, the National League for Democracy. However, rather than being able to differentiate between separate donor-local NGO partnerships – as was originally planned – the reality of democracy promotion support was far more complex, involving a web of formal and informal relationships. Activist organisations were often closely interlinked with other activist networks and received funding from multiple sources. At times individual participants also described their primary political relationships of trust not as formal ones *within* their organisation, but informal ones *across* organisations. For example, a network of Burmese activist writers, who worked for a variety of different organisations, drew strongly on one particular narrative about democratization – an *equality* narrative outlined in chapter seven – while their own organisation leaders may have drawn on different interpretations. Therefore, while I use narrative in an aggregated way, the clustering of interpretations did not always occur neatly within organisational boundaries or in the context of formal aid partnerships. As it became apparent that coalitions were connected as much along informal lines as formal ones I altered the approach, seeking to identify and connect these networks of actors using a ‘snowball’ or ‘chain referral’ sampling approach<sup>38</sup>.

Informal networks were important in establishing different narrative coalitions. Yet several discrete organisations and partnerships still remained central to the research. The UK Department for International Development (DFID) and Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) were central in this research.

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<sup>38</sup> See Biernacki, P., & Waldorf, D. (1981) for an account of issues of snowball sampling.

Both agencies have partnerships with the British Council (which has one of the largest governance focussed programs in country) and a variety of local NGOs making them prominent actors within governance and democracy promotion activities in Myanmar. In the lead up to the 2015 elections, DFID and the British Embassy also had a close relationship with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy - though there was no large scale funding directly to its activities. DFID and SIDA have had a long term presence in the country and have been long term supporters of governance and democratization related programs.<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile Norwegian People's Aid<sup>40</sup> (supported by the Norwegian Department of Foreign Affairs) funds a range of democracy promotion initiatives with local organisations. This includes partnerships with *Paung Ku* (a local advocacy NGO) and Myanmar Knowledge Society (another local NGO which publishes a *Journal on Human Rights and Democracy*) – both of which were participating agencies in this research. Finally, the work of the United State Agency for International Development (USAID)<sup>41</sup> was also a focal point. USAID funds a range of democracy promotion efforts by local organisations in Myanmar and –along with the U.S. embassy - has close connections to the National League for Democracy and prominent activist groups.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> This contrasts with other donor agencies that have been present in Myanmar for a shorter period (for example the Canadian International Development Agency) or who are less engaged with governance work (for example Australian aid).

<sup>40</sup> Including an international NGO in this research was important in representing the layers of organisations involved in democracy promotion. Western donors support to governance programs in Myanmar, is primarily enacted through 'civil society' partnerships, first with international NGOs (such as Norwegian People's Aid), and then also with local organisations or networks. This is unusual in comparison to democracy promotion or governance programs in other countries where the primary focus is on funding to government. Given the recent history of sanctions there is still very limited support to the Myanmar government from Western donor agencies. Norwegian People's Aid has had a long term and prominent presence in democracy promotion in Myanmar and therefore its partnerships were an important focus for this thesis.

<sup>41</sup> Gaining access to senior U.S. aid managers and diplomats was challenging during the field research phase – with only one formal interview conducted with a U.S. official - yet this limitation was in some ways offset by the written material from USAID and the U.S. embassy about democratization in Myanmar.

<sup>42</sup> In this thesis 'donor agencies' refers to bilateral agencies rather than multilateral agencies such as the World Bank – which do also work on governance reform. The decision to focus on bilateral donors was based on the recent history of the country and the relative influence of these donors. While the World Bank only re-entered Myanmar in the last two years, agencies such as DFID and SIDA have been operating in Myanmar for several years. At the time of this research, key bilateral donors were more relevant for this investigation.

## *Data Analysis*

In the coming chapters, I outline three different narratives of democracy in Myanmar. The process of identifying and describing these narratives was primarily inductive, allowing different narratives to emerge from the data and be explored in their own terms. Interviews and review of documents focussed on three open ended questions - about *challenges* to Myanmar's democratisation, *strategies* to address these problems and the *vision* of a future democratic Myanmar, and the detailed narrative descriptions provided in chapter five, six and seven are structured in line with these categories.

Responses to these questions were then grouped according to their similarities.<sup>43</sup> For example, when asked about the core challenge to Myanmar's democratisation, there were diverging responses. A cluster of actors – mostly donor representatives – consistently identified the lack of functioning formal democratic institutions and a personalised culture of politics as the key issue for Myanmar's democratisation. On the other hand, another cluster of actors emphasised poor past leadership – and narrow vested interests – as the core challenge.

The data analysis focussed most closely on the *content* of narratives, though at times I also drew on insights from narrative theory about the *form* of narratives. A key example comes from Polkinghorne (1995) who highlights the way the 'temporal range' of stories (where they begin and end) can reveal layers of meaning which may not be immediately obvious. This became important for the analysis, in that some donor representatives related the story of Myanmar's democratisation within a relatively narrow time window – stretching only as far back as military rule in the 1990s. In contrast, Burmese activists and opposition leaders often employed a much wider 'temporal range' (Polkinghorne 1995)

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<sup>43</sup> In the initial process of data analysis I described different clusters of responses as representing two narratives. However, as I continued with the field research a set of responses consistently failed to align with either of these narratives and led to a period of reflection on whether the data demanded an alternate categorisation. Ultimately it became clear that another set of actors identified Burmese cultural norms of hierarchy as being the core challenge with neither institutions nor moral leadership alone able to solve it. This interpretation was then identified as the basis of a third *equality* narrative about Myanmar democratisation as a process of cultural reform.

including rich reflections on colonial rule and nineteenth century monarchs – meaning that there were different ‘orientations’ within narratives.

Finally, it should be noted that in this study the data was not analysed with the wider intention of facilitating a convergence of narratives into a ‘metanarrative’. Authors such as Roe (1989) suggest that the aim of narrative analysis should be in reaching a ‘metanarrative’ that can assist in reconciling seemingly opposed policy positions. For Van Eeten (2006, 255), there can be an ‘open, deliberative approach grounded in argument, evidence, and policy debate where participants can critically reflect and reappraise their initial framing of the issue’. In contrast, the analytical approach I have taken in this thesis – with an emphasis on *discursive* power - questions any expectation of eventual consensus. As Hajer (1995) highlights much of the contest can remain imperceptible, hidden within routinized practices. The contest of narratives does not always result in the flowering of a new consensus, or even in the active perpetuation of argument, sometimes it simply remains obscured.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I began by describing three crucial elements of narrative that help to shed light on the research questions of my thesis. First, as simplified stories, narratives are an important mechanism through which political ideas are understood and communicated. What makes a story a story is that they bring order in complexity by drawing together a simplified plot which contains key elements of visions, challenges and strategies. Second, conceptual contests can be over narrative plot but also over the narrative construction of characters. Narratives are a mechanism for the exercise, and reinforcing, of discursive power. Finally, while narratives are a mechanism for the exercise of power, these struggles are not always overt, and in fact the nature of narratives and their associated practices often serve to obscure conceptual contests. I then moved to describe how narrative analysis was used as a methodology in this study. I positioned my own use of narrative in relation to three prominent themes in the narrative literature – on the level of aggregation, specificity versus flexibility, and

issue of the 'embeddedness of the observer'. Finally, I described the specific methods used in my study, sampling and how data was analysed.

After laying the theoretical and methodological foundations of this thesis in the last two chapters, the next chapter turns to Myanmar's modern history tracking the context of the word 'democracy' through periods of colonial, parliamentary and military government. While outlining the broader historical context in which my study is set, I also continue to develop themes from this chapter, especially about the role of conceptual contest in the development of meanings of democracy.

From the independence movement of the 1930s to the democracy movement of the 2000s, periods of colonial, parliamentary and military rule shaped the way that democracy was given meaning. Contemporary stories of democracy in Myanmar are, in part, a product of conceptual contests over these periods. The logic within contemporary narratives therefore can only be understood against this historical backdrop. How did the British colonial officials, Burmese independence activists, military leaders and Burmese opposition leaders make sense of democracy?

## **Chapter 4** Modern Burmese history: meanings of democracy and conceptual contest

To situate my arguments about narratives of democracy, I now outline Burma's modern political history through periods of colonial, parliamentary and military rule. Along with an overview of the country's modern history, this chapter highlights narratives of democracy drawn on by four sets of actors –the British colonial administration, Burmese independence leaders, Burmese military elites, and democracy movement leaders after 1988.

Through tracing out historical narratives I argue that meanings of democracy were not only inspired by visions of the future, but were also created in reaction to perceived challenges. As I described in the previous chapter, story-lines are often formed in response to particular contextually embedded 'counter positions' (Hajer 1995). In this chapter I highlight how a narrative of democracy that emerged within the Burmese independence movement was, in part, a reaction to the British colonial administration's own narrative of democracy. Subsequently, accounts of challenges and visions from military governments in the second half of the twentieth century were reactions to the perceived weakness of civilian leaders in the parliamentary period (1948-62).

Myanmar's modern history also indicates ways in which meanings of democracy have been constructed through conceptual contest – the focus of my second research question. In the previous chapter I argued that narratives are not only interpretations of challenges, visions and strategies but are also a means for the exercise of power in a discursive form. By constructing plot and characters in narrative, political actors can position themselves, and others, and control the ways in which 'democracy' is discussed in certain social settings. In this chapter I introduce ways that characters were constructed within historical narratives about democracy in Burma. For example, the British colonial administration's portrayal of the Burmese as a dependent and immature 'people at school'

(Fielding-Hall 1906) was a means through which they could marginalise members of the independence movement.

In describing the flow of modern Burmese history - and prominent narratives of democracy - I draw on a range of primary sources including accounts from colonial officials, speeches of independence leaders, and military documents such as the 'Burmese Road to Socialism' (Tatmadaw 1963). In providing further context of the colonial, parliamentary and military periods the chapter also draws on the analysis of scholars<sup>44</sup> such as Maung Maung Gyi.<sup>45</sup> I note the work of Maung Maung Gyi here in particular because of its influence on certain networks in the contemporary democracy movement - a topic which I will return to in chapter seven.

I now explore four sets of actors within Burmese modern history, their particular political circumstances, and prominent ways in which they gave meaning to the word democracy. I describe a narrative from within the *British colonial administration*, a reaction from amongst the *Burmese independence leaders*, a narrative drawn by *Burmese military* elite after 1962, and another by leaders in the *democracy movement* after 1988.

## **British colonial administration**

This section describes the prominent ways in which British colonial officials gave meaning to the word 'democracy' in Burma. A narrative of 'a people at school' (Fielding Hall 1906) portrayed an immature Burmese political culture as the primary obstacle to democracy. The vision was of a transfer of knowledge from 'West' to 'East' that could help to build the formal institutions of responsible democratic governance in Burma (Leach 1937).

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<sup>44</sup> In this chapter where I refer to Burmese scholars such as Maung Maung Gyi I do not include Burmese honorific titles. However, for historical figures I use the prefixes U (for male), Daw (for females) and Bo (denoting military officer). For example I refer to U Nu rather than simply Nu. It should be noted that in the reference section, the honorific titles are excluded.

In tracing out this narrative, I use primary sources from a range of colonial officials. Yet I particularly focus on works from long term members of the colonial administration - chief secretary to the Government of Burma F.B. Leach, and members of the British Civil Service H. Fielding Hall and J. G. Scott (who adopted the Burmese name Shway Yoe) - who all spent decades working in colonial Burma. A clear articulation of the paternalistic 'people at school' narrative came from these colonial officials who were most familiar with the culture and context of Burma. These works are characterised by the authors' considerable knowledge of Burma and yet their portrayal of the immaturity of Burmese political culture as an obstacle to democracy and responsible governance.

On November 29 1885 King Thibaw, the last monarch of Burma, left his Mandalay palace and was paraded through the city's crowded streets on a small bullock cart. The British expeditionary forces had defeated the Burmese army, captured the royal palace and then insisted that Thibaw leave the city immediately - riding not on his royal elephant, but in a more humble cart (Maung Htin Aung 1967).<sup>46</sup> Thibaw was then taken to India, living the rest of his life there in exile. This ended more than seven centuries of rule by Burmese monarchs in the Ayeyawaddy valley and marked the beginning of a 63 year period of British colonial control of upper Burma (Maung Htin Aung 1967).

A variety of reasons are suggested for the British invasion of Mandalay in 1885 – most notably British concerns about increasingly close relations between the Burmese king and the French government (Thant Myint U 2004). However, there was also concern to liberate the people of upper Burma from the supposedly tyrannical rule of King Thibaw. Earlier, British Chief Commissioner Fytche argued that invasion could free the country from 'the rank oppressive rule of rapacious and cruel Burmese viceroys' (Fytche 1878, 256)<sup>47</sup>. Charles

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<sup>46</sup> The invasion of Upper Burma in 1885 by the British forces was in fact the third Anglo-Burmese war, the previous two taking place in 1824-6 and 1852-3.

<sup>47</sup> Colonial administrator H. Fielding Hall recounted that after the fall of Mandalay British soldiers – anxious to portray the cruelty of the monarch - used red sealing wax to put up 'bloody' handprints inside one of the palace rooms (Fielding Hall 1906).

Crosthwaite, Chief Commissioner of Burma after the fall of Mandalay, even wondered if the British should have annexed Upper Burma earlier, as that would 'have saved the people from some years of anarchy and great suffering' (Crosthwaite 1912, 7). As historian Thant Myint U suggests, 'in British eyes... [Thibaw] was a gin soaked tyrant, together with his wicked wife cruelly oppressing his people...oblivious of his people's need for the sort of progress only a civilised government could provide' (Thant Myint U 2004, 8).<sup>48</sup>

Some within the British army assumed that removing the monarch would result in a warm welcome by wider Burmese society (Thant Myint U 2004). Instead, however, in the early years after the capture of Mandalay, the British army faced a widespread insurgency across the country. It was to be another five years before, as Crosthwaite (1912, 3) describes, 'the last of the large gangs was dispersed, the leaders captured, and peace and security established'.

The annexation also saw the construction of a geographically defined and British controlled colony called 'Burma'. While governed in different ways – the Ayeyawaddy valley with direct British rule, and the mountain areas indirectly through ethnic leaders – this new entity brought the country's *bamar* population together with hundreds of other language and cultural groups (Smith 1994). These groups had previously had their own practices of integration with, or complete separation from, the Burmese state and in many cases there had been no firm geographical borders or delineation of particular states and regions (Steinberg 2010).

Ultimately, the construction of the colonial administrative units of Burma across these cultural, ethnic and religious lines - and their eventual integration into a single, independent country - would contribute to long term ethnic conflict in the second half of the twentieth century. The instability caused by ethnic division and civil war after independence would come to be important in later narratives

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<sup>48</sup> In his 1925 work *History of Burma* British colonial official G. E. Harvey sought to present a more romantic image of the Burmese kings. However, his description highlights the inability of Burmese kings to rebuild the unity of the Bagan period. See Phillips (2005) for more discussion of the work of Harvey.

drawn on by Burmese military leaders – the supposedly inherent instability of the country justifying the ongoing role of the military in governance (Callahan 2012).

As in their other colonies in ‘the East’, the British administration portrayed a lack of maturity in Burmese culture. A government census report from 1901 described Burmese people as ‘unbusinesslike, irresponsible, perfectly incapable of sustained effort, content with what can be gained by a minimum of toil’ (Census of India 1901, 114). Reflecting on his meeting with King Thibaw before the fall of Mandalay, colonial official J.G. Scott (or Shway Yoe) observed that Thibaw’s ‘easy-going indolence’ was reflective of all Burmese (Shway Yoe 1882, 476). Meanwhile, the ‘tawdriness’ of the King’s Hall of Meeting in Mandalay, Scott went on, demonstrated the Burmese national characteristic of ‘carelessness’ (Shway Yoe 1882, 473). ‘A Burman, they say, never likes to finish anything’, he concluded (Shway Yoe 1882, 462). Slightly more favourably, Fielding Hall saw the Burmese as like ‘children who had not yet been to school...full of good intentions, full of great weaknesses, full of the faults of childhood’ (Fielding Hall, 1906, 28).<sup>49</sup>

In short, many British observers considered Burmese notions of governance to be inferior to their own. Failing to acknowledge the efforts of Burmese monarchs in the nineteenth century toward governance reform, Fielding Hall observed, ‘all the foreign influences were conspicuously wanting and as all new ideas come from without, the state of society remained very primitive’ (Fielding Hall 1906, 27). This left Burmese society – as opposed to more ‘mature’ Western society - vulnerable to exploitation by dictators. It was Western ideas which would stimulate political progress, not only in Burma but throughout ‘the East’ (Leach 1937).

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<sup>49</sup> In his 1905 work *Burma Painted and Described*, British artist Kelly makes similar observations concluding that ‘even if the Burman is somewhat indolent and conceited, his indolence is largely that of the gentleman of leisure’ (Kelly 1905, 253).

For British proponents of this colonial narrative, the solution for the ‘primitive’ society<sup>50</sup> was to train the Burmese in modern self-governance. Fielding Hall argued that the Burmese needed to become a ‘people at school’, learning the ways of the West (Fielding Hall 1906)<sup>51</sup>. A significant part of this training was in the capacity to build and follow systematic policy – as opposed to a more informal, personalised form of politics. Colonial official F. B. Leach (1937, 142) suggested:

what is essential...is that the most able men in the country should devote their time and their energies to the art of government, should put aside the petty intrigues and the personal recriminations which have unfortunately been a marked characteristic of Burmese politics in the past, and should endeavour to evolve a policy and follow out the principles of that policy.

In other words, the immature and personalised politics in Burma needed to be replaced by adherence to formal institutions of governance. This democracy promotion strategy, according to Maung Maung Gyi (1983), was one of ‘constitutionalism’.

The British administration of course had overarching economic goals in Burma. British Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain (and later Prime Minister) said in 1896 that the British ‘Foreign Office and the Colonial Office are chiefly engaged in finding new markets and in defending old ones...it is not too much to say that commerce is the greatest of all political interests’ (cited in Podmore 2008, 14). Yet this was also a period of growing recognition in the British government of imperial responsibility, taking up the ‘White Man’s Burden’ (Kipling 1899) to support social progress in colonies in ‘the East’. Along with growing local

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<sup>50</sup> For the colonial administration, an important perceived obstacle to democratization in Burma was the role of religion in politics. Schober (2011, 5) argues that the British colonial administration – influenced by western post Enlightenment political theory – insisted on ‘secularising politics [in Burma] and dislodging it from a Buddhist worldview that had, until then, encompassed it’. Yet paradoxically, as will be highlighted in the next section, British prohibitions against Burmese political gatherings in the early part of the twentieth century forced political organising into the religious realm.

<sup>51</sup> It is important to note that capacity building for democratic self-government was something that emerged as a goal only late in British colonial policy in Burma. In his 1948 work *Colonial Policy and Practice*, colonial public servant and writer John Furnival describes the period after 1923 – and the implementation of the dyarchy system – as the beginning of colonial efforts toward ‘political democracy’.

agitation for self-rule across British India, the desire to foster social progress led the British to introduce new governance institutions in Burma. Beginning in 1923, the British formed a system of 'dyarchy'. A legislative council was established - where 77 out of 103 members were popularly elected by the Burmese public - and some ministries were allowed to come under the administration of locally elected Burmese members. Meanwhile, other ministries deemed too sensitive to be locally controlled - especially related to defence and foreign affairs - remained under the direct control of the British governor. This process of 'constitutionalism' (Maung Maung Gyi 1983) was seen almost exclusively as a transfer of institutional capacity from 'West' to 'East'. In the words of Fielding Hall, 'what Rome did for the Western world, that we are doing for the East. The people must come into our school, and there learn what England learned long ago' (Fielding Hall 1906, 75).<sup>52</sup>

The transfer of democratic capacity from 'West' to 'East' was supported by a notion of democracy as being an inevitable point toward which all countries were moving - though at different rates. According to Leach (1937, 138) there had been a global current of politics which had:

for the last century been carrying mankind towards the Ocean of Democracy...The West, it is true, has been in the centre of the stream and the East has for the most part been left in backwaters along the banks, but even the East has been gradually sucked into the main stream'

'Even the East' could be brought into the Ocean of Democracy by learning from Western countries. However, despite the supposedly inevitable flow of the East into the Ocean of Democracy, some colonial observers of the period also saw deep shortcomings in colonial strategy. Perhaps most prominent was British Civil Service official and then 'pro-Burmese' scholar J.S. Furnivall (1948) who argued that the capitalist forces of British colonialism exacerbated racial divisions in Burmese society, leading to a lack of common social will. Furnivall

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<sup>52</sup> Fielding Hall's position on the superiority of Western learning - and the need for Western education in the 'East' - reflects the 1835 Minute on education in India from T. B. Macaulay (1835). The British Parliament's subsequent 1835 English Education Act made English, as opposed to Sanskrit or Arabic, the official language of education in British India.

was therefore supportive of Burmese nationalism and self-government as a way of re-integrating society.<sup>53</sup> British colonial official Eric Blair – who would later take the pen name George Orwell (1936) – was also particularly strident in his critique of colonialism in Burma. He wrote; ‘I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing...Theoretically – and secretly, of course – I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British’ (George Orwell 1936, 1).

Yet colonial officials who had more enthusiasm for Empire also expressed doubts about British ability to ‘school’ the people of Burma. Fielding-Hall (1906, 45) lamented that ‘we have introduced new ways, new thoughts, new faiths-but the old live. And though we are masters, yet is our power limited. If we move, it can be only in the ancient ways’. Despite all the resources of the British colonial administration there was some internal recognition that they were failing to construct the constitutional democracy they had hoped for (Maung Maung Gyi 1983).<sup>54</sup> ‘Charm we never so wisely’, Fielding Hall (1906, 45) concluded, ‘the East shuts her ears and goes her own way’.

Members of the British colonial administration constructed a narrative portraying a particular set of challenges, visions and strategies about Burma’s politics and its potential democratization. The immature Burmese could reach the global ‘ocean of democracy’ through becoming a ‘people at school’, learning about modern democratic institutions and values – things that England had learned ‘long ago’ (Fielding Hall 1906). Thus, as I argued in the previous chapter, narrative not only constructs a particular ‘plot’ but also serves to position different ‘characters’. Fielding Hall’s (1906) description of the Burmese as a ‘people at school’ played a role in positioning Burmese political rivals as immature and incapable of self-rule. Or Leach’s (1937) description of an ‘Ocean of Democracy’ where the ‘East’ is in the backwaters and the ‘West’ is in the centre, clearly positions British actors, rather than Burmese ones, as having

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<sup>53</sup> Furnivall did not however dismiss British ideals of governance as an example for Burma. See Pham (2004) for a detailed examination of Furnivall and his critiques of colonialism.

<sup>54</sup> Steinberg (2010) even suggests that the pattern of colonial administrative control of Burma fostered an authoritarian rather than democratic form of Burmese leadership.

authority to speak 'truth' about the topic of 'democracy'. The use of this narrative thus served to reinforce the need for British colonial power in Burma to be maintained, in order to foster 'the progressive evolution of self-governing institutions' (Churchill 1941). Yet while this narrative was prominent with the British colonial administration in Burma, in others spheres of social interaction a very different narrative emerged.

## **Burmese independence leaders**

The early twentieth century saw the beginning of a new Burmese movement seeking independence from British colonial rule. Within this new movement an alternative narrative of democracy developed - one defined partly in opposition to the British idea of a 'people at school'. Where Burmese monarchs were portrayed as despotic by British colonial officials such as Chief Commissioner Fytche (1878), an alternate narrative presented the monarchy as democratic in its foundations. Where proponents of the 'people at school' narrative saw a transfer of capacity from 'West' to 'East', some in the independence movement emphasised an everyday democracy within Burmese culture – and that in fact a transfer of Buddhist ideas from 'East' to 'West' was more important. And finally, as opposed to a focus on secular institutions and capacity building for self-government, proponents of the independence movement narrative emphasised self-rule and Buddhist moral progress.

Importantly though, I do not present this as a contest between 'traditional' and 'modern' meanings of democracy. In his 1962 work *Politics, personality and nation-building: Burma's search for identity*, Lucian Pye portrays Burmese political culture through the colonial and parliamentary periods as being rooted in 'traditional' notions of power. Yet I demonstrate in this section that Burma's independence leaders drew on a range of sources in constructing the problems and visions related to democracy. For many activists of the 1920s and 30s, resisting the British narrative of a 'people at school' meant drawing inspiration from political movements around the world yet also reframing democracy as being uniquely Burmese. They drew, for example, on reinterpretations of

Buddhist teaching, the writings of Irish revolutionaries, and Fabian socialist thought. Characterising their positions as ‘traditional’ or ‘primordial’ pays insufficient attention to this diversity.

In this section I explore the reaction of the independence movement to the British narrative of a ‘people at school’ and the diverse influences they drew on to construct an alternate ‘story-line’ of challenges, visions and strategies. Then drawing on the speeches and works of Burma’s leader, particularly Prime Minister U Nu, I describe how this narrative evolved amidst the instability of the early period after independence.

### *Reacting against a ‘people at school’*

After being preceded by religious and social associations, such as the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA), by the 1920s a set of more overtly political, and anti-British, organisations became prominent<sup>55</sup>. The General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA) emerged out of the YMBA in 1920 taking a strongly anti-colonial stance, yet it quickly fractured over differences in strategy. Then in 1930 the *Dobama Asiayone*, or ‘We Burmese organisation’<sup>56</sup> was formed. In particular the *Dobama* organisation sought to question the colonial approach of gradual institution building for democracy (Maung Maung Gyi 1983). ‘Burma is still unfree. And yet our imperialist rulers have the cheek to declare that they are for democracy’ they argued in the ‘Manifesto of the *Dobama asiayone*’ (1939 in Blum et al. 2010, 514). The British had, as I have described, made efforts to develop a new constitution and the institution of ‘dyarchy’ in Burma which allowed for local autonomy in some areas. Yet the *Dobama Asiayone* stressed that British constitutionalism was not a step toward self-governing democracy. ‘How

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<sup>55</sup> In some ways there was a paradox within the formation of these new social organisations. Their aim was to ‘revive national cultures and institutions’ (Maung Htin Aung 1967, 101) and resist British colonial influence. Yet the medium for this was the adoption of European forms of social organization. For example, the Young Men’s Buddhist Association was designed on the model of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) which was popular in England.

<sup>56</sup> The term *Dobama* was first used as a rallying cry in 1930 during riots against Indian dock workers. Later that year the term was taken up by student activists –who sought to question British power in Burma and the colonial democracy promotion approach of gradual institution building.

can it be so' the Manifesto said 'when it confers dictatorial powers upon the Governor who comes from a land eight thousand miles away? It is indeed a far cry from democracy' (1939 in Blum et al. 2010, 514).

This conflict of strategy toward democratization created a 'race' (Maung Maung Gyi 1983) during the 1930s and 40s between the constitutionalism of the British - focussing on the gradual building of formal institutions for democratic self-governance - and the nationalist and moral democratic goals of the independence movement. Both sides agreed that Burmese self-rule was the long term goal, yet the rate and nature of the transition was in dispute. The colonial narrative of a 'people at school' supported a slow transition based around institutional development, while the nationalist democracy narrative of the independence movement saw immediate self-rule as the crux of 'democracy' (Maung Maung Gyi 1983).

The more overtly political stance of independence activism was also characterized by the *thakin* movement. British colonial officials had appropriated the Burmese word *thakin* (master) and compelled Burmese people to address all British residents using this title (Ooi 2004, 1329). However, in the 1930s a group of Burmese students began to re-appropriate the word, referring to themselves and each other as 'master' (Maung Htin Aung 1967). By shifting the accepted use of the word they challenged the colonial social hierarchy and gave the message, as Aung San Suu Kyi (1991, 130) reflects in her historical works, that 'the Burmese, too, were a race of masters, not slaves'.<sup>57</sup> Thus in considering the process of democratization and independence, the *thakin* movement recognised the power of language in framing relative positions of power. This twisting of the word *thakin* portrayed Burmese activists and leaders – as opposed to the British - as the true 'masters'.

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<sup>57</sup> When, during the colonial period, the British celebrated Remembrance Day on November 11 - for the fallen in World War One - the Burmese independence movement reframed it as a 'remembrance day' for the fallen in the Anglo Burmese war of 1885, which had begun on November 11 (Maung Htin Aung 1967).

One member of the *thakin* movement – who was a student at Yangon University and also the grandson of a leader in the Burmese insurgency against the British in the 1880s (Thant Myint U 2004) – was U Aung San. He became a student leader, magazine editor, armed revolutionary and ultimately Burma's most famous independence hero. U Aung San and his contemporaries in the independence movement reflected the way in which this alternate narrative of Burmese democracy was developed.

This narrative of democracy drew inspiration from both international sources, and reinterpretations of Burmese sources. On one hand, the leaders of the independence movement often looked to other movements around the world to develop their vision of democracy. The *nagani* (red dragon) book club was founded by Burmese activists including *thakin* Nu – a young student activist who would later become the first Prime Minister of Independent Burma. The book club translated and published over a hundred books (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991) and was based on the model of Victor Gollancz's Left Book Club of London (Money 2014, 211) - particularly emphasizing left wing and revolutionary texts from the West. The main objective of Club 'was to be free of British rule and in order to do this they would have to revolutionise the minds of the people' (Money 2014, 212). Or as Aung San Suu Kyi (1991, 132) reflected, the idea behind the Club was that 'if Burma wished to be known to the world, Burma herself must first get to know the world'. Within the Book Club, the Irish struggle for independence was closely studied (Maung Htin Aung 1967).<sup>58</sup> Out of the hundred books published, twenty one were about Irish revolutionary Michael Collins (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991, 132) and at times, the Burmese independence activists even referred to themselves as the 'The Irish of the East' (Money 2014, 212).<sup>59</sup>

There was also significant interest from the Burmese independence movement in the rise of Japan's influence in Asia. When cinemas had first opened in colonial Rangoon in the early twentieth century some of the early films were of Japanese soldiers defeating the Russians in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-5 (Thant

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<sup>58</sup> As an intellectual who was also willing to sacrifice himself for his country, the work of Philippine nationalist writer Jose Rizal was also prominent in the Book Club (Money 2014).

<sup>59</sup> For analysis of the background of the term 'Irish of the East' see Zollner (2010).

Myint U 2004). By the late 1930s U Aung San and other Burmese activists – including *thakin* Shu Maung (later known as General Ne Win) - had decided to look to Japan for military support in removing the British colonial rulers (Maung Htin Aung 1967). As historian Thant Myint U suggests, the growing independence movement in colonial Burma was not simply an insular nationalist movement but looked to ‘Sinn Fein, the Fabian society, the Indian National Congress and the rise of Japan for their inspiration’ (Thant Myint U 2004, 246).<sup>60</sup> The reaction against the narrative of a ‘people at school’ was not a traditional or primordial one.

Yet on the other hand, in countering the dominant narrative of democracy in the colonial period, the movement also drew on reinterpretations of Burmese history – in particular emphasizing the Buddhist origins of democracy. Burmese political actors had long been drawing on Buddhist language and ideas as a source of legitimacy (Schober 2011).<sup>61</sup> However the independence movement and its opposition to colonial rule brought new interpretations and the overt use of the vocabulary of ‘democracy’.<sup>62</sup>

Amidst reinterpretations of Buddhist teaching within the independence movement, of particular importance were new reflections of kingship. In 1938, near the height of independence movement activism, famous Burmese writer *thakin* Kodaw Hmaing wrote ‘Thakin Tika’ which was a reinterpretation of the *Aggañña Sutta*, a foundational Buddhist story of the first king, or *mahasammata*. Thakin Kodaw Hmaing sought to make new links between democracy and the Burmese institution of monarchy (Walton 2012).

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<sup>60</sup> A prominent advocate of Fabianism at the time was J.S. Furnival. See Pham, J., 2005. ‘JS Furnivall and Fabianism: Reinterpreting the ‘Plural Society’ in Burma’.

<sup>61</sup> This is not to suggest that Buddhism was just used instrumentally by anti-colonial activist organisations to serve the end of Burmese self-rule. Turner (2014, 3) makes the compelling argument that much Burmese activist mobilisation in the early twentieth century was toward ‘saving Buddhism’. There was concern amongst many Burmese that the social and political changes in the country pointed toward a deterioration of the *sasana*, the teachings and practice of Buddhism. Rather than religion being used instrumentally, the goals of self-rule, democracy and protection of the *sasana* were closely intertwined for many independence activists.

<sup>62</sup> This time of reinterpretation of Burmese culture and traditions in the 1930s is also seen in the emergence of the *khit san sarpay* literature (including famous authors such as Theippan Maung Wa and Zawgyi) which aimed literally to be ‘testing the age’.

According to the *Aggañña Sutta* text, there was a time when ancient society began to realise that they needed to be protected from their own base nature (*Aggañña Sutta* 20, trans. Walshe 1995) so a king was popularly chosen by the people. *Mahasammata*, which literally means ‘great honoured one’, was known as ‘The People’s Choice’ (*Aggañña Sutta* 21, trans. Walshe 1995). In turn, society voluntarily decided to give ten percent of their yield to support the king (*Aggañña Sutta* 20, trans. Walshe 1995). Thus for Kodaw Hmaing the monarchical form of government was interpreted as arising through a social contract. The people chose a leader who they then supported through giving a portion of their yield. The end goal was to create, what historian Thant Myint U (2004, 56) describes as, ‘a peaceful ordered society conducive to religious activity’. As well as being bound through this social contract, the power of the monarch could be kept in check through both a parliament (or *hluttaw*) consisting of government ministers (or *wun gyi*) and the institution of the Buddhist order of monks (or *sangha*) who could appeal to the king in certain circumstances (Thant Myint U 2004). ‘Democracy’, then, was constructed within the independence movement, and works such as Thakin Tika, as ‘a leaf torn from the book of Buddhism’ (Dharma Vijaya 1953, 5)<sup>63</sup>.

Furthermore, if ‘genuine’ democracy was in fact of Burmese origins, then it was the ‘duty’ of Burmese people to present Buddhist ideas to the British so that they could see ‘the un-wisdom of enslaving nations to satisfy their ambitions’ (Dharmapala 1933, 348). They could ‘modify the cruel nature of British imperialism’ (Dharmapala 1933, 348). Reversing the colonial perception of a transfer of capacity from West to East, Burmese leader U Chan Htoon later said, Buddhism is the ‘only ideology which can give peace to the world ... Western countries are longing for Buddhism now’ (Chan Htoon 1952). In other words, where Leach (1937, 138) saw an ‘Ocean of Democracy’ with Burma in the backwaters; the independence movement saw Burmese Buddhism at the centre.

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<sup>63</sup> Some within the independence movement even saw the late monarchical period as on a trajectory toward *demokarazi* – one which was suddenly cut short by the British invasion. For example, there was renewed interest in the Myoza of Yaw’s ‘Treatise on the Compassionate disposition of righteous government’ which had been written during Thibaw’s reign. And this was interpreted as an inherently Burmese inspiration for constitutional government (Thant Myint U 2007, 159).

Reacting against the British portrayal of the Burmese culture as immature, independence activists saw democratic principles as being inherent within Burmese culture. As I described in the last section, for proponents of the colonial 'people at school' narrative, democratic progress entailed a shift away from 'traditional' Burmese concepts and practices. Yet for the independence movement, emphasising that democracy was already inherent in Burmese culture was crucial. In the coming chapters, I highlight how this understanding of Burmese society was also held by some participants in my own study.

For many activists of the 1920s and 30s, resisting the British narrative of a 'people at school' meant drawing inspiration from political movements around the world yet also reframing democracy as being uniquely Burmese.<sup>64</sup> Thus the contest between meanings of democracy was not, as Pye (1962) suggests, one of 'traditional' against 'modern'. These narratives were developed in Burma through what Silverstein (1998, 12) describes as an 'amalgam' of internal and external influences.

Further, the struggles of the colonial period also provide insights on the construction of meaning through conceptual contests. The colonial administration controlled the circles of government policy, yet activists within the independence movement sought to establish a meaning of democracy that could challenge the assumptions of the British. Where the narrative of a 'people at school' positioned the Burmese as being incapable of democracy, an alternate narrative positioned the independence movement leaders as in fact having unique knowledge about democracy. However, after successfully gaining independence from the British in 1948, the leaders of Burma faced a set of new challenges in attempting to unify the country.

### *The vision of a moral democracy*

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<sup>64</sup> While there was admission that the practice of Burmese kings or wider society did not always live up to the ideals of Buddhist democracy (Thant Myint U 2004), the goal of 'democracy' was portrayed not as a colonial import, but as a thoroughly Burmese principle.

Following the end of the Second World War in 1945, British colonial resources in South East Asia were exhausted and the Burmese movement for independence gained momentum. In particular, a new political alliance, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), became the focus of Burmese resistance to the British. The AFPFL was led by U Aung San and brought together a range of diverse political factions, including the Communist Party of Burma (CPB). After negotiations in London, British Prime Minister Attlee finally conceded that the British would grant Burma independence in 1948. The AFPFL then convincingly won general elections to determine the composition of the new government of Burma (Taylor 2009).<sup>65</sup>

In his speech to the AFPFL Party Convention in 1947 U Aung San warned the party leadership against division saying 'unity is the foundation. Let this fact be engraved in your memory...' (in Silverstein 1998, 161). Yet the unity of the AFPFL leadership was to be severely tested in the lead up to, and following, the gaining of independence in early 1948. The country's infrastructure had been largely destroyed during the war, its administrative systems were fragile, and it remained awash with weapons (Taylor 2009). To make matters worse, in the lead up to independence U Aung San, and a number of other Burmese cabinet ministers, were assassinated. Then, after independence, the new AFPFL government found itself immersed in a 'maelstrom of civil war' (Tin Maung Maung Than 2005, 52). The Communist Party of Burma (CPB) split from the AFPFL and took up arms against the Burmese military. Several ethnic minority armed groups – notably the Karen - also entered into conflict against the government. Finally, the newly independent Burmese government also dealt with an invasion from Chinese Kuomintang (KMT) troops on its north-east borders (Smith 1994).

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<sup>65</sup> The independent Burmese government reflected the complex interactions of (Burmese and non-Burmese) concepts which had guided the independence movement. While resisting British colonial rule, the formal institutions adopted in the new democratic Burmese state were structured almost exclusively around the British Westminster 'prototype' (Maung Maung Gyi 1983, 87). Or as Taylor (2009) suggests, the systems parliamentary government and bureaucracy designed by the new Burmese leaders were clearly a 'descendent' of the liberal democratic systems of the colonial administration.

At one level, the instability of the country restricted the functioning of democratic institutions. For example, due to insecurity, only 1.5 out of 8 million eligible voters actually cast their ballots in the 1951 elections (Blum et al 2010) and at times, government control of the capital itself, in Rangoon, was threatened by non-state armed groups. Prime Minister U Nu later claimed that that in the three years after independence 'over nine tenths of the country had been in the hands of insurgents' (Nu 1956).

Yet at another level, after years of instability following independence, the AFPFL leaders increasingly drew on personalised and moral notions of democracy. As during the earlier movement for independence, the AFPFL leadership continued to overtly emphasise the Buddhist origins of democracy. Minister for Education U Ba Yin said 'Buddha gave to humanity its charter of equality and freedom from fear and laid foundations for the establishment of a real world wide democracy' (Ba Yin 1954, 5). Similarly, in an interview in 1955 Khin Maung Gale (1955, 7), Burmese Minister of Finance, reflected:

In my view, not only democracy and socialism, but Buddhism also [is] interwoven. Unless there is a moral and spiritual content in a political ideology, there would be mere abstract nothingness.

There was also increasing emphasis, especially from U Nu, on the moral character of leaders. At the conclusion of his speech to the AFPFL congress in 1958 U Nu stressed that 'to make democracy stand steadfast and lasting, two things above others are needed. The ability to restrain and discipline oneself, and a spirit of subordination of self' (cited in Blum et al 2010, 46).<sup>66</sup> For U Nu, democracy required the structure of Westminster inspired institutions, yet it was moral character that could make democracy 'steadfast and lasting'.

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<sup>66</sup> In his speech U Nu also outlined several 'cardinal rules' which needed to be followed by members of the AFPFL – they needed to 'practice the moral precepts' of not drinking, gambling, or having illicit sexual relations, they should not be 'conceited' or gather 'individual strength', they should practice the 'principles of respectfulness and humility' shown by the Buddha, and not depend on 'force or arms'.

By the late 1950s the country was recovering economically and security had somewhat improved, despite the continuation of several civil wars (Taylor 2009). Yet this period was characterised by increasing division *within* the AFPFL. In 1958, the party split into two factions– a ‘Clean’ faction under U Nu, and a ‘Stable’ faction led by other independence leaders (Silverstein 1998). The AFPFL party, which had been one of the only stable political forces in the country after independence, had been unable to contain its diverse factions.

In this context of party division, U Nu, who was also a playwright, continued to personalise the moral commitment to democracy. He praised the martyr U Aung San for his *sedana*, or goodwill (Houtman 1999, 62). And in his introduction to U Nu’s play *The Wages of Sin*, Law Yone (1961) remarked:

U Nu came close to quoting the Bible when he gave his concept of democracy: It is not he who says Lord, Lord who will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who doeth the word of my Father. It is not everyone who says Democracy, Democracy that will find it, but he that doeth what democracy enjoins...democracy had not failed, but those professing it had failed democracy. In particular those who had preached it constantly had failed to practice it.

In other words, U Nu suggested that many people may talk about democracy, yet it was those who fulfilled the obligations of democracy who were most genuine. In 1960, as U Nu (Nu 1960, 1) reflected on Burma’s politics since independence, he said to Burmese parliamentarians that it was the lack of moral character of leadership which was the period’s greatest failing:

Even we who formed the vanguard failed to regulate our own conduct in full accordance with the noble ideals that animated that system...the arrogance, greed and power-madness that gripped many of our leaders, big and small, brought us to the brink of ruin.

For U Nu (1960, 1), the ‘arrogance, greed and power-madness’ of political leaders was undermining democracy and needed to be replaced with selflessness.

The period after independence from the British was one of intense contest – armed conflict against external communist or ethnic minority rivals, but also splits amongst the AFPFL political elite themselves. The extreme instability in the country during the parliamentary period led the country's leaders to emphasise the central place of moral and spiritual progress in democracy. Understanding these reactions of independence leaders is crucial in making sense of meanings of democracy drawn on by contemporary activists within the democracy movement. In the coming chapters I return to explore moral notions of democracy in depth.

Ultimately, the unity that U Aung San had hoped for within the political leadership of the country did not eventuate. Various Burmese political factions had worked together to demand independence from the British. Yet after independence, the crucial coalition between the military and U Nu's AFPFL party frayed, and military leaders began to construct a rival narrative about democracy in the country.

## **Burmese military**

This section outlines an evolving narrative about democracy from within the Burmese military or *tatmadaw*. I first focus on the 'Burmese Road to Socialism' - which defined the era of General Ne Win's rule (1962-88) - before turning to the more recent conceptions of 'disciplined democracy' that have been prominent since 2003. While evolving significantly through different periods, military elites drew on certain ongoing themes - the weakness of civilian politicians, and the importance of national unity and a constitutionally protected 'guardian' role for the military. There was a struggle for a system that, in the eyes of the military elite, could protect Myanmar's unity and maintain a central role for the *tatmadaw* (Callahan 2012, Jones 2014)

Examination of the Burmese military also reflects the way in which meanings given to the word democracy are constructed through conceptual contest. In this section I argue that through describing challenges, visions and strategies in

Myanmar's politics, military elites positioned themselves as the only institution capable of holding the country together (Callahan 2012). Most obviously this was through the portrayal of civilian politicians – many of whom were also independence activists – as being self-serving and weak. In different ways, all the contemporary narratives identified in my study of the democracy movement react against this military narrative. Furthermore, the intense and longstanding opposition to this Burmese military narrative has meant that many other contests – within the contemporary democracy movement and with its supporters – have been obscured. Thus an understanding of the military 'story line', and its origins, is required in order to interpret the contemporary struggles for democracy that are the focus of this thesis.

### *Under General Ne Win 1962-88*

Amidst the political uncertainty created by the split in the AFPFL in 1958, General Ne Win assumed control of the country in a 'caretaker' capacity. The stated rationale of Ne Win's intervention was to bring stability before national elections could again be held (Silverstein 1998). At this time, the Burmese military released a document entitled 'The National Ideology and Our Pledge - First Phase of the Ideological Development'. In this report it was argued that 'democracy is not safe...[we] therefore must be ever alert and watchful lest it fall victim to complacency...democracy will flourish only if people respect [law and order] and submit to the rule of law' (Tatmadaw 1958). This reflected the growing political instability in the country, and the concern amongst military elites for a firmer handed approach to the core issue of national unity.

In early 1960, during this period of temporary military leadership, historian D.G.E. Hall observed that General Ne Win 'has scrupulously respected constitutional forms. His ministers are all...persons of distinction in various walks of life and of high character' (Hall 1960, 189). Yet Ne Win's respect for constitutional forms was, in fact, short lived. After briefly restoring power to Prime Minister Nu – whose 'Clean' faction won the 1960 national elections – General Ne Win decided that more decisive action was required. On March 2,

1962, the Burmese military staged a coup. *Tatmadaw* leaders took over the government in the name of the Revolutionary Council, imprisoned U Nu and other civilian cabinet members, and set aside Burma's constitution.

Documents released by the military after the coup reveal a new narrative about democracy in Myanmar, one formed in reaction to the perceived chaos of the parliamentary period. Dr Maung Maung (1969, 296), who became Chief Justice in the Ne Win regime, said that the Revolutionary Council was 'deeply disillusioned with parliamentary democracy'. This was prominently articulated in a 1963 manifesto called 'The Burmese Road to Socialism: Policy Declaration of the Revolutionary Council' (Tatmadaw 1963). Crucially this 'Burmese Road' would be resolutely socialist and avoid 'deviation towards right or left' (Art. 3) – the deviations (whether communist or British capitalist) were seen to have caused many of the problems of Burmese history. And it would also avoid the pitfalls of parliamentary democracy. The Policy Declaration argues (Art. 14):

In the Union of Burma...parliamentary democracy has been tried and tested in furtherance of the aims of socialist development. But Burma's 'parliamentary democracy' has not only failed to serve our socialist development but also, due to its very defects, weaknesses and loopholes, its abuses and the absence of a mature public opinion, lost sight of and deviated from the socialist aims, until at last indications of its heading imperceptibly towards just the reverse have become apparent (Tatmadaw 1963)

Thus 'parliamentary democracy' and its perceived failings became the primary counter position against which the military would articulate its 'Road to Socialism'<sup>67</sup>. Parliamentary democracy had been unable to hold together the fractious ideological and ethnic diversity of the country. Meanwhile, the 'abuses' referred to in the Declaration were the perceived failures of civilian politicians to bring national unity. Civilian politicians were portrayed by military elites as

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<sup>67</sup> And as in the prominent independence movement narrative, this 'Burmese Road to Socialism' twisted together themes from a variety of origins. Western ideas of socialism - which had been adopted and adapted through groups like the *nagani* book club of the 1930s - clearly formed some of the basis of the 'Burmese Road'. And the architects of Ne Win's socialist program were not all – as is sometimes assumed – insular Burmese military men. Dr Maung Maung, who became Chief Justice under Ne Win and was instrumental in the writing of Burma's 1974 constitution (and again in the crisis of 1988) had his legal training at Lincoln's Inn, London, received a doctorate from Utrecht University in the Netherlands and spent two years at Yale University (Maung Zarni 2012, 296).

‘feeble and self- serving’ (Farrelly 2013, 313) or ‘fractious and corrupt’ (Jones 2014, 787). A senior figure in Ne Win’s administration, Colonel Maung Maung Kha, argued that while most civilian and military leaders had the same activist roots, those who had left the military were inferior. ‘The cream of the resistance movement’, he suggested, ‘stayed with the Burma army, and most of the rest became politicians. It was irksome to find that those who could not hold their own in the army came, in time, to be our political superiors’ (quoted in Lissak 1964, 9). This new narrative of the ‘Burmese Road to Socialism’ not only portrayed the failure of the system of parliamentary democracy in Burma but also constructed new characters, particularly emphasising the ineptitude of civilian politicians.

The ‘Burmese Road to Socialism’ Declaration also highlighted the perceived political ‘immaturity’ of Burmese citizens. It was partly the ‘absence of mature public opinion’ (Art. 14) that made parliamentary democracy unworkable in Burma. The independence leaders had argued that democracy was not born in the West but rather had Burmese Buddhist origins. Whereas the new military elite argued that ‘democracy’, at least in its parliamentary form, would fail due to the immaturity of citizens – an argument echoing the British colonial narrative of a ‘people at school’.

The solution to the problem of ethnic and ideological division in the country was to emphasise unity and the presence of a strong central government (Tatmadaw 1963)<sup>68</sup>. Civilian leaders such as U Nu had stressed that moral transformation was central to maintaining unity. Yet military elites turned to the idea of a strong constitutional framework with a central guardian role for the military – especially in suppressing dissent.

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<sup>68</sup> Walton (2012) importantly argues that while the Burmese Road to Socialism did not employ the overt religious language of U Nu, it was still explicitly placed within a ‘Buddhist moral universe’- with order and discipline providing the population with the stability for spiritual progress. Article eight of the Burmese Road to Socialism suggests that government had the ‘sole aim of giving maximum satisfaction to material, spiritual and cultural needs of the whole nation’ (Art. 8).

This perceived 'guardian' role in suppressing dissent resulted in the scale up of efforts to defeat armed communist and ethnic minority insurgencies. During the 1960s military campaigns increased significantly (Smith 1994). Yet this emphasis on bringing national unity through military force brought a self-fulfilling logic to the military narrative. On one hand, as Jones describes, the military portrayed itself as the 'only reliable guardian of Burma's national survival' (Jones 2014, 785). Its active presence in government was necessary to prevent the fracturing of the country under the feeble rule of civilian politicians. On the other hand by attempting to build national unity through military campaigns, the Burmese military was also successful in creating 'enemies' and perpetuating conflict (Callahan 2004). Thus the never-ending civil wars supported the narrative that the military was essential to the country's unity. As Callahan suggests, the ongoing strife within the country only 'reinforced the military's sense of being the nation's guardian' (Callahan 2012, 122).

Along with a hands-on armed role in forcing 'national unity', military elites also considered that they needed to maintain a core role in governance. This was formalised in the 1974 Constitution which instituted a nominally civilian system - under the one party rule of the new Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) - but with an active and ongoing role for the military. However, the scepticism of 'parliamentary democracy' from military elites did not mean that formal institutions were abandoned in General Ne Win's government. What is not often recognised is that the 1974 constitution gave provisions for state, division, township, ward and village tract level elections - meaning that a quarter of a million people were voted into local government positions (Martin 1975).

Of course given the BSPP was the only authorised political party these elections were clearly highly restricted and Martin argues that there is 'no evidence that the elections brought significant change at local government level' (Martin 1975, 130). Meanwhile, at the upper level, the Ne Win's Council of State, which took responsibility for all central decision-making, was 'almost entirely comprised of [Ne Win's] original Revolutionary Council' (Martin 1975, 129). The BSPP maintained their tight grasp on political power in Burma.

However, despite the initial optimism from military elites that they could guide the country to national unity and prosperity, by the late 1980s it had become clear that the 'Burmese Road to Socialism' was an economic failure<sup>69</sup>. Ongoing civil war, a collapsing economy and an increasingly unresponsive government sparked an evolution of the Burmese military narrative about democracy.

### *The road to 'disciplined democracy' 1988-2011*

By 1988, public frustration with the economic and political failings of General Ne Win's Burma Socialist Programme Party began to be taken to the streets. An incident of heavy handed police treatment of a student in Rangoon sparked waves of large scale protests (Thant Myint U 2004). As public opposition grew through 1988, it forced long standing senior *tatmadaw* officers to shift their stance. In July, General Ne Win abruptly resigned- ending his three decades of dominance in Burmese politics. After further months of protest and instability, on 18 September the military retook power under the new leadership of General Saw Maung. The military suspended the 1974 Constitution and began a brutal crackdown against protesters.

In this section I highlight how the new regime, named the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC),<sup>70</sup> reacted to the democracy movement by forming a vision of 'disciplined democracy' – multiparty democracy, yet with a constitutionally protected guardian role for the military. The SLORC was supposedly guided by three 'national causes' which were communicated widely through the State controlled media – 'non-disintegration of the Union; non-disintegration of national solidarity; and perpetuation of national sovereignty' (Tin Maung Maung Than 2005, 66). Importantly, from the perspective of *tatmadaw* elites, the military intervention was justified by the protests. General

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<sup>69</sup> After being one of the wealthiest countries in South East Asia in the early twentieth century (Leach 1936), in 1987 Burma was included in the United Nations list of Least Developed Countries.

<sup>70</sup> The SLORC was later renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

Khin Nyunt the Secretary 1 in SLORC later reflected on the 1988 crackdown by the military arguing that (Cohen 1999, 2):

The country was on the verge of destruction. Anarchy and chaos prevailed everywhere. Frankly, the machinery of government had broken down completely and the economy was in a shambles. Our first task was to restore peace and stability, law and order.

The ‘anarchy and chaos’ precipitated by the failure of the Ne Win government meant that, from the perspective of new *tatmadaw* elites, the military ‘unavoidably had to assume responsibilities’ (Government of Myanmar 2003, 1). Activists and protesters were portrayed by SLORC as being responsible for the anarchy and breakdown in order. On the other hand, military elites constructed their own role as a guardian that would help to restore ‘peace and stability’. Yet widespread public support for the protesters caused the SLORC to abandon the single party state of the Ne Win era and plan for a cautious return to multi-party democracy – though of a more constrained kind than that of the Westminster inspired parliamentary period. General Saw Maung stressed that the military would not hold power indefinitely and multiparty general elections were planned for 1990 (Government of Myanmar 2003).

For the post-Ne Win military elites however, a new problem had emerged after 1988. The communist and ethnic insurgencies had long threatened the integrity of the country, yet the protests had galvanised a powerful and organised new opposition movement – supported by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the popular daughter of national hero U Aung San. A new political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), rapidly gained popularity and became the focal point of opposition to the military. Confirming the concerns of military elites, the NLD won a significant majority of constituencies in the 1990 elections and NLD leaders demanded that they should form government.

Yet the SLORC denied any transfer of power. Military leaders withdrew their plans for multi-party elections and rather than forming government, SLORC announced that candidates elected in the poll would form a constituent assembly to design a new constitution through the process of a National Convention

(Steinberg 2010). In 1993, after the arrest of many members of the NLD, they began their highly orchestrated National Convention process. Of the 702 delegates selected for the National Convention, ultimately only 99 had been elected in the 1990 vote (Human Rights Watch 2007). The goal of this National Convention, General Khin Nyunt explained, was supporting 'the emergence of a modern, developed and democratic State in accordance with the aspirations of all strata of people' (Government of Myanmar 2003).

After several stalled years, including an NLD boycott of the National Convention process, in 2003 the regime outlined and then proceeded to implement a new 'Road Map to Democracy' (Steinberg 2010). The 'roadmap' was described by the military as a 'step by step implementation of the process for the emergence of a genuine and disciplined democratic system' (Burma Today 2003). Even in the 2000s, the period of parliamentary government in the 1940s and 50s continued to be a cautionary tale for many military elites. An editorial in the state controlled *New Light of Myanmar* in 2008 argued that, 'in the period of the parliamentary democracy in which the *tatmadaw* [Burmese military] did not participate in the politics, the Union was on the edge of collapse' (New Light of Myanmar 2008). For military elites 'disciplined democracy'<sup>71</sup> would avoid the chaos of U Nu's parliamentary period. Yet it would also move the country beyond Ne Win's 'Burmese Road to Socialism'.

In practical terms, the 'Roadmap to Democracy' involved reconvening the National Convention in 2004-7 to draft a constitution, holding a national referendum in 2008 to ratify the constitution<sup>72</sup>, conducting elections in 2010 to form a legislature, and finally forming a new civilian government in 2011. As described in the introduction, the quasi-civilian Thein Sein government that took power in 2011 proceeded to make a series of sweeping political and economic

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<sup>71</sup> Importantly though, while the English phrase 'disciplined democracy' gives awkward connotations of heavy handed authoritarianism, participants in this study viewed the Burmese word *si kan* (discipline) more favourably, in the sense of portraying an ordered and systematic approach.

<sup>72</sup> Jones (2014) highlights the close similarities between the 1993-6 National Convention documents and the Constitution adopted in 2008 - with the sections on aims and objectives of the state, state structure, and role for the military being almost identical.

reforms including liberalisation of the economy, release of many political prisoners and broadening of media freedoms.

Yet in order to understand contemporary narratives of democracy, it is important to note two consistent themes in military plans for 'disciplined democracy'. First, the National Convention and Roadmap to Democracy processes both emphasised the centrality of the constitution (Jones 2014). During the late 2000s, on the back page of the newspaper *New Light of Myanmar* (2008) there was a daily insistence that 'Democracy can only be achieved through the constitution'. The regime also actively deemphasized any connection between democracy and what they considered to be personalized politics. Houtman (1999, 135) argues that the regime felt that a focus on individual personalities – whether U Aung San, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi or General Ne Win – would undermine the military agenda. Thus the regime took at times extreme steps to minimize the focus on national heroes or leaders. For example, the *kyat* monetary notes were changed to display a lion (or *chin the*) rather than the picture of independence hero U Aung San (Houtman 1999).

Second, not only did military leaders consistently emphasise formal institutions over personalities, they also stressed the need for an ongoing guardian role for the *tatmadaw* in the country's governance. General Khin Nyunt (Government of Myanmar 2003) said 'we believe that we must give shape for the emergence of a democratic State that corresponds with our country and our people'. For military elites, the uniquely fractious nature of the country meant that Myanmar's democracy would necessarily have to rely on the military's hand in governance (Callahan 2012). Military elites continued to portray the *tatmadaw* as the only institution capable of holding the country together (Callahan 2012). This role was enshrined in the 2008 Constitution, with twenty five percent of positions in the parliament reserved for members of the armed forces. As signboards erected in cities around the country declared, 'Only when the army is strong will the nation be strong' (Dunlop 2013, 137).

The military narrative of ‘disciplined democracy’ – and these themes of formal institutions and the military’s guardian role - played an important role as a counter position against which the emerging democracy movement constructed alternate narratives. Thus an understanding of the military ‘story line’, and its origins, is required in order to interpret the contemporary struggles for democracy that are the focus of this thesis. In the coming chapters I describe three narratives that all, though in contrasting ways, reacted against this military narrative.

## **The democracy movement after 1988**

The events of 1988 not only precipitated new thinking about democracy within the military, but also a new narrative of democracy within the emerging opposition movement. In the next three chapters I take up in detail my own findings about the ways democracy was given meaning within the Burmese democracy movement during the Thein Sein period (2012-2016). In this section I first describe the democracy movement after 1988 and its struggles against the military government in both domestic and international spheres. I then introduce a narrative about the need to end illegitimate rule, and the centrality of moral character in democratic leadership – conceptual threads that feature prominently in the coming chapters. In examining the emergence of the democracy movement in this section I particularly highlight the works of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Due to her overwhelming popularity her views were crucial in informing this new narrative of democracy within the opposition.<sup>73</sup>

Most obviously, the brutal military crackdown on protesters in 1988 had a significant impact on the new democracy movement. Several hundred protesters, mostly students, had died in the first two days of military action and Fink (2001,

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<sup>73</sup> Of note is that the word ‘democracy’ was still central to the demands of the opposition movement. Parliamentary democracy had ended 26 years earlier in Burma and thus most of the protesters had no direct experience of democracy and, given the restrictive Burmese education system of the time, few opportunities to learn about it.

63) notes that the crackdowns had a 'profound psychological influence' on the young protesters, in particular through galvanising hatred of the military.

As well as catalysing intense local opposition to the military, the brutal response - and the subsequent refusal to transfer power after the 1990 elections - also created an international dimension to the democracy movement. In the early period after military crackdown, over ten thousand students fled to neighbouring countries and the West (Fink 2001). Then over the following years there was a proliferation of new Burmese organisations operating outside the country or in zones outside the control of the military government - such as the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB) and the All Burma Student's Democratic Front (ABSDF). Many of these groups were also supported with funding from Western aid agencies (Taylor 2009). While diverse in their specific interests, these exile organisations were committed to the general goal of ending the Burmese military regime. After Daw Aung San Suu Kyi called for international sanctions against the military regime in 1995, groups such as the NCUB had a high degree of success in lobbying Western governments to adopt, and maintain, a hard line stance against the Burmese government (Taylor 2009).

The efficacy of these efforts in fostering political change inside Myanmar was questionable.<sup>74</sup> Yet the prominent international campaign against the Burmese military during the 1990s and 2000s is important in that it contributed to a popular and scholarly focus on the struggle between the military government and opposing groups (comprised of both ethnic minority groups and the democracy movement led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi). My argument in this thesis is that the potency of the campaign against the Burmese military during the 1990s and 2000s eclipsed the examination of 'other' struggles for democracy in Myanmar - struggles that are also crucial in understanding the country's transition.

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<sup>74</sup> Importantly, while many Western governments held economic sanctions against the military regime, Myanmar's neighboring countries refused to endorse sanctions, thus undermining Western efforts to coerce military elites. See Taylor (2009) and Pederson (2008) for a wider discussion of sanctions policies.

While the international campaign against the Burmese military government grew, opposition leaders within the country also emphasised a new narrative about democracy focussing on the need for freedom from the illegitimate rule of the military, and for moral leadership. In her famous speech at Shwedagon pagoda in 1988, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (1991, 193) explicitly likened the struggle for democracy to the movement for independence against the British saying that ‘this national crisis could in fact be called the second struggle for national *lutlatye* (‘independence’ or ‘freedom’)’. Suu Kyi (1991, 193) went on to quote her father U Aung San in saying that ‘democracy is the only ideology that is consistent with freedom [*lutlatye*]’. As for the Burmese independence leaders, there was again a fusing together of notions of democracy and restoration of legitimate government, though in this case referring to the end of military, rather than British colonial, rule.

In the early 1990s, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was also intent on countering any argument that Burmese citizens were too immature for democracy, and that the country required the military to play a guardian role. In Suu Kyi’s 1991 essay *In Quest for Democracy* she argues that the military government sought to ‘undermine the movement for democracy’ by portraying democracy as ‘un-Burmese’ and human rights being a ‘western artefact alien to traditional values’ (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991, 174).

Like *Thakin* Kodaw Hmaing in the colonial period – whose work I highlighted earlier in this chapter – Suu Kyi (1991, 169) also draws on the *Aganna Sutta* to suggest that democracy is in fact consistent with, and indeed embedded in, Buddhist teachings. Amongst other Buddhist inspired codes of conduct she also highlights the *raza dhamma* or Ten Duties of Kings. Suu Kyi (1991, 170) argues that these are ‘generally accepted as a yardstick which could be applied just as well to modern government as to the first monarch of the world’. She translates the Ten Duties as ‘liberality, morality, self sacrifice, integrity, kindness, austerity, non-anger, non-violence, forbearance and non-opposition (to the will of the people)’. In this way Daw Aung San Suu Kyi echoed the narrative of the

Burmese independence leaders in relation to both the Buddhist foundations of democracy and the centrality of moral character in democratic leadership.

Ultimately however, the efforts of the democracy movement – and its exiled supporters – failed to dislodge the military from its hold on state power. Through the 1990s and 2000s there were several attempts, including by the United Nations, to create dialogue between the military leadership and the NLD with the aim of brokering a compromise. However, during this period Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD refused to agree to the military's plans for 'disciplined democracy'. Taylor (2009, 414) concludes that 'while moral certainty prevailed within the NLD, power continued to reside with the army'. Many key leaders of the NLD - including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi - and thousands of other activists spent years as political prisoners under the military regime. It was only after the 2010 elections, and then the liberalising reforms of the Thein Sein administration, that many political prisoners, such as 88-generation activist Ko Min Ko Naing, were finally released.

The Burmese democracy movement emerged in the struggles of national protest in 1988. On one hand, the harsh military crackdown on the movement catalysed an internationally recognised campaign against the Burmese military government. This campaign had considerable success in galvanising Western opposition to the regime, though it likely had less impact on the trajectory of military rule inside the country. Meanwhile opposition leaders and activists within the country suffered considerably through the 1990s and 2000s, being monitored, harassed and tortured by Burmese intelligence, being held as political prisoners, and for some, losing their lives.

These experiences were crucial in shaping the way that the activists, aid workers and opposition leaders gave meaning to the word democracy – through the 1990s and 2000s, and into the Thein Sein period, which was the period of my own research. Opposition to the military role in governance and a personalised and moral notion of democracy are central themes in narratives of democracy identified in this study. In the coming chapters I continue to trace out the context

of the Burmese democracy movement and its supporters, and the ways in which activists, aid workers and opposition leaders understood and communicated about democracy.

## **Conclusion**

My outline of Burma's modern history situates the arguments of this thesis about other struggles for democracy. I have described examples of the way democracy was given meaning in the colonial, parliamentary and military periods of government. At one level, these historical narratives support Hajer's (1995) contention that narratives are often formed in reaction to the story-lines, or plots, of rival actors. For many Burmese independence leaders, resistance to the British colonial narrative of a 'people at school' was the inspiration for a new narrative of democracy. Meanwhile, within the Ne Win government there was a reaction against the perceived weakness of Burmese parliamentary democracy and a vision was constructed of a 'guardian' role for the military. Further, as I will describe in the coming chapters, all the narratives identified in my study of the democracy movement were, in different ways, reactions against this military narrative of 'disciplined democracy'. Thus the flow of meanings of democracy within Burmese political history is crucial in understanding contemporary narratives.

At another level, these historical examples highlight other ways in which meanings of democracy are constructed through conceptual contest. In particular, I have pointed to how narratives can construct not only a *plot*, or interpretation of the process of democratization, but also position rival actors in different ways. For example, the colonial narrative of a 'people at school' was a way to position Burmese leaders as immature and unable to contribute to the country's transition to democracy. Members of the British colonial administration were the central actors in the story of democracy – drawing 'the East' into the Ocean of Democracy. For their part, the independence movement leaders drew inspiration from both inside and outside the country to construct themselves as the only morally legitimate democratic voices in the country.

In turn, the narrative of 'disciplined democracy' then created an image of civilian Burmese politicians as 'feeble and self-serving' (Farrelly 2013, 313). The military, in contrast, was constructed as being the only institution which could maintain stability and unity in the country (Callahan 2012). This flow of narratives and counter narratives of democracy is critical in understanding the context of the Burmese democracy movement during the Thein Sein government (2011-2016), which is the focus of this study.

In these first four chapters of my thesis I have sought to lay the theoretical, methodological and contextual foundations of the study. In the coming chapters I turn to my analysis of the democracy movement. How was democracy given meaning amongst activists and aid workers during the Thein Sein period of government? How did actors within the democracy movement use narratives, as simplified stories, to communicate about democracy? What challenges, visions and strategies were articulated?

## **Part 2 NARRATIVES AND THE BURMESE DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT**

As the word democracy becomes a point of consensus in Myanmar rather than one which polarises different political actors, it is increasingly important to examine the various meanings to which it is attached. My contention in the second part of the thesis is that examination of the ways democracy is given meaning amongst activists, opposition leaders and aid workers in Myanmar reveals crucial conceptual contests. There is a need amongst scholars and aid practitioners to understand struggles for democracy not only through the lens of authoritarians and democrats, but with attention to conceptual contests over how democracy is given meaning.

Attention to these ‘other’ struggles for democracy can help to make sense of the actions and beliefs of democracy activists around the world, particularly when those beliefs seem to diverge from liberal democratic expectations. Rather than assuming that actors in democracy movements are incompetent when their actions or beliefs diverge from those of Western democracy promoters, attention to conceptual contests over democracy can reveal local actors as sophisticated players of a different kind of game (Schaffer 1997).

Part 2 of this thesis turns to my own study of the democracy movement in Myanmar during the Thein Sein government 2011-2016. In the next three chapters (Ch. 5, 6 and 7) I describe three contrasting narratives of democracy. As I have argued, a central part of what makes a story a story is plot. Plot brings together different events and experiences and provides them with meaning (Wagenaar 2014). In particular a plot links together key narrative elements - visions, challenges, and strategies by which these challenges can be addressed - into a unified whole. In these next three chapters, these elements of narrative (challenges, visions and strategies) provide the basic chapter structure.

The first narrative I describe, which is the focus of chapter five, is an *institutional* narrative. This was prominent amongst Western aid agency representatives and focussed on the problem of division and personalised politics, a vision of formal procedures of democracy and liberal values, and a strategy of capacity building. In chapter six I outline a *benevolence* narrative that was prominent amongst opposition leaders and some activist networks. This narrative highlighted the problem of dictatorial leadership, the vision of benevolent leadership and a strategy of moral education and the building of discipline. Finally, in chapter seven, I described an *equality* narrative - present within other activist networks - that questioned Buddhist inspired relational hierarchies in Burmese social and political life, and portrayed equality as critical to the vision of democracy. A strategy of cultural reform in the country was seen by some activists to be necessary for the process of democratization.

These chapters establish that beyond the civil-military and ethnic contests that have received much analytical attention in Myanmar, there are other key contests over the meaning of democracy. Both within the democracy movement, and between the movement and its Western donor supporters, there are significant contrasts in the ways in which democracy is understood and communicated. Yet while offering distinct accounts of the country's democratization, these different narratives also share certain similarities. Most importantly, each of these narratives reacts to the military emphasis on 'disciplined democracy', which I described in the previous chapter. All participants in this study agreed that the Myanmar military forces should withdraw from a 'guardian' role in the country's politics. Participants also agreed that the long periods of military dominated rule in Myanmar - under both General Ne Win's Burma Socialist Program Party and the more recent SLORC and SPDC - were at best deeply problematic, and at worst violent and oppressive.

Further, proponents of all of these narratives agreed that formal institutions such as free and fair elections, a functioning parliament and a reformed constitution, were necessary components of democracy in Myanmar. Thus while these coming chapters emphasise contrasts between these narratives, it is

important to recognise that there are also areas of agreement, especially over the defining issue of ending a *tatmadaw* role in governance. Crucially, these areas of agreement - and especially the compelling common cause against the military - have served to obscure other important contrasts between the narratives.

These three chapters take a primarily inductive approach, drawing on field research in the form of interviews, document review and observation. I make reference to interviews from my field research and also publicly available writings or interviews from key figures, such as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, 88 Generation Leader U Min Ko Naing and former U.S. Ambassador to Myanmar Derek Mitchell.

Beyond this, I also draw on wider literature in these chapters in two cases. First, certain texts were specifically identified by participants as being influential in their own perspectives – for example, the work of the author Maung Maung Gyi (1983) as being central to the *equality* narrative. In these cases I make reference to relevant sections of these texts.

Second, where it is necessary to provide some background to explain certain aspects of narratives –for example, related to Buddhist influence on concepts of democracy – I make additional links to Myanmar studies scholars. Therefore, while drawing primarily on data from my field research, in these chapters this data is, at times, interwoven with other explanatory literature. I now turn to the first of these story-lines, an institutional narrative of democracy, and its place in wider Western engagement with the Myanmar government during the Thein Sein administration.

## Chapter 5 Institutional narrative

In this chapter I unpack a narrative that emphasised the institutional dimensions of democracy.<sup>75</sup> I outline three elements of this narrative. First, most international aid workers who were participants in this study pointed toward the challenge of ethnic and religious divisions in the country. These aid workers described how divisions in Myanmar were perpetuated by a personalised political culture where formal institutions of democracy were insufficiently embedded. Second, aid agency representatives often expressed a vision of a formal procedure based democracy supported by liberal values of human rights, pluralism and protection of minorities. This vision also had a modern orientation where proponents of this narrative saw Myanmar's democratization as being set within the context of other transitional countries around the world - moving away from traditional systems toward a democratic future. Third, aid workers participating in this study emphasised the strategy of donor agencies in building government and civil society capacity for democratic governance.

While elements of this institutional narrative permeate the work of Western donor agencies in other contexts, this narrative was also set within the particular political circumstances of the Thein Sein administration, the re-engagement of Western countries in Myanmar and a cascade of political and economic reforms in the country. In President Barak Obama's 2012 State of the Union address he declared that 'a new beginning in Burma has lit a new hope' (Obama 2012). This 'new beginning' was embodied in reforms such as the establishment of a new parliament, a gradual freeing of press censorship and the release of many long term political prisoners – most notably Nobel laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Myanmar President Thein Sein said that after half a century of military rule, the country would move to become a 'modern, disciplined democracy' (Thein Sein 2011).

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<sup>75</sup> As Bratton suggests the word 'institution' is 'one of the loosest in the social-science lexicon' (2007, 96) - referring to both formal and informal rules of the game by which politics is conducted. In this thesis I use it to refer primarily to formal democratic institutions, such as regular free and fair elections, a representative parliament or constitutional constraints on executive power. Though as I highlight later in the chapter, for proponents of this narrative there was also sensitivity to the role of liberal values in shaping informal institutions.

Four months after Obama's State of the Union address European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton glowingly said that:

After decades of internal repression, we see dramatic and hopeful changes taking place in Burma. Here is a democratic transition unfolding in a peaceful, collaborative fashion –acclaimed by the domestic electorate and the international community. Myanmar is such a rare case. [The E.U.] will now enter into an active collaboration with Myanmar, to assist the reform process and to contribute to economic, political and social development' (Ashton 2013).

Over the following year other Western governments also responded by easing longstanding sanctions against the Myanmar government and scaling up the budgets and presence of donor agencies such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID). DFID's (2012) Operational Plan noted the planned increase in the aid programme to Myanmar from 37 million GBP in 2011/12 to 82 million GBP in 2015/16 – more than doubling the aid budget over five years.<sup>76</sup>

Along with this increased high-level focus on Myanmar came a new set of commitments to supporting democratization. USAID stated their aim of helping to build 'a peaceful, prosperous, and democratic Burma that respects the human rights of all its peoples'(USAID 2013, 2) while the Australian government intended that their increased support would help 'create a more democratic and inclusive society' (AusAID 2013, 10). Yet what do Western donor representatives mean by wanting to build a more democratic Myanmar? What do they see as the primary obstacles to democracy? What do they think a more democratic Myanmar would look like? And how, in their view, can the country be supported to reach that vision?

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<sup>76</sup> During the Thein Sein period of government, donor agencies varied in their use of the country's name. For example, the Australian aid programme used the term 'Burma' in 2011 but had shifted to use 'Myanmar' by 2016. Meanwhile, in 2016, the United States Agency for International Development continues to use 'Burma'.

This chapter draws on donor documentation, observation of donor partner meetings, informal interactions with donor representatives, and material from seventeen interviews, most of which were with Western aid workers. While this narrative was prominent within Western donor agencies, I also caution against essentialising a 'Western' perspective. First, I describe some variety between Western proponents of this narrative in the way the institutional story-line was narrated. As I highlighted in chapter three, narratives are better understood as a cluster of interpretations rather than single homogenous stories. In other words recognise the 'decentred' nature of narratives (Bevir and Rhodes 2003). Second, it was also not only Western participants who were proponents of this narrative. Two Burmese activists participating in this study also articulated the key elements of the institutional narrative. Therefore, while the material in this chapter is largely drawn from interviews with Western aid workers and review of donor documentation, I am not suggesting that there is a rigid or uniform connection between the institutional narrative and the 'West'.

## **The challenge of division and personalised politics**

A crucial element of understanding narratives is the different challenges or counter positions against which they react. Narratives contain what Bruner (1991) describes as a 'breach' from the expected situation or vision. Democratization may be considered to be an important process, but what is it movement *away* from?

In this study, which took place in the years of the Thein Sein administration 2011-2016, there were several different assessments of the core challenges to Myanmar's democratization. For proponents of the institutional narrative the central challenges to democracy in Myanmar were civil-military, ethnic and religious *divisions*. Religious divisions in particular drew out the clearest articulations of the perceived obstacles to democratization. Yet what makes this narrative 'institutional' is that underlying these various divisions, aid workers often pointed toward the challenge of an immature, personalised form of politics.

This personalised politics was considered to be fundamentally undemocratic, as it did not rely on formal democratic procedures. For proponents of this narrative therefore, democratization was described as movement *away* from societal divisions, whether civil-military, ethnic or religious, and movement *away* from an informal, personalised form of politics. In this first section I describe each of these dimensions of the perceived problem; *divisions* and *personalised politics*.

## *Divisions*

The longstanding civil-military divisions in Myanmar society were portrayed within this narrative as an overarching challenge - with thorough rejection of the *tatmadaw* emphasis on the 'guardian' role of the military. Similar to all other narratives about democracy described in this study, aid workers often pointed to the removal of the military from Myanmar's governance as a necessary step toward democracy. Yet while the civil-military division was seen to be an obstacle, it was ethnic and particularly religious divisions that were emphasised in interviews and seen to be the country's most intractable.

In its border areas Myanmar has been host to some of the world's longest running civil wars - some of which began only months after Burma gained independence in 1948. In the last chapter I described this instability after independence, and armed conflict between the Burmese government and communist and ethnic minority insurgents, especially in the country's border areas. According to DFID, 'underlying ethnic tensions' (DFID 2012, 2) in the country have created a deeply fractured society and the only way to control the country has been through force. In an article in *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, former U.S. Ambassador Derek Mitchell (2013, 14) explains 'Burma's Challenge' to find political rather than military means to solve ethnic issues:

the challenge is how the country's diverse people can overcome a history of fractiousness in order to live together and hold the country together through political means rather than force- something that arguably has never happened in Burma's history.

While this longstanding ethnic tension was of concern for many participants they also pointed toward division between Muslim and Buddhist communities. In 2012 and 2013 there was an escalation in communal violence along religious lines. It initially involved clashes between Buddhist communities and a Muslim minority group (who identify as 'Rohingya') in Rakhine State in Myanmar's west but then spread to involve other Muslim communities around the country. In March 2013, in the central Myanmar town of Meiktila, the alleged murder of a Buddhist monk sparked attacks on local Muslim communities leaving over forty people dead and hundreds of homes destroyed (Macnamara 2013).

For many proponents of the *institutional* narrative, this religious violence – and wider anti-Muslim attitudes within the Burmese democracy movement – presented one of the starkest challenge to democracy in the country. In the meeting room of her agency office, I interviewed Claire, a European aid program manager who had spent several years in the country.<sup>77</sup> She reflected on the escalating violence in 2012 and 2013 saying:

When it was just the Rohingya...you felt here is this one group that people are just mental about. But then when Meiktila happened...It was brutal and totally shocking. For me, you live in a society with such respect for elders and nobody [responds] to a woman being stabbed to death in her bed. (Interview 17/Nov 2013).

What was particularly troubling for many participants in this research was that anti-Muslim attitudes were seen to not only be held within the military, or by Buddhist nationalist groups such as the Association for Protection of Race and Religion (or *ma ba tha* in its popular Burmese acronym), but also more widely in society. During my field research I met Michael, a European donor representative, in the embassy compound where his agency was based. Entry to the compound required passport identification and my bag was held at the compound entrance security point during the interview. Michael had arrived to

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<sup>77</sup> All interviews quoted in this chapter were in English language. All names of study participants are given in these chapters as pseudonyms.

his posting in Myanmar only a few months earlier and his wife and small children were soon to arrive. He was particularly concerned about the growing communal violence in the country at the time, and raised this immediately in the interview saying:

People here are racist, I mean we are all racist in our societies...but here, if you don't think the three year old has the right to eat or go to hospital then that is really depressing...I don't know enough here but people are telling me that they [the Burmese] are brought up to think that Muslims are basically shit. (Interview 37/Feb 2014).

Similarly, Claire concluded that it was 'shocking to see the degree of apathy that exists [in response to the violence]...they are not particularly worried enough to care and say anything' (Interview 17/Feb 2014). Like Michael and Claire, many Western aid workers participating in this study found the incidents of violence against Muslims - and the perceived lack of concern amongst Buddhist Burmese - to be deeply concerning.

The seemingly intractable nature of this division was seen by aid agency representatives to be a key challenge for the country's democratization. Within this concern over religious divisions Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, as the most prominent leader in the democracy movement at the time, was considered by many aid workers to have lost credibility by not speaking out more strongly. International attention was drawn to her in an October 2013 interview on BBC where Suu Kyi was seen to defend Buddhist aggressors by saying:

Yes, Muslims have been targeted, but also Buddhists have been subjected to violence. But there's fear on both sides and this is what is leading to all these troubles and we would like the world to understand: that the reaction of the Buddhists is also based on fear (BBC 2013).

This interview sparked a series of opinion pieces in the international media portraying Suu Kyi's failure to defend human rights as a 'fall from grace' (4News 2013). In field interviews with participants this event was often recounted. 'Did you see the BBC thing with Aung San Suu Kyi when she was really questioned?'

asked Michael, 'for me, it was extremely disappointing - that she can't even say anything' (Interview 37/Feb 2014).

Further, international aid workers were concerned that it was not only Burmese leaders such as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi who had a seeming disregard for human rights, but also staff within local partner organisations. Thomas, the director of an international NGO reflected:

I have no idea how many times my head office is saying 'something is happening in Rakhine [regarding religious violence], what are our local partners doing about this?' I try to say 'well you know many of our partners are part of the problem' (Interview 27/Feb 2014).

In this way, for proponents of the institutional democracy narrative, the escalation of religious tensions within Burmese society since 2012 was a sobering experience. Sophia, a conflict advisor within a European donor agency, said 'I don't know how democracy can progress in a society where people have these kinds of views' (Interview 19/Nov 2013). Reflecting on long term Western advocacy and support to the Burmese democracy movement Thomas concluded:

Look at what [Western human rights organisations] are saying publicly [about Myanmar's democracy movement]. 'This country is going to hell. The forces that we have believed in, I don't see how we can work with them any more' (Interview 27/Feb 2014).

As will become clear in the coming chapters, the issue of religious tension was a prominent flashpoint within narratives and was used to build contrasting arguments about democracy.

Overall, drawing the civil-military, ethnic, and particularly religious lines of division together in this narrative was the sense amongst many aid workers that Burmese leaders are unable to solve political problems in a mature way. They have 'an inability to compromise' (Interview 4 Oct 2013), said one Western donor manager in an interview. They are 'not good at trade-offs' (Interview 39 Feb 2014) said another. This immaturity of political processes was considered

by Claire to be inherent within Burmese culture because of its longstanding isolation. She explained:

With such isolation for so long...they are less familiar with the idea of a pluralistic society. They have sort of been frozen in time and are less familiar with the kind of discourse and the idea of it being normal for many people to have many opposing views (Interview 17/Nov 2013).

Being insulated from external influences during the period of military rule was considered by several aid workers to have delayed Myanmar's progress toward becoming a modern and pluralistic society - Myanmar political culture was 'frozen in time'.

### *Personalised politics*

Civil-military, ethnic and especially religious divisions in Myanmar were portrayed, by proponents of this narrative, as a core challenge to democracy. Yet aid workers participating in this study also pointed to the underlying challenge of the country's personalised political culture. Rather than relying on the strength of formal democratic institutions to bridge division and instigate further reform, aid workers often portrayed Myanmar political actors as relying on a personalised or individualised form of politics. This perceived challenge played an important role as a counter position against which this narrative's liberal and institutional vision of democracy was set.

Many reforms were made after the 2010 elections and the establishment of the new quasi-civilian Thein Sein government. Yet proponents of this narrative saw those changes as still based in the personal leadership of President Thein Sein (or other key figures) rather than on a growing reliance on formal democratic institutions. Returning to Myanmar after more than twenty years in exile in the United States, academic Min Zin<sup>78</sup> (2013, 1) reflected:

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<sup>78</sup> Min Zin was not a direct participant in this study, though his perspectives were commonly raised in interviews by both Myanmar and international participants.

I was struck by how many people I spoke with still seem to expect the solutions to our political problems to come from great heroes (whether it's current president Thein Sein or an opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi) rather than institutions. Our leaders tend to prefer one-man (or one-woman) shows instead of people who develop the necessary political institutions.

For aid workers and observers like Min Zin (2013), this focus on personalities rather than procedures often applied not only to President Thein Sein, but also to the National League for Democracy leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Jonathan, an aid program manager, said that rather than focussing on institution building or policy, Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) was building a 'national level personality party' (Interview 43/Aug 2014). This concern was reflected in former U.S. Ambassador Mitchell's conclusion that 'change [in Myanmar] remains rooted in individuals, not institutions' (Mitchell 2013, 14).

This overreliance on personality-based politics was portrayed by aid workers as bringing an unhelpful hierarchical model of leadership in the democracy movement. A long-term international aid worker suggested that the National League for Democracy in particular is 'profoundly hierarchical' with 'too little empowerment and delegation' (Interview 32/Feb 2014). Meanwhile, Jonathan considered that this lack of delegation was not only related to the powerful position of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, but also that of the NLD's Central Committee. 'Talk to local level people in the NLD about policy and they say "we implement what the Central Committee decides. You need to talk to the Central Committee" ....It is very hierarchical' (Interview 43/August 2014), he concluded. Thus while being the most prominent opposition organisation in Myanmar, many Western aid workers expressed doubts about the NLD's personality led style and hierarchy, seeing it as undemocratic.

As will become clear in coming chapters, attitudes toward the NLD - and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi herself - were deeply polarised amongst participants. For proponents of this institutional narrative, Suu Kyi was often portrayed as a barrier to, rather than an agent of democratization. 'For the democracy movement, at the end of the day, she [Aung San Suu Kyi] is the symbol. Yet she

has created more problems than anything else' (Interview 27/Feb 2014) concluded Thomas. Another donor representative recounted a meeting at a Western embassy, 'I remember a conversation with someone from one of the embassies. They said, "what would Aung San Suu Kyi think about that?" [Another said] "Who cares what she thinks about anything? None of us care. Nobody really cares" (Interview 28/Feb 2014). In contrast to perspectives described in the next chapter, proponents of this institutional narrative viewed the role of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD as largely problematic.

Overall, many international aid workers felt that the pervasiveness of this personalised form of politics meant that democratization would be extremely challenging for Myanmar. The focus on 'great heroes rather than institutions' was considered by proponents of this narrative to undermine the shift toward a more modern and institutionally grounded democracy. Importantly the problem of political immaturity and personalised politics was set against a wider backdrop of other transitional countries in the region. Aid workers often reflected that other countries in Asia were also struggling to move towards a more institution based political system - Myanmar was not alone in these challenges. Sophia stressed that Myanmar's democratization must be considered in the context of 'the neighbourhood' (Interview 19/Nov 2013). She suggested that many countries in Asia are struggling to consolidate democratic institutions, and therefore expectations within Myanmar of a rapid transition ought to be tempered. As another donor manager concluded, 'Myanmar is similar to other countries in moving from a personality driven, unregulated system to one with more institutions and regulation' (Interview 4/Oct 2013).

Drawing on the narrative theory outlined in chapter three I have argued that in order to understand meanings given to the word democracy it is crucial to trace back the various 'counter positions' against which the vision is set. Narrative analysis can reveal the ways that visions of democracy drawn on by political actors are not abstract but are rather reactions to particular perceived challenges. Democratization may be considered to be an important process, but what is it movement *away* from? For the aid workers participating in this study,

democratization was often described as movement *away* from societal divisions, whether civil-military, ethnic or religious, and movement *away* from an informal, personalised form of politics.

## **The vision of democratic procedures and liberal values**

Proponents of the institutional narrative saw the only viable solution to Myanmar's fractious society as lying in the consolidation of democratic procedures, and societal support for those procedures through liberal values. Reacting against the perceived system of personalised politics real democratization was seen, by aid workers involved in this study, to entail a shift from the informal to the formal, and from the personalized to the institutional<sup>79</sup>. Yet while there was a focus amongst international aid workers on the importance of formal institutions there is also some caution about rigid models. It was assumed - by proponents of this narrative - that countries such as Myanmar should be able to design their own institutional frameworks, and these procedures may, or may not, exactly reflect Western models. However, in reacting to the perception of various divisions in Myanmar society, aid workers also considered there to be an inviolable cluster of liberal values – especially rights, pluralism and majority protection – which these democratic institutions must reflect, and which must enjoy wide support amongst citizens.

European Union (2013) documents emphasise that Myanmar needs to develop a 'modern' constitution, a functioning parliament, an independent judiciary, 'credible, transparent and inclusive' elections (EC 2013, 3), and ratify international human rights conventions. The development of formal democratic institutions is portrayed in these documents as the only way to deal with the myriad of divisions within Myanmar society – something that an informal political culture based on personality politics cannot achieve. For DFID, it is the development of these institutions – especially 'strengthening the work of

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<sup>79</sup> This finding resonates with Bunce and Wolchik's (2012) study of donor democracy promotion programs in post-communist countries which suggests that donor representatives heavily emphasized the institutional dimension of their programs over for example, the 'freedom', or 'social/economic' benefits of democracy.

Parliament' (DFID 2012) which will create 'a better governed, more peaceful and prosperous Burma that uses its increased wealth to reduce poverty' (DFID 2012, 1). In this sense, the institutional narrative echoed the British colonial administration's emphasis on modernising and formalising political processes.

For proponents of the *institutional* narrative, support to 'civil society' was also an important dimension. The Australian aid programme aims to strengthen Myanmar civil society, especially for its role in 'strengthening the capacity of people to hold [the Myanmar government] to account' (AusAID 2013). Meanwhile, the European Union's Comprehensive Framework for policy and support to Myanmar says that the E.U. 'attaches great importance to the involvement of civil society in building the institutions that are necessary for a modern inclusive democracy' (EU 2013).<sup>80</sup>

Yet while Western donor statements emphasised formal institutions in democratization, in interviews, proponents of this narrative were often cautious about being too prescriptive. Western aid agency manager, Claire, said, 'I don't necessarily think there is one perfect model of democracy that you can apply to every environment...it has to work for that society' (Interview 17/2013). Similarly, European donor representative, Michael, reflected that 'there needs to be a Burmese democracy that works...We are too quick and eager to do things our way' (Interview 37/2014). Developing a vision for Myanmar democracy was seen by proponents of this narrative to require a degree of humility in moving outside of established Western models. NGO director Thomas reflected:

So much here is about governance and state building. So much is about supporting the institutions which will mirror our similar institutions in our country. Maybe there is another way? I am not sure we have the humility to acknowledge that many things can actually work, it doesn't have to be a

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<sup>80</sup> One example of civil society engagement in democratic processes - which was highlighted by USAID (2014) as a 'model' - was in the drafting of the Association Registration Law in Myanmar parliament in 2013. Some civil society organisations were invited by government lawmakers to offer technical advice to improve the draft bill - 'the final result being a law that is widely welcomed' (USAID 2014). In this institution centric vision for democracy in Myanmar, civil society was seen by donors to play an important role - connecting citizen voices with policy making.

replica of an American or Norwegian or Australian model (Interview 27/2014).

These reflections suggest that while there was some coherence within the *institutional* narrative about the centrality of liberal democratic procedures, its proponents also expressed a desire to be sensitive to the Myanmar context. Though ultimately, while there was some caution amongst aid workers about formulas for democracy, there were limits to this flexibility. These limits were often expressed by aid workers around a cluster of values - universal human rights, pluralism and protection of minorities. Once again, it was reflection on communal violence that drew out the clearest articulations of these limits.

### *Inviolable liberal values*

For Western participants in this study, the consolidation of democratic procedures was only seen to be possible when based on a set of inviolable liberal values. As described in the previous section, there was some flexibility amongst aid workers about the form of formal democratic institutions such as a constitution, free and fair elections and a functioning parliament. However, aid workers saw it to be critical that these procedures were underpinned by support for liberal values. This emphasis was borne out through reflections on divisions in Myanmar society, particularly reactions to incidents of communal violence and the treatment of Muslims minorities by the Myanmar state. As with all the narratives described in this study, the vision of democracy became most clear when contrasted with a particular counter position.

Especially concerning for several international aid agency representatives was the perceived lack of recognition within the wider Burmese community of human rights as a universal concept. This was highlighted in an extended interview with Michael, who despite being relatively new in his position, spoke at length about the issue of communal violence in Myanmar. In particular, he expressed concern that without human rights as a foundation, democracy would not be possible.

How can you see these starving children and not think that they have any rights?...Of course I don't understand anything about this country but I do understand that people have their rights – notwithstanding their race, culture, whatever... (Interview 37/2014).

In this way, while acknowledging that he had only a limited appreciation of the local dynamics of religious tensions, he stressed that the value of human rights must be universally accepted. Further, he suggested that if local actors could not accept the premise of universal human rights in democracy then he could not talk about these issues any further. He concluded:

I am quite good at talking to young people about human rights but here I have failed miserably...Even trying to say things like 'my daughter is 3 and a half and she is sick and I take her to the hospital. If a Rohingya [Muslim minority group] girl gets sick and desperately needs help, don't you think she should get it?'. 'No' [they say]...And I tried all these things in my tool box. Nothing works...I have to admit I really can't discuss this anymore. I have to give up. I am really disappointed (Interview 37/2014).

Similarly, Claire expressed her surprise at the anti-Muslim perspectives of some Burmese democracy activists and their ability to separate the meaning of democracy from the core value of universal human rights:

'People who we would regard as...defenders of democracy saying 'oh yeah, I am for human rights for everyone but just not for them [Muslims]'. And they literally say something along those lines. And I am like 'what, do you hear yourself?' (Interview 17/Nov 2013).

Within this institutional narrative vision there was no possibility that Burmese activists could be 'defenders of democracy', and at the same time question the rights of certain minority groups. For proponents of this narrative, flexibility was seen to be important with regard to the form of democratic procedures. Though in relation to the universality of human rights, there was significantly less tolerance of alternate perspectives.

Along with human rights, the vision of democracy was seen by aid workers involved in this study to also embrace pluralism and acceptance of multiple – especially minority - voices. ‘In [my country] we say that the measure of a true democracy is not majority rule but how minority voices are heard and incorporated’, reflected Sophia (Interview 19/2013). However the Burmese democracy movement was seen to not yet understand the value of minority voices. Thomas compared this to the situation in Turkey, as another country grappling with the inclusion of minority voices:

‘Erdogan always says ‘I have the majority so you shut up. I won more than 50% of the votes. So what are you taking about – this is democracy, you have to respect democracy’. But the argument of the other side - which is more Western oriented - is ‘democracy is not just about your majority, you can’t take away our rights as minorities’ (Interview 27/2014).

Proponents of this narrative saw movement toward clearer government protection of the Muslim minority - and also ethnic minority groups such as the Kachin and Karen - to be essential for any ‘genuine’ vision of democracy. In this way, human rights, pluralism and protection of minorities formed a cluster of values that were incorporated by Western aid workers into meanings of democracy. Although the structure or procedures of formal democratic institutions may vary, aid workers in this study saw it to be essential that these institutions have their grounding in liberal values. However, as will become clear in the next chapter, other narratives portray different hierarchies of values.

### *A modern orientation*

Two subtle, yet important, dimensions of this institutional vision of democracy were also apparent in the way in which participants sought to orient the story of democracy. First, in interviews with Western aid workers, anecdotes were commonly drawn from other countries – comparing and contrasting Myanmar’s progress against both Western, and other ‘developing’ countries. Whether related to leadership in Turkey, or institutions in Norway, the reference points from which aid workers understood and communicated about democracy were

often international. In this way, Myanmar's own democratization was framed within this narrative as being part of a wider global story.

Second, proponents of this narrative also commonly described events and issues within a comparatively narrow 'temporal range' (Polkinghorne 1995) – referring in only a very limited way to events in Myanmar history. As will become clear in the coming chapter, for many Burmese activists and opposition leaders, Myanmar's past was seen to have a crucial place in informing both the challenges and vision of the country's democratization. Yet for proponents of the institutional narrative there was little reference to Myanmar's past beyond the recent period of military government. Importantly, where there was reference to history it was also almost always in order to illustrate a challenge, rather than as a potential resource that could inform the meaning of democracy. Thus while there was no overt, or conspiratorial devaluing of Myanmar's past, Western proponents of the institutional narrative gave little attention to how Myanmar history could be of value in informing the development of democracy. Most aid workers involved in this study considered the relevance of the past to be in better grasping problems to solve, rather than as a potential source of solutions.

The combination of these dimensions meant that the vision in the institutional narrative was a linear, modernist one - communicated as part of a global story that was focussed toward the future, rather than a locally embedded one that drew on the past. This orientation then flowed into the way in which strategies to support democracy were framed.

## **The strategy of capacity building**

Along with descriptions of challenges and vision, narratives also include an element of strategy – the key ways that the 'breach' (Bruner 1991) from the vision can be addressed. For proponents of the institutional narrative, a crucial element in the advance of democracy is the role of Western donors in capacity

development. Yet this strategy is seen, in some cases, to be hampered by the lack of interest from key political actors such as the National League for Democracy.

Underlying the core challenges of division and personalised politics, many Western aid workers saw a lack of capacity – which is described by U.S. Ambassador Derek Mitchell (2013, 14) as ‘thin’ both in government, and in Myanmar civil society. As one European donor representative said, a critical problem in Myanmar is the government’s ‘lack of understanding of institutions’ – for local governance, for protection of minorities and for providing a check and balance for government (Interview 39/ August 2014). Meanwhile, donor agency statements describe a lack of professionalism and advocacy skills amongst Myanmar civil society organisations that has ‘impeded their ability to effect change’ (USAID 2014).

Therefore, capacity building took a central place within the institutional narrative. Having been isolated from the modern world for decades, most aid workers participating in this study assumed that Myanmar political actors – including those in the democracy movement – had a limited understanding of the necessary formal structures of democracy. A key aim was to transfer technical knowledge about democratic institutions from donor countries to Myanmar civil society and government. Strengthening of formal democratic procedures and fostering liberal values, were seen by proponents of this narrative to be the overarching solution to Myanmar’s divisions. Yet building such institutions would require new skills and knowledge. For the Australian aid program in Myanmar, capacity building is required to ‘to strengthen democratic institutions and electoral processes, strengthen the voice of civil society and promote human rights (AusAID 2013, 14).

Several aid workers involved in this study suggested that capacity could be increased with greater exposure to other contexts. A number of Western donors - including Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation, Swedish Foreign Affairs and the U.K.’s Department for International Development - had facilitated exposure visits for members of parliament and ‘civil society’ leaders to Western

democracies (Interview 19/Nov 2013). Sophia, a peace and conflict advisor, had coordinated such an exposure visit, and talked about their role in building capacity of government ministers:

One of the things that has struck me most is that...a lot of these reforming ministers hadn't been abroad, hadn't travelled. So in a way strengthening them and helping them see more, helping key people see that there is a world out there and you don't need to be afraid. You can actually engage with this (Interview 19 Nov 2013).

Myanmar's government and 'civil society' leaders were seen to be able to take a wider role in democracy if they could be exposed to the global progression of democracy.

Meanwhile for local organisations, there were also considered to be technical needs - both organisationally, and in their capacity to hold the state to account. Local NGOs were also seen by many Western aid workers to lack institutions and formal structures. As USAID (2014,1 ) suggests:

If CSOs [civil society organisations] are going to promote accountability and transparency in the reform process, they must meet minimum standards of organizational governance including written bylaws, financial policies, strategic plans, bank accounts, and human resources management.

Further, USAID (2014, 1) suggest that 'in order to effectively advocate [to government] CSOs need the capacity to conduct evidence-based research as well as specialized democratic governance- themed knowledge'. In this way, the emphasis on procedure building at the government level was mirrored in the emphasis on formal institution building within local organisations themselves.

As Myanmar had liberalised since the 2010 elections, the expectations of 'civil society' organisations were now also seen to be higher. 'At that point [during the period of military rule] I think it was great to only capacitate and empower', suggested Michael, 'that was fine because it was such a bad environment and you had to do everything underground. But now it is time to raise that' (Interview

37/2014). Michael insisted that Western support should be now assisting Myanmar civil society toward 'changing things through parliament or influence by their local elected leader in parliament' (Interview 37/2014). He argued that as the country had liberalised, 'civil society' needed to take up more of its democratic functions in holding the state to account.

Yet proponents of this narrative also saw Western efforts to build capacity of local actors to be frustrating - especially in engagement with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (NLD). On one hand, most aid workers involved in this study considered the NLD by to have a profound need for capacity building for democratic governance. Thomas argued that 'the NLD party structure is rubbish. They don't have technical capacity and general understanding of the technical aspects of governance is very limited' (Interview 27/2014). On the other hand, the NLD was also seen by international aid workers to have little interest in this capacity building. Aid program manager, Jonathon, had been attempting to support the NLD in developing an approach to democratic governance reforms at the local level. He said the process had been deeply frustrating and that 'individuals may show interest but it is almost impossible to get the engagement of the [NLD] party' (Interview 42/2014).

In contrast, the military backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and the Thein Sein administration was considered to be more open to capacity building support from Western donors. Thomas, in particular, was impressed by the attitude of openness within government ministries:

'I think there is a humbleness in Myanmar right now. When we meet with government bodies to speak about capacity building for staff I am struck by the humility on behalf of the Myanmar [government]. Saying 'we know we have a lack of capacity and we want to learn'. When did that ever happen? Did [the} government ministry [in my country] ever say, 'we have a lack of capacity and we want to learn?'. No way, we would try to hide all the mistakes' (Interview 27/February 2014).

For proponents of this institution-centric narrative, the lack of interest from the National League for Democracy – and the contrasting attitude of the USDP - was deeply concerning. Some participants suggested that despite their agency's previous support to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's democratization may be better served if the NLD did not win a majority in the 2015 elections. A coalition government (involving the NLD and other parties) - or a role in opposition under the ongoing rule of the military backed Union Solidarity and Development Party - were seen by proponents of this narrative to be preferable options for Myanmar's governance. In this sense, the future democratisation of Myanmar was considered to be more dependent on technical governance capacity than the popularity of leaders. Relating this situation to his previous experiences, Michael reflected:

I see similarities with South Africa. The ANC [African National Congress] was a liberation party not at all ready to govern. And the strongest opposition here [the NLD] is the same. So I would think the best outcome for the election is for the USDP [Union Solidarity and Development Party] to win, and then become better and better. Now they have some good people who start to get it (Interview 37/August 2014).

Importantly, the process by which people 'get it', was often expressed by aid workers as one where they gain technical knowledge and skills in governance. The perceived lack of capacity in the National League for Democracy led Thomas to conclude that a future coalition government – between the USDP, NLD and other parties - would be most productive.

Personally, I think that probably the best for the country is a unity government after 2015. The NLD alone? I mean that idea would keep me awake at night. But some sort of legitimacy of NLD and representativeness of the Lady [Aung San Suu Kyi] combined with the best elements of bureaucratic knowledge (Interview 27/February 2014).

While most aid workers involved in this study recognised the NLD as having popular legitimacy, they also perceived that the lack of capacity in the party and unwillingness to accept international support meant that its ability to drive

future democratization was limited. In this sense, the place of the NLD within Western donor strategy underwent a profound change. Before the 2010 elections Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD enjoyed widespread support. Though during the Thein Sein administration, the role of the NLD was widely questioned within the Western donor community. Several participants expressed the uncertainty that this shift brought. Thomas went on to suggest:

[Previously] you had a regime, a military dictatorship, that everyone hated. It was disgusting...[but] now...the statements coming from [President] Thein Sein are more helpful. His head office people are ahead of the opposition [NLD].

Before the 2010 elections the ‘worldview’ of Myanmar politics held by many Western governments was that there was a binary contest between an autocratic military and a democratic opposition. But for proponents of the institutional narrative, these lines were blurred. The Union Solidarity and Development Party was demonstrating some institutional competence while the National League for Democracy was not as interested in Western policy support as was expected. Claire reflected that democracy promotion during the military dominated period was at least somewhat clearer. It was ‘easy before when you knew who the baddy was’ (Interview 17 Feb 2014), she concluded. Many aid workers involved in this study expressed concern about the period of transition under the Thein Sein administration - the ‘baddy’ was not as bad as had been thought, and the democracy movement was not as competent as was hoped.

## **Conclusion**

Proponents of the institutional narrative considered democratization in Myanmar to be extremely challenging. Most aid workers participating in this study expected that it was only the formal institutions of democracy – embedded in core values of universal human rights, pluralism and protection for minorities - which could solve the country’s seemingly intractable divisions. It was clear to many that a personalised political culture, reliant on the popularity of individual

leaders, would not be able to bring sustainable democratic change. Therefore, aid workers often saw the most important interventions to be those that could 'build capacity' in government, political parties, civil society organisations and wider society. Increased knowledge and skills for supporting formal institutions - including a solid constitution, a functioning parliament, free and fair elections, human rights mechanisms, and an independent judiciary - would allow Myanmar to deepen its transition to a modern state.

This narrative was on one hand characterised by its rejection of key elements of the military supported 'disciplined democracy' story-line. All Western aid workers involved in this study strongly resisted the role of the *tatmadaw* in governance, and the illiberal values which had supported military rule. Yet on the other hand, proponents of the institutional narrative also shared with military, and ex-military, elites some underlying assumptions about the problem of personality driven politics. Both the institutional and 'disciplined democracy' narratives deemphasised the role of individual personalities in the process of democratization – especially the role of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. As I have described, many proponents of the institutional narrative expressed concerns about the National League for Democracy, the focus on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and the NLD's perceived disinterest in the technical aspects of governance. At the same time, these participants also showed some sympathy for the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party which they felt had built a degree of competence in democratic governance. Thus, while rejecting many elements of the military story-line, aid workers in this study also echoed the concerns of military elites about the personalised politics of the opposition.

In contrast to the institutional narrative, the next chapter outlines a narrative from within the Burmese democracy movement where the focus was not on formal institutions and liberal values, but on the role of benevolence or goodwill (*sedana*) in democracy.<sup>81</sup> I argue that certain sections of the democracy

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<sup>81</sup> During the period of direct military rule in the 1990s and 2000s, both military elites and opposition leaders made appeals to the concept of *sedana* (goodwill or benevolence) to support their legitimacy (see Houtman 1999). I argue in the next chapter however, that during the Thein Sein administration the activists and opposition leaders (many of whom had been released from

movement made the value of benevolence uniquely central to their vision of democracy. Democracy was primarily conceived in personalised rather than procedural terms.

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prison) could make persuasive claims to commitment and selflessness – qualities that were considered to be crucial to demonstrating *sedana*.

## Chapter 6 Benevolence narrative

This chapter outlines a benevolence narrative of democracy. The narrative is described in three parts; the *challenge* of dictatorial leadership in Myanmar and the moral failure of citizens, the *vision* of a morally transformed society based on benevolent leadership and the values of unity and obligation, and a *strategy* of moral education to renew these values within society, and promote discipline. I argue that this narrative highlights a moral rather than institutional vision – one in which the ability of individual political actors to transcend self-interest is highly relevant. Proponents of this narrative emphasise that a focus on the narrow interests of particular individuals or groups will spark division and thereby undermine democracy. With the most immoral approach to politics being that of the *ar nar shin*, or power obsessed dictator.

The emphasis on a moral vision for democracy recalls the interpretive studies that I outlined in chapter two, from Frechette (2007), Baaz and Lilja (2014), Rodan and Hughes (2014) and Walton (2012). These works describe the prominence of moral, rather than procedural, meanings of democracy and their connection to religious, especially Buddhist, teachings. In particular these studies highlight how the evaluation of public office can occur through a personalised rather than procedural lens. The legitimacy of leaders can be established through perceptions of the moral conduct of the individual and significantly less attention is given to ‘appropriate political institutions’ (Rodan and Hughes 2014, 13). Where this moral notion of democracy or accountability is seen to fail, Rodan and Hughes (2014, 13) suggest that political actors can attribute this to individual moral failings rather than a problem with the framework itself.

Taking a narrative approach in this study - and identifying challenges, vision and strategy - serves to illuminate the way in which some Burmese political actors also employ moral understandings of democracy. The focus on narratives makes clear the profound contrasts between the *institutional* narrative, with its vision of formal institutions and liberal values, and the *benevolence* narrative, with its

emphasis on moral democracy. Between international aid workers and Burmese activists there were often stark contrasts in the ways democracy was understood and communicated. Yet this is not to suggest that there is simply a Western-local divide between meanings of democracy. As the coming chapters highlight, a narrative approach can also tease out the contests *within* democracy movements.

To help clarify the dynamics of these contests it is important to consider the intersections between politics and religion in the way democracy is given meaning. While at one level supporting the arguments of Rodan and Hughes (2014) and Baaz and Lilja (2014) about moral notions of democracy or accountability and their grounding in religious teaching, my study also cautions against any uniform understanding of the relationships between Buddhist concepts and Myanmar's politics. Religion and politics in Myanmar are not static or separate topics of investigation, but are related in a dynamic and contested way.<sup>82</sup>

On one hand, there are many examples where Buddhist ideas and symbols have been drawn on instrumentally in building political legitimacy of political leaders in Myanmar. Activities such as donations for pagoda building or sponsorship of a Chinese tooth relic have been used by the military to attempt to reinforce their power in the country (Schober 1997, McCarthy 2008). Religious concepts can also be drawn on for competing political purposes. In the 1990s and 2000s leaders of the National League for Democracy attempted to resist military rule through also employing Buddhist language and concepts, for example through Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's reflections of the *dhamma raja* (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991).

However, religious concepts are not relevant only for their instrumental use in politics. Religious teaching in Myanmar also influences the way in which politics, and democracy, are understood and communicated. The valuable scholarship of

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<sup>82</sup> Several proponents of the benevolence narrative explicitly drew on Theravada Buddhist concepts to articulate challenges, visions and strategies. I agree with Schober (2011) and Walton (2012) that it is important to move beyond portrayals of Buddhism as an 'other-worldly' religion, removed from politics.

Sarkisyanz (1965), Houtman (1999), Walton (2012) and Turner (2014) all connect Theravada Buddhist concepts to particular patterns in Burmese politics - for example the influence of a Buddhist ethical focus on motivations over outcomes. There is a dynamic interaction between Buddhism and politics in Myanmar – with religious concepts and symbols appropriated for political ends, and political practice also guided by the logics of religious concepts (Walton 2012).<sup>83</sup>

I now turn to describe the challenges, vision and strategies within the benevolence narrative. My description in this chapter draws on observation of political party and activist organisation meetings, informal interactions with over fifty activists, and twelve extended interviews with activists and members of the National League for Democracy.

## **The challenge of moral failure**

When asked about the key challenges to democracy in Myanmar, proponents of the benevolence narrative pointed to the moral failures of leaders – the inability of leaders to put aside their own narrow vested interests. Tracing through Myanmar history – even to the period of the Burmese monarchy – some participants in this study identified key turning points where progress toward democracy was thwarted by the leadership of an *ar nar shin* or power obsessed dictator. The historical examples drawn on varied between different participants, yet proponents of this narrative often constructed a binary between *sedana* (benevolent) leadership on one hand and *ar nar shin* (power seeking) dictators on the other.

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<sup>83</sup> Where relevant in this chapter I describe the background context of certain Burmese words, particularly *sedana* (goodwill, right intentions, benevolence). Yet there is also the challenging question of how meaning is attached to these words in contemporary usage, and the degree to which participants in this study were, or were not, making conceptual links to specific Buddhist doctrinal positions. In some cases participants made explicit connections between particular Buddhist teachings and their understanding of democracy, and in this chapter I provide background information to contextualise these links. However, my purpose in this thesis is to describe contemporary narratives about democracy in Myanmar. In this chapter I therefore focus my analysis toward that purpose and do not speculate more widely on etymological or doctrinal debates related to particular Burmese Buddhist concepts. For more detailed explorations of Buddhist doctrinal issues and democracy, see Walton (2012).

I met with U Wunna in the office of the NGO where he worked in Yangon.<sup>84</sup> U Wunna is an activist and writer who, at the time of the interview, had recently returned from postgraduate study internationally. He was particularly interested in describing the historical origins of democracy in Burma. In the late monarchical period, U Wunna suggested, Burmese King Mindon had made several steps toward a Burmese style of democratic governance (Interview 1 2013 Burmese). 'In the King Mindon era there were reforms made and the democracy idea was tested - with a *hluttaw* [parliament], *bye daik* [privy council] and law courts', U Wunna explained (Interview 1/October 2013 Burmese). Yet while progress was made, after King Mindon's death in 1878 the reforms ceased and it 'went back to an *an nar shin* (dictator) style' (Interview 1/October 2013 Burmese) under Burma's last King Thibaw.

U Wunna then described the role of U Aung San (the father of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi) who had led the movement for independence and united several of the country's ethnic minority groups around his *hpasapala* party (the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League). U Aung San was seen by U Wunna to have been a moral leader who could have led the country toward democracy. Yet in the final months before independence he and several key members of his party were assassinated (Interview 1/ October 2013 Burmese).

In a similar way U Aung Naing, who was member of the National League for Democracy and had spent several years as a political prisoner, looked to Myanmar history to emphasise the negative influence of *ar nar shin*. I met with U Aung Naing in a coffee shop in Yangon. He had expected that the interview would be conducted in English and, concerned about his own English language skills, said that he was nervous and had invited his wife to interpret for him. Yet when I began the interview in Burmese, U Aung Naing began to speak passionately (in Burmese) about the country's history. He stressed that on one hand the parliamentary terms of U Nu – and his AFPFL party – (1948-58, 1960-62) were a

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<sup>84</sup> All names of participants are pseudonyms. The language of the interview is indicated after quotes and Burmese titles, U (for males) and Daw (for females), are used.

‘taste of democracy’ (Interview 5/October 2013 Burmese), yet one also compromised by a failure of moral leadership. Echoing the assessments of U Nu himself about the moral failure of politicians, he said that during the AFPFL era, ‘the influence of *ar nar shin* (dictators) was still large’ (Interview 5/October 2013 Burmese).

For proponents of the benevolence narrative, such as U Wunna and U Aung Naing, the negative influence of *ar nar shin* was most clearly illustrated in the role of the Burmese military, which overthrew the U Nu parliamentary government in 1962. As described in chapter four, military leader and independence hero General Ne Win established a Burmese one party socialist state which lasted until 1988, only to be followed by a more direct form of military rule under SLORC and the SPDC until early 2011. U Shwe Aung, a local NGO and network leader said that ‘once the military got into the seat, they didn’t want to get out’ (Interview 46/October 2014 Burmese).

Proponents of this narrative saw *ar nar shin* (dictators) to be leaders who were disconnected from the people. U Wunna gave several insights into the perception of *ar nar shin* leadership. When asked what defines an *ar nar shin*, he replied:

‘I think most of the politicians know the key [to connecting with people] but they use it for their own purposes and later they forget and walk away. When people see this they think of *ar nar shin*’ (Interview 23/October 2013 English/Burmese).

He went on to give the example of the early period of the rule of General Ne Win in the 1960s and his frequent participation in *du dait swe nwe pwe* (literally ‘knocking knees discussions’) - sitting together on the floor with villagers and discussing issues. ‘People really liked this’, U Wunna said. But when General Ne Win stopped having these kinds of connections to ‘the people’ he began to be seen as an *ar nar shin* (Interview 23/November 2013 English/Burmese). In this way, U Wunna suggested that *ar nar shin* are not ‘dictators’ in the formal political sense of a state ruler with absolute power. Rather, he described *ar nar shin* as a style of leadership and - as will become clear in the next chapter - it is used by

activists in a range of contexts, not only in referring to national level leaders (Interview 23/November 2013 English/Burmese).

Meanwhile, U Aung Naing gave several insights into the long period of 'dictatorship' in Burma/Myanmar.

There has been a lot of damage to the country. The time of the military government was more than 20 years [1988-2010]. And a one party *ar nar shin sanit* (dictatorship) of more than 20 years [1962-1988]. All together more than 40 years of being tossed around (Interview 5/October 2013 Burmese).

In particular, he stressed that it had adversely affected the political culture in the country, instilling a sense of fear. He likened this kind of leadership to negative relationships within families, saying it is:

'like how a father treats his son. Under the hand of an *ar nar shin* (dictator) style, for young people there is a lot of fear. You don't tell the truth, you just say what the person in charge says. In society there has been a lot of this culture. In the *Ma Sa La* [BSPP period under General Ne Win] as well, if you did something wrong you didn't say. And with the military government showing weapons, governance got worse' (Interview 5/ October 2013 Burmese).

A number of activist participants had similar reflections on the impact of the military government and there was a common concern that despite some political liberalisation since 2011- and the establishment of new formal institutions of democracy - the military *ar nar shin* have maintained their power. U Aung Naing concluded that this was also happening in his own local electorate:

'For my own township it is just military people wearing civilian clothes. For example one of the old colonels is the township authorities chairman, an old officer is the district chair. These people have continued to have power - they want to continue with the dictatorial system (*ar nar shin sanit*). They have allowed only some surface level democratic changes but underneath they don't really do them' (Interview 5/ October 2013 Burmese).

Seen by several participants to be compounding this challenge of ongoing *ar nar shin* influence was the role of Western countries in supporting the 'transition'. 'The Western community says that they will support transition but there is no real transition yet. I don't see a transition', said one young activist (Interview 45/ February 2014 Burmese/English). Crucially, through reducing economic sanctions and using more direct engagement in capacity building activities, he argued that Western countries have given too much credibility to the government. In this sense, he suggested that *ar nar shin* within the military had been successful in both maintaining their power and garnering greater Western support (Interview 45/ February 2014 Burmese/English).

Thus the *benevolence* narrative pointed toward a dictatorial style of leadership as being the central challenge to democracy in Myanmar. Though in contrast to the *institutional* narrative, this was not presented by proponents of this narrative as a critique of a personalised form of politics, but rather of the failure of individuals within that system. The vision for democracy lay not in the building of formal democratic procedures – and movement away from informal, personalised forms of decision-making - but rather in the personal qualities of political leaders. Activists often described democracy in personal, and relational terms, rather than in formal and institutional ones.

### *The Failure of Citizens*

Proponents of this narrative considered the challenge to Myanmar's democratisation to not only come from *ar nar shin* dictatorial leadership, but also from the failings of citizens. Burmese society was, on one hand, seen by some activists to have inherently democratic qualities. Yet on the other hand, citizens were considered to lack the moral maturity necessary for genuine democracy - especially an understanding of the obligation of democracy to put aside one's own vested interests. Burmese society was considered to have a dual nature, being both inherently democratic and yet morally flawed.

U Zaw Aung is an elderly NLD member and writer who I met in the downstairs open plan office of the National League for Democracy in Yangon (Interview 12/ November 2013 Burmese). The interview was interrupted several times as he fielded questions from NLD volunteers sitting at other desks in the office. When asked about the challenges to democracy in Myanmar, U Zaw Aung sought to establish that Burmese society has important traits that are inherently democratic. In particular, he contrasted Burmese history with that of European countries in order to highlight what he perceived to be the unique socioeconomic and gender equality of Burmese society:

For all of Myanmar's history, there was no feudal era like in Europe...And there was no large relational divisions between men and women - an appropriate role was given for women and men did not have ruling relationship over women (Interview 12/ November 2013 Burmese).<sup>85</sup>

He portrayed these qualities within Burmese society as being inspired primarily by the impact of Buddhism. These democratic qualities are present, 'mostly because of ... the positive impact of Buddhism. Because Myanmar people believe in Buddhism there is compassion in relationships', he concluded (Interview 12/ November 2013 Burmese). While throughout its history Burmese society may not have been a 'full democracy', U Zaw Aung suggested that, unlike India, it enjoyed many of its features. He stressed that:

For all of Myanmar's history there have been practices similar to democracy. In India there is caste division. There is a separation in relationships between people...[but in Myanmar] while it was not the full practice of democracy, it was close' (Interview 12/ November 2013 Burmese).

Although Burmese history and culture was seen by activists such as U Zaw Aung to demonstrate democratic traits, there was also considerable scepticism about the moral maturity of citizens. Proponents of the *benevolence* narrative argued that the self-interested nature of citizens in Myanmar had allowed the rise of

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<sup>85</sup> This view of an inherent gender equality in Myanmar is disputed by studies from the Gender Equality Network. For example, the 'Behind the Silence' (Gender Equality Network 2015) report highlights the extent of domestic violence against women in the country.

authoritarianism. After being released from prison in 2012, 88 Generation activist U Min Ko Naing (2012) said that all of society is responsible for Myanmar's political failings since independence. 'We understood that the government needed to go', he said, 'but we did not understand that society also needed to change' (Min Ko Naing 2012, 135).

One of the key perceived failings of citizens was in allowing division, for example in disputes between different non-government organisations or splits within activist networks. Division was described as a form of immaturity. Though unlike the institutional narrative, which focused on ethnic and religious tensions, for many activists the primary concern were divisions within the democracy movement. When asked about the level of importance of ethnic or religious division, U Wunna stressed that these were second order problems (Interview 1 2013 Burmese) - which could be addressed once the intra *bamar* divisions were resolved. With moral leadership and responsible citizenship restored, other divisions would become tractable.

Thus the key failings were seen by many activists to lie in the democracy movement itself. 'At the moment it is like two men and three organisations. You have one, I have one and together we have another one. It is divided like that', reflected a young activist repeating a commonly used joke within the movement (Interview 36/ February 2014 Burmese)<sup>86</sup>. Proponents of this narrative often criticised other activist organisations or individuals as being trapped within their own narrow vested interests rather than looking to the interests of the movement, and their country. 'Some are still weak', U Aung Naing concluded, 'there is still an obsession with groups, people and factions. Our work can only continue if this can be removed' (Interview 5 2013 Burmese).

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<sup>86</sup> The origins of this commonly repeated joke are unclear. Though Kyaw Yin Hlaing (2007, 38) links the emphasis on unity to a quote from scholar Kanbawza Win, 'if we put two Myanmar in a cell they will form three political parties'. He also draws parallels with the U.S. funded Cuban exile movement in Miami in the 1960s where a common saying was 'if you put two Cubans in a room with a political problem to solve, they would come up with three organisations'.

In considering the liberalising reforms in Myanmar since the 2010 elections, several NGO and activist leaders also felt that Myanmar citizens were often not mature enough to understand what democracy meant. In particular, several activists suggested that people naturally emphasise individual freedoms over responsibilities. U Nay Lin, a member of the National League for Democracy said that democracy was often perceived by Myanmar citizens simply as ‘permission to do what you like’ (Interview 8/October 2013 Burmese). In this sense, there was concern amongst proponents of the benevolence narrative that democracy could lead to moral failings of citizens – and even lead to increased crime in Myanmar communities. ‘During these days, there are lot of crimes. The reason behind such crime is that we are getting democracy’, concluded one activist (Interview 19/November 2013 English). Many activists suggested that democracy may bring more openness, yet the people were not ready for it – there was scepticism about the ability of the wider population to constructively participate in democratic change.<sup>87</sup>

As I have argued in previous chapters, narratives are often shaped as reactions to particular counter positions – visions are formed in response to particular perceived challenges. For proponents of this benevolence narrative, there was an explicit reaction against the military vision of ‘disciplined democracy’ - identifying dictatorial *ar nar shin* leadership, and specifically that of military leaders, as the core problem. Yet the benevolence narrative also echoed certain elements of the military narrative, particularly the scepticism about whether Burmese citizens had the maturity to practice democracy. As will be highlighted in the coming sections, there are also other ways in which this *benevolence* narrative reproduced elements of the ‘disciplined democracy’ narrative.

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<sup>87</sup> This scepticism is echoed in Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s own reflections - from her 1991 book ‘Freedom from Fear’ - about the underlying reason for long-standing military rule through Myanmar history. Democracy had failed after Burma gained independence because ‘citizens failed to carry out the duties of citizenship’ (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991, 171).

## The vision of *sedana*<sup>88</sup>

As described in the previous chapter, when viewed through the lens of the Western donor centric institutional narrative, Burmese society is mired in division. In this view, the conflicts inherent within the political realm can only be contained through formal institutions, supported by liberal values. Instead, because of a personalised form of politics Myanmar has been unable to build the formal institutional structures of democracy that could contain its various divisions.

In a reversal of this perspective, the benevolence narrative emphasises that it is not so much a failure of the moral and personality centred *system*, but a failure of *individuals* within that system. Previous governments have failed to bring democracy due to the failed individual and collective moral character of political actors. The formal institutions of democracy – a constitution, free and fair elections and a functioning parliament – are seen to be useful and necessary components of democracy. Yet the fundamental challenges to Myanmar's democracy are moral ones, rather than institutional. The divisions and conflicts of the political realm can best be addressed through benevolent character which can transcend those contests. The necessary changes required for democratization are therefore seen by many Burmese activists to occur through a combination of benevolent leadership and the fostering of values of unity, obligation and protection of the majority. Importantly, the contrasting 'temporal range' and use of anecdotes in this narrative point toward a vision that is oriented domestically and historically, as opposed to the international and future orientation of the *institutional* narrative.

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<sup>88</sup> *Sedana* is a Romanization of the Burmese spelling of the word. In the Romanization of the original Pali, this word is *cetana*.

## Sedana leadership

For proponents of this benevolence narrative, the first element in the vision of societal transformation was the role of benevolent moral leadership. U Wunna stressed that the primary need was for leaders who are a *tageh seit shi de lu* or 'people with true motivations' (Interview 1/October 2013 Burmese). Meanwhile, U Aung Naing (Interview 5/October 2013 Burmese) pointed to the importance of *sedana* ('benevolence' or 'goodwill') based leadership. In this sense, many activists participating in this study saw moral character as the primary concern in leadership, with knowledge or technical skills in governance as a secondary consideration. 'It is more than just reading a book and understanding – it is understanding in their heart. They need to have real democratic values. [We need] those kinds of people', concluded another activist (Interview 11/ October 2013 English).

In order to contextualise this orientation toward *sedana* (benevolence), it is important to highlight the relative place of intent and results within the ethical framework of the 'Buddhist moral universe' (Walton 2012). Within this framework, there is a 'premium set on motives [intent] rather than effects [results]' (Maung Maung Gyi 1983, 73). While activists evaluated political leaders on the tangible impact of their actions, the perception of their internal motivation, and whether or not they were seen to have *sedana* (benevolence), was also critical. In other words, proponents of this narrative evaluated leaders on both their ability to deliver tangible changes, and on perceptions of whether their motivations were 'true'.

In his important work on the Burmese democracy movement in the 1990s, Gustaaf Houtman (1999) highlights the strategic importance of benevolence for the democracy movement. He explains the distinction between the military government and the democracy movement by highlighting different Burmese conceptions of power - *ar nar* as 'authority', and *aw za* as 'influence'. Where the military employed *ar nar* (authority) in order to control the country, the democracy movement sought to establish *awza* (influence) with citizens, based

on moral legitimacy rather than coercive control (Houtman 1999). Houtman's (1999) work constructs a binary contest between the military and the democracy movement - a construct that this thesis is intending to unsettle. Yet his underlying insights into Burmese conceptions of power are still highly relevant.

In the late 1990s, there was little opportunity for the opposition movement to gain *ar nar* or government authority. Therefore, Houtman argues (1999), Burmese activists or opposition leaders often sought to establish influence or *awza*, especially through demonstrating their benevolence.<sup>89</sup> In the last chapter, I described how the National League for Democracy was often derided by proponents of the *institutional* narrative for having little governance capacity. Yet through the lens of the benevolence narrative, a higher premium was placed on the moral legitimacy of political leaders and representatives. U Aung Naing reflected on Myanmar's democratic future saying, 'the number one thing is that it is important to have *sedana* for the country. Within NGOs, parliament and government organisations, people need to have true *seit sedana* (benevolent motivations)' (Interview 5/October 2013 Burmese). What then are the distinguishing features of a leader with *sedana*?<sup>90</sup>

Most obviously - for proponents of the *benevolence* narrative - the ideal leader with *sedana* was the opposite of the self-interested *ar nar shin* dictator. U Wunna suggested that within the democracy movement it was the value of selflessness that was seen to be crucial in recognising *sedana* (Interview 1 2013 Burmese). Within the movement there were many who had made profound sacrifices for the cause of democracy. Most of the key leaders in the National League for Democracy, the 88 Generation activist organisation and other local NGOs and

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<sup>89</sup> Military leaders in Burma had also sought to establish *awza* (influence) and not only their coercive control. For example, see U Maung Maung's (1969) biography of U Ne Win (1969).

<sup>90</sup> It is important to note that the use of the word *sedana* has been common not only in the democracy movement but also by the military elite. Houtman (1999, 162) highlights how military leaders frequently referred to their own leadership as *sedana*, or goodwill based leadership and that democracy movement leaders like Aung San Suu Kyi were taking advantage of the goodwill of the military in causing instability. There were appeals for adversaries to the army to show *sedana*, and when ethnic armies agreed to ceasefires this was seen to demonstrate *sedana*.

activist groups had spent years – some up to 20 years - as political prisoners during the period of SLORC and SPDC government. Many activists regarded this kind of selflessness as crucial to demonstrating one's *sedana*, and therefore leadership credibility.

This focus was illustrated in a book that was produced internally by the National League for Democracy in 2013 to profile the hundreds of candidates for election to the Central Committee of the party. The profiles of the individuals included – along with usual details of educational background or work experience – a section where they could outline their own commitment in terms of numbers of arrests or years served as a political prisoner (Interview 24/ February 2014 English). This emphasis on selflessness was also reflected during my field research in a trip to a regional meeting of the National League for Democracy. Several key regional NLD leaders travelled to the meeting by public transport which added several hours to the journey while on the night before the public meeting an NLD Member of Parliament slept in a corner of the office rather than pay for a nearby hotel room.

Yet while selflessness was respected, it was drawn into public discussion only with a specific tone. This tone was seen by U Ye Thu, an activist who had close connections to the NLD, to be set by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi herself. He described how she clearly respects party members who have faced adversity – and appointed leaders who had demonstrated their commitment - yet was also opposed to open demonstrations of sympathy. He commented on this culture within the movement saying:

Daw Suu doesn't like the word 'sacrifice'. She always says I am not sacrificing; I am just doing my job. That is your own choice. For example, you have decided to do politics, that is your own choice, you must not expect benefit...If you ask [for respect or sympathy], she doesn't like, it will not work. (Interview 34/ February 2014 English).

In this sense while selflessness was clearly a central part of gaining leadership credibility, appeals to particular actions or periods of suffering could not be made in an overt way.

Selflessness was also seen by many activists to be demonstrated through foregoing potential personal gain from leadership. For example, a member of the 88 Generation organisation spoke about the commitment of the organisation's leaders, including prominent activist U Min Ko Naing, and their refusal of any personal benefits:

People think they [88 generation leaders] have international help. But they don't receive any support. Ko Min Ko Naing got support on one trip to America...to get awards. But some 88 didn't get passports and couldn't go. So Min Ko Naing didn't go either. From his prize...Min Ko Naing put all money into the 88 organisation. Because of this people love him' (Interview 36 2014 Burmese).

He then explained how the demonstration of *sedana* by Ko Min Ko Naing led to greater public support for the 88 Generation leaders. Now 'wherever they go...because of their goodwill (*sedana*) there are people who donate', he concluded (Interview 36/February 2014 Burmese). This also extended down to other prominent members of the movement who received little financial gain for their work. An activist organisation leader with links to the 88 Generation described activism as one of the lowest paying jobs in the country saying, 'the people who work here only get paid the same as a teashop waiter' (Interview 40/February 2014 Burmese). Thus the perception of selflessness was crucial in discerning leaders or activists with *sedana*.

Within the *benevolence* narrative it was often Daw Aung San Suu Kyi who was seen to exemplify *sedana* (benevolent) leadership<sup>91</sup>. As described in the previous chapter Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was criticised by many international aid workers

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<sup>91</sup> Not all proponents of this narrative were equally supportive of the role of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. U Wunna, while articulating the key elements of the benevolence narrative (Interview 1 2013 Burmese), was skeptical of the leadership of Suu Kyi claiming that she was in fact not driven by true motives.

as having an autocratic style and not supporting democratic values. Yet for proponents of the *benevolence* narrative she was often portrayed as an individual with *sedana* who can bring democracy to Myanmar. 'I believe that with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's *seit sedana* (goodwill), ability and actions we can [bring] changes', reflected U Aung Naing when asked about the prospects of the country's future democratization (Interview 5/October 2013 Burmese). Where there had been failures of leadership throughout Myanmar history – from King Thibaw through to recent military leaders – Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was often seen by proponents of this narrative as the moral leader the country has needed.

A Western diplomat recalled a meeting with the National League for Democracy where Daw Aung San Suu Kyi been asked why the general public overwhelmingly voted for her and the National League for Democracy in the 2012 by-elections. He said Suu Kyi replied that internal party research had revealed three main motivations for voters supporting the NLD (Interview 39/February 2014 English). The most important was the public regard for Suu Kyi's father, U Aung San who - before his assassination in 1947 - had been the country's most famous independence leader. More than sixty years later his sacrifice for the country – as one of the *ar zar ni* (or independence martyrs) - gave legitimacy to Suu Kyi's own campaign. The legacy of U Aung San was also clearly claimed by the National League for Democracy. At one meeting of the NLD that I attended, the links to U Aung San and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi could not have been made clearer. Clustered around the stage in the large meeting room were five photographs of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. And in the centre, above the lectern was a large photograph of U Aung San in military uniform.

The second stated reason for the success of the National League for Democracy was the selflessness of Suu Kyi herself in spending time as a political prisoner. Spending much of the last 25 years under house arrest and losing her privileged life in Oxford, Aung San Suu Kyi was considered to have the traits of *sedana*. An activist writer summed up her status saying:

‘Aung San Suu Kyi is very popular with ordinary people because she risked herself and her life for the country. They know about this and they trust her. She will never disappoint the country. She has no personal interest, personal money or opportunities. She never got that. So they trust her’ (Interview 14/October 2013 Burmese).

Finally, Suu Kyi’s campaign was found to receive support because of the perception of selflessness of other NLD party leaders – many of whom had also spent more than a decade as political prisoners. Thus the progress of genuine democracy in Myanmar was seen by proponents of this narrative to be closely connected to *sedana* – which was demonstrated through selflessness. Democracy depended on the moral capacity of political actors to put aside their own vested interests for the good of the country.

### *The Values of Democracy: obligation, unity and majority protection*

As described in the previous chapter, the institutional narrative was underpinned by a set of core values that were seen to be inviolable – especially universal human rights, pluralism and minority protection. While formal democratic structures may vary between countries, for proponents of the institutional narrative, any democracy must necessarily adhere to these values. In contrast, many activists in the democracy movement appealed to a different set of values - emphasising the obligations of citizens, unity and majority protection. This is not to suggest that leaders or activists who draw on this narrative were opposed to the concepts of rights, pluralism or minority protection, rather these values were balanced in a wider hierarchy of political values.

A key dimension of debate in the movement was the perceived balance between rights and obligations in *demokarazi*. U Nay Lin – an elderly member of the National League for Democracy - explained that in a democracy, rights cannot overshadow obligations. He suggested that if democracy is about rights alone then it will lead to instability in society - as everyone will be guided by their own self-interest (Interview 8/October 2013). Rather, as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi also

argues (1991, 183) in *Freedom from Fear*, 'free men' are the ones who 'make themselves fit to bear the responsibilities and to uphold the disciplines which will maintain a free society'. In this way, there was a reversal of the primary trajectory of democratic 'freedom'. As U Nay Lin suggested, 'democracy is not about freedom to do whatever you like', but rather a freedom from moral failings (Interview 8/October 2013 Burmese). Not freedom to pursue one's own self-interests but a freedom *from* those self-interests.

During our discussion U Nay Lin and I walked around the central pagoda of a town in regional Myanmar. At this time, he explicitly linked his vision of democratic obligations to Buddhist teaching on relational responsibilities (Interview 8/October 2013 Burmese). He stressed the importance of the Buddhist *wuttaya nga pa* (or 'Five Obligations') as examples of mutual obligations defined for different relationships within society – parents and children, teachers and students, husbands and wives, monks and lay people (Interview 8/October 2013 Burmese). For instance, it is a parent's obligation to instruct and encourage their children and a child's obligation to obey their parents. These obligations and their implicit hierarchy are then closely reflected in Burmese language and social practices – for example in use of superior-inferior pronouns. The pro-nouns *Sayar* or *Sayama* (teacher), *U, Daw* (uncle/aunt), *Ko, Ma* (brother/sister) and *Tha* or *Thami* (son/daughter) are used according to the nature of the relationship between two people, and the degree to which they are superior or inferior in social status (Interview 8/October 2013 Burmese).

U Nay Lin also pointed to a wider set of obligations for leaders, the *nayaka wuttaya* (Interview 8/October 2013 Burmese) – which are translated as 'vigilance, diligence, sympathy, patience, wisdom and helpful admonition' (Maung Maung Gyi 1983, 164). For U Nay Lin, citizens were expected to set aside their 'own desires' and fulfil their obligations to the country or leader. On the other hand leaders were also expected to fulfil their obligations to citizens. There was an emphasis, for many activists, on democratic *obligations* rather than rights.

Related to the emphasis on obligation was the importance of *unity* – citizens putting aside vested interests for the good of the community or country. U Aung Naing explained that the most important thing for the country’s democratic future is ‘the role of the community and all parties in setting aside obsessions and standing together’ (Interview 5 2013 Burmese). This relates closely to Houtman’s observations on *sedana* leadership which he suggests – as well as being translated as ‘goodwill’ or ‘benevolence’ – also has the connotation of ‘a union of mind with an object or purpose’ in Burmese (Houtman 1999, 162). The presumption is that ‘for a government to work, all people must share the same deep intentions’ (Houtman 1999, 162) - a unity of vision.

This was reflected in the responses of a local NGO leader U Shwe Aung to questions about democracy in Myanmar. He contrasted Buddhist inspired ideas of communal unity with the more individualistic tendencies of Western liberal democracy.

Buddhism brings an ideal of community and equality. [When we go to the pagoda] we say we are spreading the good to everyone. Karma gained is not for the individual but for the whole community. Liberal democracy and capitalism is more about benefits for the individual (Interview 46/ August 2014 Burmese).

According to U Shwe Aung, democracy could not just be about individual benefit, like Buddhist practice it must be for the ‘whole community’. In this way he linked the value of unity to a Buddhist moral framework. Walton (2012, 225) explains this emphasis by suggesting that<sup>92</sup>:

the morally grounded expectation of unity orient’s a citizen’s democratic practice away from individualism and towards a more inclusive community orientation...disunity is the result of a group of individuals committed only to their own benefit; it is a result of moral failure.

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<sup>92</sup> Walton (2015) links this conception of unity to the work of U Hpo Hlaing in the monarchical period. U Hpo Hlaing emphasized unity and harmony amongst ministers and advisors comparing them to the limbs of a body (Walton 2015).

In other words, for proponents of the benevolence narrative, unity could become its own inviolable value – taking on a universal truth.

Importantly amongst activists this emphasis on unity was often directed toward both the *bamar* democracy movement itself, and also to the responsibility of ethnic minority groups - such as the Kachin or Karen - to look to the goodwill of the nation (not only toward their own group). U Aung Naing argued that if they are not ‘careful’ ethnic minority groups could cause an unhelpful division in the country. He stressed that:

It is better if the ethnic groups work together for changing our country. In the ethnic groups there are people who want their own group to become stronger. They need to be careful and come closer (Interview 5/ October 2013 Burmese).

The focus on obligation and unity therefore gave the benevolence narrative a majoritarian slant. While there was acknowledgement of particular needs of minority groups – such as ethnic or religious minorities – on the whole these were subsumed under the obligation for Myanmar society to be united behind the *bamar* majority. The logic of *sedana* as ‘a union of mind with an object or purpose’ (Houtman 1999, 162) led to an assumption amongst many *bamar* activists that democratization should centre on drawing minority groups into unity with the *bamar* majority, rather than making greater concessions for minorities. Cheesman (2015, 108) uses the concept of ‘sovereign *cetana* (*sedana*)’<sup>93</sup> to argue that this kind of benevolence of leaders is ‘not aimed at protecting rights generally, but only certain rights for certain people who deserve them because they conform with the sovereign’s vision for the community’. Minorities who did not hold to a unified vision for the country did not come under the umbrella of the *sedana*.

The majoritarian slant in the benevolence narrative was presented most starkly in debate about religious division and violence, and the need for protection of the

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<sup>93</sup> Cheesman (2015) uses the Pali rendering of the term *cetana*.

Buddhist majority in Myanmar.<sup>94</sup> In the institutional narrative outlined in the previous chapter, protection of Muslim minority groups was seen to be crucial. In contrast, for proponents of this benevolence narrative, the fundamental need was for protection of the Buddhist majority who were seen to be under threat.<sup>95</sup> U Shwe Aung described this need to defend the Buddhist majority:

‘Buddhism is not confrontational...But Muslims in Myanmar are systematically threatening the country, infiltrating into the country...Buddhism needs a defence system otherwise we will have to be backed into the ocean. We do not want to attack but just defend’ (Interview 46/August 2014 Burmese).

The majoritarian slant of this narrative recalled lessons from the parliamentary period and the precarious state of the Burmese majority in defending themselves. As I described in chapter four, after gaining independence in 1948, the new Burmese leaders were faced with both communist and ethnic insurgencies which, at times, even threatened the capital in Yangon. Meanings of democracy, and especially the emphasis on unity, were formed within the context of extreme instability and the perception of threat to the country.

Proponents of the institutional and benevolence narratives reached starkly contrasting conclusions about the issue of communal violence in the country. Yet, as I describe further in chapter eight, underlying these perspectives were differing constructions of the country’s challenges and the vision of democracy. On one hand, the institutional narrative was grounded in what is seen to be an inviolable cluster of procedurally protected ‘democratic’ values – especially universal human rights, pluralism and minority protection. While not rejected in the benevolence narrative, this universality of values was questioned by many activists and held in tension with different values of obligation, unity and majority protection.

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<sup>94</sup> It is important here to note the perceived association between *bamar* ethnicity and Buddhism. As Bechert, H. (1983, 99), notes the common saying is ‘To Be a Burmese is to be a Buddhist’.

<sup>95</sup> See Schissler (2016) for more examples of the perceived threat to the Buddhist majority.

## *Orientation of the benevolence narrative*

Finally, in contrast to the modernist orientation of the institutional narrative, the vision of democracy was often portrayed by proponents of the benevolence narrative though a wide 'temporal range'. As I described earlier in this chapter, participants such as U Wunna and U Aung Naing gave detailed historical anecdotes drawn from as far back as the monarchical period of the nineteenth century. In her book *Freedom from Fear*, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi explicitly embeds her perspectives on democracy in Myanmar history, describing the democracy movement as being involved in 'a second struggle for national independence' (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991, 193). Though activists made occasional references to democracy in other countries, the benevolence narrative was primarily set against a Myanmar (or even a *bamar* ethnic) backdrop.<sup>96</sup>

This orientation of the benevolence narrative contrasted significantly with the modern and international orientation of the *institutional* narrative. Rather than the vision of democratization being focussed on the future – an expectation of linear movement toward the modern world – for many activists democratization was considered to be a restoration of past democratic life, restoration of democratic practices that were inherent within Burmese culture. There was no consensus around a vision of democracy for Myanmar. The institutional and benevolence narratives in fact contained starkly different assessments not only of the vision of institutional or moral democracy, but also the temporal orientation of that vision.

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<sup>96</sup> This local and historical orientation is illuminated through Candier's (2011) observations on the Burmese word for 'reform' (or *pyu pyin ye* in Burmese). While primarily used in the context of restoration – for example repairing a road would be an act of *pyu pyin ye* – from the mid nineteenth century onwards the word also came to be associated with reform of government. Yet this reform was not only a future oriented act. In line with a cyclical rather than linear perspective of historical change, 'reform' was part of a cycle of decline and restoration. In this sense, it was oriented toward the future yet also toward a restoration of the past (Candier 2011).

## **The strategy of moral education and building of discipline**

Across the narratives described in my study, there were some broad overlaps in the strategy of building democracy. For many opposition leaders and activists the general elections in 2015 were a key strategic focus. Meanwhile in 2013 and 2014, prior to the beginning of formal election campaigning, many within the democracy movement were focussed on the campaign to reform Myanmar's 2008 constitution – in particular to reduce or remove *tatmadaw* presence in Parliament, allow Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to be eligible for the Presidency and to change the provisions for constitutional amendment. Western aid agencies were also supportive of these activities, seeing them as crucial steps in the country's democratization. Between all participants in this study there were certain points of overlap in assumptions about promoting a more democratic Myanmar. However there were also crucial distinctions between the strategies highlighted in different narratives. Where the institutional narrative focussed on capacity building of Burmese government and civil society actors, within this benevolence narrative one distinctive strategy was of moral education and the fostering of discipline.

In the benevolence narrative there was an assumption of tension within Burmese society. As I have described in this chapter, Burmese society was seen by many activists to have inherently democratic traits. Yet, citizens were also considered to lack the maturity required for the practice of genuine democracy. Proponents of this narrative, such as U Nay Lin, criticised Myanmar citizens for understanding democracy as the right to do 'whatever you like', and emphasised the responsibilities or obligations of democracy. Therefore a key concern for many activists was to foster a more mature understanding of democracy – which could be achieved through a strategy of moral education.

It was hoped by proponents of this narrative that activists, government officials and citizens could be reached through public talks or workshops. The more citizens could understand the genuine meaning of democracy, activists or

opposition leaders assumed, the more they would be able to practice democracy – particular in putting aside their own self-interest for the benefit of the country. After describing the importance of the quality of *sedana*, U Aung Naing suggested that ‘there needs to be trainings given to leaders...in order for them to understand. [And] there should be trainings for activists’ (Interview 5/ October 2013 Burmese). He went on to say that local NGOs could play a role in the wider education of society about democracy and ultimately this would contribute to the vision of ‘public, community and all parties...setting aside obsessions and standing together’ (Interview 5/ October 2013 Burmese). Any democratic progress was considered by U Aung Naing to rely on the moral character of political actors.

For proponents of the benevolence narrative, the fostering of discipline (or *si kan*) was another distinctive aspect of strategy. The word *si kan* – which was also employed in the Burmese phrase for ‘disciplined democracy’ - was used to describe an ordered and systematic approach. While reacting against the military narrative, activists and opposition leaders also reproduced a similar emphasis on order. Since the origins of the contemporary democracy movement in 1988, the theme of discipline has been prominent. In Aung San Suu Kyi’s famous 1988 speech at the base of Shwedagon Pagoda, to hundreds of thousands of protestors, she stressed:

‘If the people are disunited, no ideology or form of government can bring much benefit to the country. If there is no discipline, no system can succeed’  
(Suu Kyi 1988).

The words *si kan* (discipline) and *nyi nyut chin* (unity) are written in large red Burmese letters over the entrance to the National League for Democracy’s head office in Yangon. And when activist Ko Min Ko Naing, leader of the 88 Generation Students Group, was released from prison in 2012, he stressed that the maturity required for democracy was closely linked to the development of discipline. One of his first public comments after being released was that ‘it is very important to have discipline and unity, we have to show that we deserve democracy’ (Voice 2012).

For many activists and opposition leaders interviewed in this research, discipline was seen as a strategic foundation for challenging the control of government by military, or ex-military, elites. It was in the military regime's interests to factionalise the democracy movement and therefore if they were to challenge existing power structures it could only be through presenting a disciplined and united front. One activist highlighted that without a disciplined strategy within the democracy movement, the military's agenda would continue:

The government works to make [division] happen...if three organisations want reform then if [we] work together it will be better...We need unity. We need to work together. If there is no unity then we have to accept the government 'play'...Our groups are not the same, but our objectives are the same. For me, whoever it is I will be ready to greet them (Interview 36/February 2014 Burmese).

Allowing conflicts to surface within the democracy movement was seen by proponents of this narrative to allow manipulation from powerful political actors such as the military. Therefore a strategy of discipline and unity, fostered through moral education was seen to be crucial to promoting *demokarazi* in the country. Most proponents of the *benevolence* narrative were not opposed to international aid agency strategies of capacity building, and, at times, acknowledged the usefulness of Western support in these areas (Interview 5/October 2013 Burmese). Yet despite this recognition of a place for Western technical support, for many democracy activists the focus on moral education and the building of discipline was considered to be crucial.

## Conclusion

Many Burmese activists and opposition leaders participating in this study saw democratization not as a process of institutional modernisation but rather as a moral transformation, where citizens and leaders increasingly put aside their own narrow interests for the benefit of the majority. It was not a personalised form of politics that presented a barrier to democratization. Rather, long term

moral failure of both leaders and citizens was perceived to be the core problem – with the persistent negative influence of *ar nar shin* dictators embodied most obviously in military and ex-military political elites. Finally for proponents of this benevolence narrative, the strategy of fostering democracy was not a technical one of capacity building, but rather one of moral education and the building of discipline.

In this sense, depending on the narrative that is drawn on, democracy can be described in contrasting ways. An emphasis on moral character in leadership (from the benevolence narrative) was portrayed as immature, personalised politics in the institutional narrative.. Meanwhile, the focus amongst activists on protection of the majority was portrayed within the institutional narrative as neglect or oppression of minorities.

Beyond the specific content of these narratives there were also contrasts in their orientations. Proponents of the institutional narrative frequently used anecdotes from their recent experiences in other countries (for example South Africa, Turkey, Ireland, Norway) to compare and contrast Myanmar's democratisation. In this way the story was oriented toward Myanmar's position relative to other countries. In contrast, the *benevolence* narrative had a far wider temporal range and was often supported by activists using anecdotes from Myanmar history – even precolonial history. In this way the *benevolence* narrative portrayed democracy within a local and historically embedded story, as opposed to an international and future oriented one.

The institutional and benevolence narratives were both reactions against the military narrative of 'disciplined democracy' in Myanmar – yet, as I have argued, reactions to this narrative were shaped in different ways. While proponents of the benevolence narrative were opposed to certain elements of the military narrative – notably the idea of military 'guardianship' - they also reproduced other elements of that story. In their caution about citizen ability to understand democracy, and their focus on obligation, unity and discipline, proponents of the benevolence narrative echoed certain elements of the military inspired

‘disciplined democracy’. Thus even in reacting against a particular ‘counter position’, narratives can also replicate certain dimensions of rival narratives.

Further complicating this picture of contrasting narratives of democracy was the fact that there were not only differences between the Burmese democracy movement and its Western donor supporters, but also – as the next chapter highlights - profound differences *within* the movement. There was no simple binary opposition between ‘Western’ and ‘local’ meanings of democracy, but rather multi-dimensional contrasts between different narratives. The next chapter outlines another narrative arising from within the Burmese democracy movement – one which questions the focus on benevolence.

## Chapter 7 Equality narrative

To this point my unpacking of meanings of democracy in Myanmar has emphasised distinctions that were largely, though not exclusively, along lines between international and Myanmar actors. Yet a crucial contribution of this study is in unsettling a portrayal of only international-local contests over meanings of democracy. In this chapter I outline an *equality* narrative of democracy that was drawn on within the Burmese democracy movement and which was largely a reaction against the *benevolence* narrative described in the previous chapter. This *equality* narrative had three components - the core *challenge* of hierarchy within Burmese society, a *vision* of personal or relational equality, and a *strategy* of cultural reform. Proponents of this narrative saw the emphasis on values of unity and obligation within the *benevolence* narrative, and the implicit hierarchies that these values create, as deeply problematic for the country's democratization.

Meanwhile, the equality narrative aligned, in some ways, with the *institutional* narrative that was prominent amongst Western donor agencies. There was sensitivity amongst some activists to ethnic and religious division, and also recognition of the importance of liberal values of human rights and pluralism. However, this equality narrative also strongly emphasised the relational and personal realm over the formal and procedural. Formal democratic institutions, for example of free and fair elections, a representative parliament and revision of the 2008 constitution, were considered by proponents of this narrative to be a necessary part of a democratic political system. Yet it was reform of *bamar* culture itself – and its inherent hierarchies – that was seen by some activists to be of greater relevance to democracy. Change in formal institutions, without corresponding cultural reform, would result in the perpetuation of authoritarian cultural traits in a different form.

Within my study, it was amongst particular informal networks of activists that the *equality* narrative was most prominent. These activists were often highly

educated and yet working for low profile local NGOs or political institutes. They had limited connections to elite opposition leaders in the National League for Democracy, or to prominent activist groups such as the 88 Generation. In describing the equality narrative in this chapter I draw on several Burmese language articles from the Myanmar Journal of Human Rights and Democracy, informal conversations with over fifty activists, and sixteen extended interviews with participants.

## **The challenge of hierarchy**

The perceived challenges to democracy portrayed in this *equality* narrative differed in important ways from both the Western centric *institutional* narrative and the *benevolence* narrative. The *institutional* democracy narrative (outlined in chapter 5) portrayed a personalised form of politics as a core challenge for Myanmar's democratisation. This 'old mindset' (Mitchell 2013, 14) could only be overcome by a shift toward modern procedures of democracy – where changes could be rooted in firm institutional ground rather than the shakiness of individual leadership. In contrast, activist proponents of the *benevolence* narrative did not question the focus on personalised politics. Rather they portrayed the failures of individuals within that system - in the role of dictatorial *ar nar shin* - as the core challenge. Many activists saw a rejuvenation of *sedana* leadership and citizenship as critical in the country's democratisation.

In this chapter I highlight a third perception of the main challenge to Myanmar's democratization which concentrated on the need to radically reform the country's political culture. Proponents of the equality narrative perceived the primary problem not to be the personalised nature of politics, but rather the hierarchical values fostered within that personalised system of politics. These hierarchical values were seen by some activists to be an unresolved obstacle to Burmese democracy. I interviewed a prominent writer and activist Daw Thandar Win in central Yangon in the upstairs office of a journal that she wrote for. She described Burmese thinking as 'locked up' (Interview 48/August 2014 English), insisting that new leaders, even those with *sedana*, would not be able to solve

this inherent problem and may – should they emphasise the values of unity and obligation - in fact reinforce it. Crucially, for proponents of the *equality* narrative, new formal democratic institutions would also fail to treat the core problem, which was seen to be cultural rather than procedural. In order to contextualise this concern for hierarchy, the next section explores the perceived reasons for ‘un-democratic’ hierarchies within Burmese culture and then their manifestations in social and political life.

### *‘Un-democratic’ hierarchy in Burmese culture*

I organised to meet U Tun Kyi at the office of the local organisation where he was director.<sup>97</sup> We sat at the staff lunch table and moving between Burmese and English he described his concerns about Burmese culture. When I asked U Tun Kyi about the main challenge to Myanmar’s democratisation he said:

‘It’s the culture...the hierarchy and religious teaching. The social teaching and religious teaching listened with no criticism. You will [be] put in that frame not to argue, not to disagree – about status of religious leaders, social leaders, teachers, parents...these are key challenges for the practice of the democracy’ (Interview 9/October 2013 English/Burmese).

In this way he stressed that the common connection between Buddhist teaching and Myanmar political culture was deeply problematic. In the previous chapter I highlighted the role of Buddhist social obligations in informing the *benevolence* narrative. In the social arena, relational obligations such as the *wuttaya ngapa* (or five obligations) influence patterns of relations, for example between parents and children, or teachers and students. Meanwhile in the political realm I highlighted that there was an emphasis, amongst many activists and opposition leaders, on obligations in the relationship between citizens and leaders. For proponents of the *benevolence* narrative, fulfilment and strengthening, of these relational obligations was linked to the practice of democracy.

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<sup>97</sup> In this chapter I use pseudonyms and I do not link individual participants to particular organisations. Given the smaller scale of these local organisations, when compared to the National League for Democracy, revealing the name of the organisation would compromise their anonymity.

Yet U Tun Kyi criticised these assumptions as a misinterpretation of Buddhist teaching. He suggested that they contribute to an undemocratic hierarchy, not only in political life but more generally in social relationships. Through the reinforcing of these obligations, those who are 'inferior' in the hierarchy are 'put in that frame not to argue, not to disagree' (Interview 9/October 2013 English/Burmese). Importantly, he also identified religious leaders themselves as often promoting these hierarchical social values to protect their own interests. He continued, 'religious teachers want to [have] their role, so their teaching is how to keep their security and position...They interpret teaching as what they want' (Interview 9 2013 English/Burmese). In this way, the relational obligations were seen by U Tun Kyi to have their own self-reinforcing logic - with those in the 'superior' position, including religious leaders, able to dictate the interpretation of the obligations themselves.

A number of activists participating in this study supported the view of U Tun Kyi and several identified Burmese political scholar Maung Maung Gyi's book *Burmese Political Culture* (1983) and Lucian Pye's 1962 work *Politics, Personality, and Nation Building: Burma's Search for Identity* as being influential in shaping their perspectives on democracy in Myanmar. In particular, these works were seen to be important in developing their critique of relational hierarchy. One activist who worked for a local political education institute considered these works so important that he translated parts of them from English into Burmese and distributed the translations to his friends.

Maung Maung Kyi's (1983) reflections on the influence of the relational obligations such as the *wuttaya* resonate closely with those of U Tun Kyi, described above. He explains that the *wuttaya* are 'excellent indeed....[but] the interpretation of the rules often happens to rest with the parties older in age or superior in status such as parents, the teacher, the husband, and the master' (Maung Maung Kyi 1983, 36). Maung Maung Gyi (1983) observes that those in a superior position in a relationship – whether parents, teachers or national leaders – can use well-intentioned principles to reinforce hierarchy. The set of positive obligations for leaders - such as the *nayaka wuttaya* emphasis on

patience, wisdom and sympathy - 'degenerates into domination on the part of the party in power... while the rules...help to standardize the hierarchical pattern of the relationship' (Maung Maung Gyi 1983, 36). Further undermining attempts to question the hierarchical nature of relationships is the overlay of a Buddhist religious framework. This means that attempting to undermine this system is not only 'breaking the obligations but is "blasphemy"' (Maung Maung Gyi 1983, 36).

Lucian Pye's (1962) work *Politics, Personality, and Nation Building: Burma's Search for Identity* builds on this analysis and its relation to power. Pye (1962) portrays Burmese culture as being obsessed with power and hierarchy yet with a Buddhist overlay that masks the extent of this obsession. Pye (1962, 146) argues:

there are few cultures that attached greater importance to power as a value than the Burmese. Considerations of power and status so permeate even social relationships that life tends to become highly politicized. The fact that Buddhism is a central feature of Burmese life makes the quest for power more subtle and more indirect.

In my own reading, both Maung Maung Gyi (1983) and Pye (1962) essentialise Burmese culture and create a simplistic binary between problematic traditional values and modern democratic values. Yet for many proponents of this *equality* narrative these works were influential. The reinforcement of hierarchical norms throughout society – from families to schools and workplaces – was seen by some activists to have impacted Burmese political life. As U Tun Kyi described above, these norms were seen to have created mechanism that allowed social, religious and political leaders to face little criticism or questioning. Relational norms promoted in the *benevolence* narrative as being 'democratic', were criticised as in fact being a barrier to democracy. Unquestioning adherence to obligations and the value of unity was seen by some activists to be a central problem for the country.

A final reason given by some activists for the perceived perpetuation of hierarchical norms was the orientation of *benevolence* narrative toward Myanmar's past. As outlined in the previous chapter, proponents of the *benevolence* narrative commonly described Burmese society as an inherently democratic one, yet one where both leaders and citizens have, at times, failed to meet their moral obligations. Some opposition leaders and members of the NLD saw democracy as having ancient origins in Theravada Buddhist teaching. In this context, 'reform' could be interpreted as a return to the past, the restoration of an inherently democratic culture (Candier 2014).

Yet this orientation toward Burmese history was strongly critiqued by many proponents of the *equality* narrative. They emphasised the authoritarian rather than democratic traits in Burmese political culture and were cautious about only looking to Myanmar's past for solutions. Recalling General Ne Win's failed 'Burmese Road to Socialism' U Tun Kyi suggested that some leaders of the democracy movement are intent on an insular 'Burmese Road to Democracy' – one that is oriented only to the past and one that is equally likely to fail (Interview 9/October 2013 English/Burmese). Meanwhile, historian and author Thant Myint U (2014) lamented this exclusive orientation to the past and particularly the assumption that Myanmar needs to be 'restored' to a position it previously held:

There is a dominant narrative or way of thinking about things [in Myanmar] – and it is often about degeneration and the possibility of restoration. There is a sense by a lot of people- it is impossible to generalize – that the country has seen better days... in general almost everyone thinks that things were better before in some way and the country needs to be restored to its rightful place as a relatively rich country in the region, democracy needs to be restored. That in some way, things needs to go back to something that it was before.

In this way, the orientation of the *benevolence* narrative was criticised by proponents of the *equality* narrative. There was concern about the assumption that Burmese society was inherently democratic. On the contrary, for some activists, it was seen to be inherently autocratic.

## *Hierarchy in Political and Social Life*

These hierarchies throughout society were seen by some activists to have had significant repercussions in political and social life. Most obviously proponents of the *equality* narrative were highly critical of the military's longstanding role in national politics. The norms of mutual obligation were seen by some activists to have allowed unaccountable control of governance by *ar nar shin* leaders over the last half-century. Thus in its opposition to a 'guardian' role for the military, this narrative resonated with the perspectives of both the *institutional* and *benevolence* narratives. However unlike other narratives from this study, proponents of the *equality* narrative presented a sharper and more radical critique of *bamar* culture.

In particular, while proponents of the *benevolence* democracy narrative looked to leaders to play a transformative role, activists drawing on this *equality* narrative were much more sceptical - questioning the seeming obsession with *sedana* (benevolence) over results. Daw Thandar Win argued that:

As long as [leaders] have a good benevolence and good intention [they] can dictate to people. That is the way people think...they think that 'since we have good intentions [for the people] whatever we do for you it should be good' ...That kind of mentality is quite infectious' (Interview 48/August 2014 English).

For proponents of the *equality* narrative, *sedana* in leaders was insufficient to bring about the necessary change to society. An activist who now works for an international advocacy organisation, U Phyo Maung, reflected that while he had once had confidence in individual leaders to change Myanmar and bring democracy, he was now more sceptical:

I was in prison for four years. At first I thought the leader could make a difference but...replacing one person with another can be dangerous, sometimes society wants a dictator...Like [George Orwell's] Animal Farm, I want to get rid of the farmer but I am worried about Napoleon (Interview 47/August 2014 English).

For some within the democracy movement, the dictatorial 'Napoleon' they were concerned about was within the democracy movement itself. Within some activist networks, this scepticism about leadership was often particularly aimed at Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy. While criticised in the *institutional* narrative for her party's lack of capacity for democratic governance, for proponents of the *equality* narrative Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was often more harshly described as yet another 'dictator' or *ar nar shin* (Interview 7/ October 2013 2013 English).

According to these critics, her supposed disconnection from citizens - and her authoritarian style of decision making within the National League for Democracy - demonstrated that she was largely perpetuating, as opposed to challenging, the authoritarian norms in Burmese political culture. Daw Win Win was the manager at a local advocacy organisation and in an interview she concluded:

I am not a fan of Daw Suu, frankly speaking. I admire her perseverance....she is the idol of Myanmar people, people look up to her...But I don't believe that she is the one who can change the country...I think I am afraid they [the NLD] are becoming like the dictatorship or 'one lady show', it is very threatening and dangerous. Alarming I think (Interview 7/ October 2013 English).

The problem of hierarchy and dominant leaders in Burmese history was seen by some activists, such as Daw Win Win, to be reproduced through the actions of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy. The 'one lady show' was even 'threatening' or 'dangerous' (Interview 7/ October 2013 English). Prior to her release from house arrest in late 2010 Suu Kyi had few critics from within the democracy movement (Interview 11/November 2013 English). Yet for many proponents of this narrative it was her involvement in mediating a dispute over a controversial Chinese supported copper mine - in Letpadaung in central Myanmar in 2013 - that sparked wider questioning of her role (Interview 11/November 2013 English).

Early in 2013, anti-mine protesters, including monks, had been injured in clashes with police. In her new role as a Member of Parliament, Suu Kyi was invited to be part of a government commission of inquiry (Ei Ei Toe Lwin 2013). However, the conclusion of the report - which was publicly supported by Suu Kyi - was that the mining project could continue, albeit with some modifications. Burmese activist and writer U Kyaw Kyaw (Interview 11/November 2013 English) said that was the moment he concluded that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi had the 'intelligence' required for leadership, yet lacked the 'compassion'. In short, she was just another *ar nar shin*.

Meanwhile, U Ye Thu - an activist who had been involved with training for the National League for Democracy - even likened the NLD organisational style to that of the old military regimes saying:

'Sometimes I make a joke, [the NLD leader] look like BSPP [Socialist party of General Ne Win] members. When [they] came to our office they [stopped] downstairs and waited before they came. They are very formal, not like us. [Like we] want to pay homage to [their leaders]. They wear the same uniform. Not like a modern political party' (Interview 34/August 2014 English).

Yet for some proponents of this narrative the criticism of hierarchy in the party was also mixed with sympathy for NLD leaders and members. In 2003 the NLD had organised a series of political rallies for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi around the country. However, in the northern Myanmar town of Depayin, the NLD touring party had been attacked by over a thousand government sponsored protesters. Over seventy NLD party members were killed and many injured while Daw Aung San Suu Kyi only narrowly escaped (Interview 34/August 2014 English). U Ye Thu went on to say:

[NLD members] are very loyal to their leaders, very committed. Sometimes I feel sorry for them. Some of them sacrificed their lives...in the 2003 Depayin massacre...[They] think that our community hierarchy ...is important. [They think they] have a role to play (Interview 34/February 2014 English).

There was commonly sympathy for the commitment of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, yet the hierarchical social values they fostered were seen by some activists to present a barrier to genuine democratization. Paradoxically, this characterisation of Suu Kyi within the *equality* narrative was the opposite of how she was portrayed by observers at the beginning of the democracy movement in 1988. In her book *Freedom from Fear* (1991) she argues that there is a need to not only change the system of government but also the 'Burmese mentality'. She stresses that there are norms of relational obligation that in some ways perpetuated control by the military. As Burma historian Taylor (2009, 412) reflects, in her early speeches and behaviour Daw Aung San Suu Kyi:

appeared to challenge not only the military regime but also the commonly accepted patterns of deference and respect allegedly characterising much of Myanmar social exchange...the hortatory activities of the NLD were part...of an effort to change Myanmar's putatively undemocratic political culture.

In other words, at the beginning of its opposition to the military government in 1988, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy were seen by observers like Taylor (2009) to be seeking to comprehensively reform the way Buddhist social norms are interpreted – a central theme in this *equality* narrative. In this way it is not only political events that can be interpreted differently through the lens of contrasting narratives, political actors are also constructed as 'characters' in narratives. The next chapter addresses this point in more detail, yet at this stage it is important to note how Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has been constructed as both a reformer of cultural hierarchies, and as a core obstacle to such reform.

For proponents of this *equality* narrative, democratization was often described in personal terms – a process that occurs in the relational realm more than in formal procedures. Reflections on the obstacles to democracy extended beyond criticism of military authoritarianism to recognition that dictatorial norms were embedded throughout society, within the National League for Democracy and even within activist networks or organisations themselves. The building of formal democratic institutions was seen by proponents of this narrative to be an

element of the country's democratization. Yet the reform of political and social culture, and the questioning of Buddhist inspired norms of mutual obligation, was considered to be of greater importance.

## **The vision of equality**

In response to the problem of hierarchy in the social and political realm, some activists presented a vision of democracy emphasising equality –where there would be no tiered system of relational obligations. Recalling Burmese independence leaders and their organisations - groups such as the *nagani* Book Club and writers such as Thakin Kodaw Hmaing - proponents of this vision emphasised a reinterpretation of Buddhist teaching. Yet this was also combined with incorporation of liberal political values such as human rights and pluralism.

In order to counter the emphasis on obligations from the *benevolence* narrative, proponents of this narrative challenged the patterns of control by social, political and religious leaders in Burmese society. Such a shift was seen by some activists to require the formation of new norms of decision-making and debate, and respect for different perspectives. U Tun Kyi stressed that this equality would mean that 'each individual has the right to say and express, and at the same time respect others' (Interview 9/October 2013 English/Burmese). Or as Daw Win Win (Interview 7/October 2013 English) suggested, a more democratic approach to decision making would mean:

If my decision is not the same as yours, I need to respect your decision....You and I are different, but it doesn't mean you are below or beneath myself. You have different kind of opinion, decision, because of your background, because of your thinking.

For Daw Win Win, genuine democracy meant that in everyday relationships there could be no assumption that one person was 'below' or 'beneath' another. In this way, the *equality* narrative overlapped in some respects with the *institutional* narrative in its emphasis on greater pluralism and respect for

difference. Yet the vision in this narrative was of a more comprehensive reform of culture. Equality in status needed to be fostered not only in the formal sphere of governance – as, for example, equality under the law - but also in schools and monasteries, and even within democracy promotion programs themselves (Interview 7/October 2013 English). An editorial in the Burmese language *Journal of Human Rights and Democracy* (Myanmar Knowledge Society 2016, 3) describes the issue of hierarchical *sayamwe-tapyemwe* (teacher and follower)<sup>98</sup> systems which operate not only ‘in the realm of politics or the realm of government staff’, but also in local civil society organisations. These relationships may not be actively engaged in, but rather unconsciously generated within local organisations. The editorial stresses that it is only through change in culture and practices within civil society organisations that the broader influence of these relationships in the country can be reduced (Myanmar Knowledge Society 2016).

Daw Win Win raised the issue of democracy within her own local advocacy organisation. ‘Even though we are promoting democracy’, she said, ‘[our organisation] is kind of a dictatorship’ (Interview 7/October 2013 English). She reflected that decision-making was centralised and staff had limited ability to question the leadership. In this way, there was an acute sensitivity amongst proponents of this narrative for modelling of ‘democratic’ or equal relationships within the movement, and also between activists and Western aid workers. This sensitivity over relational equality also recalls the *thakin* movement of the colonial period that I described in chapter four. Amidst wider political goals of democracy and independence, young activists sought to overturn the social hierarchies in colonial society by appropriating the word *thakin* (master) and using it for themselves.

Though importantly, for proponents of this narrative there was also some uncertainty about the basis of this vision of equality in social and political life. On one hand, some activists advocated for reform or reinterpretation of a Burmese

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<sup>98</sup> The Journal translates *sayamwe-tapyemwe* as ‘patron client’ system, the more direct translation would be ‘teacher-follower’.

Buddhist teaching, while others drew more explicitly on liberal political values such as pluralism and rights in describing the vision of democracy.

As highlighted earlier, proponents of this *equality* narrative such as U Tun Kyi were sharply critical of the political and social role of Buddhism. Yet this did not mean that Buddhist teaching was always rejected. U Tun Kyi suggested that it is a problem of interpretation rather than a fundamental flaw in Buddhist teaching itself (Interview 9/October 2013 English/Burmese). He differentiated the dominant - and supposedly hierarchical - expression of Buddhism from what he described as the 'real teaching':

The real *sangha* [order of monks] is the beggars - they are the ones who stay lowest. They have only one or two clothes...There is no house or monastery, teaching is to stay under the tree. That is the real teaching (Interview 9 2013 English/Burmese).

He argued that it was possible for Buddhist teaching to have a non-hierarchical influence if it was interpreted and practiced in a more 'real' way. In particular, rather than emphasising the status of those with seniority in a relationship U Tun Kyi stressed that people should be judged on the quality of their conduct:

Buddhism is very much on the quality of people. There are some teachings on quality of being a senior person. But this is not true teaching. It is quality based on the *thila* (moral conduct). Young people with *thila* [are] more respectable than....[older people]'. Buddhism is not a blind faith (Interview 9/October 2013 English/Burmese)

'True' expressions of Buddhism were seen to encourage critical thinking rather than 'blind faith' in religious leaders. Activist U Pyoe Maung described this reinterpretation of Buddhism saying that in promoting democracy, 'we need to go back to the essence of Buddhism, which is free thinking' (Interview 47/August 2014 English). Many proponents of this *equality* narrative did not reject Burmese Buddhist teaching but sought to reinterpret it in a more egalitarian way. However, whilst reinterpretation of Buddhist teaching was seen by some activists to provide a foundation for a reformed culture and more equal practice

of democracy, it was also seen to have limitations – particularly in the question of how non-Buddhist Myanmar people could be incorporated into the vision.

While the majority of Myanmar citizens identify as Buddhist, there are significant Christian, Muslim and Hindu minorities in the country. U Myo Myint concluded that ‘Buddhism can be a moral framework to some extent but [Myanmar’s vision] should be clearly more than Buddhism’ (Interview 31/February 2014 English). He went on to suggest that a solely Buddhist basis for democracy would be too *bamar* centric and contribute to a patronising approach to non-Buddhist ethnic minorities. He continued (Interview 31/February 2014 English):

When I talk to some people in CSOs they try to promote [democratic] ideals but in their discourse they [are] just thinking about the dominant group. A kind of ‘white man’s burden’. I am *bamar* Buddhist. [So] I have to take care of these ethnic people.

Even reinterpretation of Buddhist teaching would be insufficient in providing a basis for democracy in Myanmar as it could perpetuate inequality of status between Buddhist and non-Buddhist. U Myo Myint even reproduced the colonial language of Kipling’s ‘White Man’s Burden’ to describe the problem of *bamar* elites assuming that they had superior status. Therefore some proponents of the *equality* narrative also drew on liberal values - especially human rights and pluralism - in describing a vision of democracy that went beyond a basis only in Buddhist teachings.

Yet writer and activist U Moe Kyaw was concerned that human rights were not well understood in the democracy movement and this constrained the vision of democracy for many activists. He highlighted that (Interview 29/February 2014 Burmese):

Some activists understand the things in the Human Rights Declaration. But the way they understand is through memorizing or learning by rote. They don’t understand the essence.

In particular, U Moe Kyaw stressed (Interview 29/February 2014 Burmese) that the ‘essence’ of human rights – an attitude of sympathy toward the vulnerable – was often lost when Burmese activists considered issues such as ethnic conflict or communal violence:

In the human rights declarations there is the attitude of sympathizing with vulnerable people and marginalized people. [But] they don’t understand. So when there is ethnic conflict even people who say ‘human rights’ will see national identity as more fundamental. They don’t understand the basic concepts of human rights. It is only the information that they understand’.

Even senior figures – such as prominent Buddhist monks like Thitagu Sayadaw – were seen by U Moe Kyaw to lack comprehension of ‘democratic’ values such as human rights. He continued (Interview 29/February 2014 Burmese):

Thitagu sayadaw - who is a monk respected over the whole country - doesn’t understand politics. Sometimes he speaks to the military government from Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s side, from the opposition party side. [But] even he doesn’t understand human rights. For other people, it is even worse.

Therefore along with a reinterpretation of Buddhist teaching, the vision of equality in this narrative was also seen by activists such as U Moe Kyaw to rely on wider understanding of liberal values of pluralism and acknowledgment of the universality of human rights. Yet while drawing on both Buddhist teaching, and liberal values, in describing a new vision of democracy, some activists expressed uncertainty about an underlying ‘ideology’ to inform democracy in Myanmar. Reacting against the ‘disciplined democracy’ of the military and against the *benevolence* narrative, some activists were uncertain about what a new Myanmar democracy should be based on. U Myo Myint reflected (Interview 31/February 2014 English):

You know since the independence movement we have nationalism, communism, we have Buddhism. That is our ideologies. [But] if you take out these three what are we going to believe? We have no replacement...How can we now define our country and nationhood?’ (Interview 31 2014 English)

In this sense, the *equality* narrative has other parallels with the Burmese independence movement in the 1930s and ‘their search for a philosophy’ (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991, 129) to guide their action. For the Burmese independence movement, there was no longer an interest in returning to the traditional form of the monarchy, yet they were also deeply unsatisfied with the ‘modern’ politics emphasised by British colonial rule.

Proponents of the *equality* narrative similarly had no interest in the continuation of military influence and the hierarchical norms that had been fostered in society. However as the next section describes, they were also sceptical of a Western strategy of capacity building for liberal democracy. Some activists were seeking to end *ar nar shin* dictatorial rule and reform culture on their own terms. The next section outlines how proponents of this *equality* narrative describe the strategies to foster democracy in Myanmar.

## **The strategy of cultural reform**

For activists drawing on this *equality* narrative, there was a pressing need for cultural reform to reduce what were perceived to be undemocratic hierarchies throughout society. Changes in norms of social relationships – and assumptions of superior-inferior status - were seen by some activists to be required not only in national political life but also within schools, NGOs and even in families. This perspective meant that proponents of this narrative were sharply critical of both the ‘capacity building’ emphasised in the *institutional* narrative, and the moral education and discipline highlighted in the *benevolence* narrative. As I have argued, strategies for promoting democracy were deeply embedded within assumptions about the meaning of democracy, and the problems it is intended to solve.

Activist organisation leader U Tun Kyi stressed that Myanmar’s democratization would require a deep reform of *bamar* culture - beginning at the household level. He said that in order to foster more democratic relationships ‘you need to start from the household level and the role of parents’ (Interview 9/October 2013

English/Burmese). Rather than instilling a sense of hierarchy as implied in the *wuttaya* sets of mutual obligations, parents should foster a more 'democratic' culture of equality. Activist U Phyo Maung expressed some optimism at the prospects of democratization through cultural reform in the household:

I think a big change can happen, and is happening, in education at home, relationships at home between parents and children. Obviously all parents say 'it is not what we used to do'. But I am hearing that from a lot of people that the way they are educating their children is fundamentally different and that they really are encouraging their children to think for themselves and to become more autonomous than they would have been allowed to [previously] (Interview 47/August 2014 English).

While U Tun Kyi saw hierarchical interpretations of Buddhist teaching as dominating society, he also expressed some optimism that Buddhist practice amongst younger people was changing toward fostering more democratic ideals. He suggested that:

Young people more and more understand that the current practice of Buddhist monk is not real teaching....not the real practice...It is changing, it's a natural trend. The younger generation [has] less respect to religious teaching...They see the religious teaching as not practical and not helping the day to day. So they are more critical...and find a more practical way.... Buddhism is not a blind faith. (Interview 9/October 2013 English/Burmese)

For proponents of this *equality* narrative, democratization was a society wide process. The only way to treat the problem of hierarchy in Burmese society was through an ongoing democratic reform of everyday relationships to have more equality of status. For some activists, such reform was seen to require new opportunities for citizens to learn about the democracy. Therefore, one key strategy employed by some activist organisations was to widen the theoretical resources available for the democracy movement and citizens more broadly. U Soe Aung, a well-known Burmese writer said, 'we need to circulate and publish books on democracy. We need to do seminars and speaking events' (Interview 16/November 2013 Burmese). He had already published a collection of his own

newspaper articles on democracy in Myanmar – many of which were based on translations of Western political texts. Meanwhile, before becoming more active in a local organisation since 2012, U Moe Kyaw had invested time in translating several Western political texts into Burmese, including the transcript of the 1971 televised debate between Michel Foucault and Noam Chomsky. U Moe Kyaw felt that a widespread lack of understanding of political theory amongst political actors in Myanmar was a limitation to democratization.

As Myanmar's politics has liberalised since 2012, several new activist organisations have emerged supporting this process of cultural reform and translation of Western political thought. For example, Yangon School of Political Sciences (YSPS) began as a vehicle for training young Myanmar people in political theory, which could help them to question assumptions within Burmese culture about the practice of democracy. One of the founders of YSPS said that it was important that ideas like those of Burmese author Maung Maung Gyi are more widely disseminated in the country to provide people with tools to think more critically about cultural values. Meanwhile Myanmar Knowledge Society (MKS) focused on publishing a monthly Myanmar Journal of Human Rights and Democracy. The journal contained opinion pieces on Myanmar current affairs and also provided translations of political articles published in Western forums. For example, one of the early issues of the journal included an article translating the works of writer and former Czech Republic President Vaclav Havel.

Activists drawing on the *equality* narrative sought to reform culture by making new intellectual resources available, especially those providing critical perspectives on Burmese culture. In some ways then this narrative has parallels with the *institutional* narrative and its emphasis on the strategy of capacity building. Proponents of both narratives intended to make external resources more available to Myanmar citizens and local organisations. Yet there were also important differences in strategy. Whereas proponents of the *institutional* narrative hoped for a transfer of democratic knowledge from 'west to east', for proponents of the equality narrative there was a desire to engage with Euro-American political literature directly, and not through, for example, workshops

mediated by international NGOs. Within these activist networks there was significant interest in Western political thought, yet at the same time, little interest in the capacity building activities of international agencies. Many proponents of the equality narrative were ambivalent about engagement of Western democracy promotion agencies in the country.

This was partly due to an assumption that Western agencies hoping to foster democracy in Myanmar did not sufficiently understand the context. Daw Win Win (Interview 7/October 2013 English) concluded that:

[International agencies] might have pure and genuine intention. But the context, the background and the experiences from their country and ours, might be different. And it might not be relevant if they drive with their own agenda.

For this reason Daw Win Win concluded that Western aid agencies should 'not be the driver. They should be in the back seat and supporting the drivers' (Interview 7/October 2013 English). Though not only did Western agencies not sufficiently understand the context, their prominence was seen to increase the resistance of the military, or others with powerful positions. As U Tun Kyi reflected (Interview 9/October 2013 English/Burmese):

The international should be staying at the back, with very low visibility. Otherwise they will interpret as foreign ideas. There will be more resistance. It is very clear.

Ultimately proponents of this narrative argued that change in the formal procedures of liberal democracy - which were emphasised in the *institutional* narrative - would not be able to shift the core problem of political culture. There was hesitancy about what was described as 'minimalist' models of representative democracy. U Ye Thu commented that, 'In the [international] view the definition of governance means 'management' (Interview 19/November 2013 English). He stressed that the required democratisation in Myanmar society needed to go beyond 'management' and be driven through a more direct and equal style of decision making.

Importantly he argued that liberal, representative institutions cannot sufficiently change the underlying hierarchies in Burmese social and political life.

Democracy, he suggested, would require a more thoroughgoing change of an inherently authoritarian culture. This meant that U Ye Thu was also particularly cautious about the Western donor approach of institution building in democracy promotion, fearing that it misdiagnosed the core obstacle to democratization (Interview 15/November 2013 English). He suggested (Interview 15/November 2013 English) that such an approach could even unwittingly perpetuate authoritarianism:

Usually the aid agencies, the democracy promotion agencies, they focus on institution building. They want to work with the Union Election Commission, they want to work with the legislature...I think they also need to review their program. Working with the government is fine but what I am worried about is their ideology...The problem is they are minimalists meaning that they are just focussing on [institutions]....in Myanmar, we [might] have everything, legislature, electoral commission. And then they will say 'it is okay' ....[but] I think that will create an opportunity for the authoritarians to persist in another form.

For U Ye Thu, the 'minimalist' or institutional approach to promoting democracy ignored the wider challenge of hierarchy in Burmese culture – and the ongoing role of *ar nar shin*. U Kyaw Kyaw reflected that Western agencies tend to focus on 'hardware' and 'skills' in their aid programs rather than the more important dimension of a 'change of attitude' (Interview 11/October 2013 English).

Recalling Myanmar history during parliamentary rule several activists argued that formal procedures of government were peripheral to the actual practice of democracy (Interview 11/October 2013 English). For example, in the parliamentary period (1948-1962) the adopted institutions – which were closely modelled on the British Westminster system - were not seen to be able to constrain the chaos of national division.

Yet while there was scepticism of the institutional narrative focus on 'capacity building' for democracy, proponents of this narrative were also critical of the

‘moral education’ encouraged by proponents of the *benevolence* narrative. Such moral education was seen by several activists to reproduce the core authoritarian tendencies in Burmese political culture, thereby suppressing citizen ability to question the perspectives of those in leadership. Therefore instead of cultivating a singular unity based around one leader, proponents of the equality narrative focused on fostering debate in the movement (Interview 7/October 2013 English/Burmese). Activist leader U Myo Myint explained that respecting diversity, rather than demanding unity, was important to the strategy of the democracy movement (Interview 31/February 2014 English):

We always think exclusive, the other movement is not the right thing, they will harm my strategy, they will harm the reform process. That makes us divided, instead of diverse. So I think that for me is the biggest challenge.

One example of this perceived lack of pluralism was in tensions within the opposition movement, between the growing ‘social movements’ focussing on labour rights, land rights or education policy, on one hand, and political parties (such as the NLD) on the other. U Myo Myint reflected that (Interview 31/February 2014 English):

All of the political parties think the social movement - labour movement and land movements - are not good for the reform process. And the labour movement, land movement [and] peace movement are thinking MPs in the parliament is not going to work....Some MPs explicitly mention that these [protests] are not necessary at the moment. [They say], ‘we are on the right way, we are trying to do our best - trying hard within the parliament. And you are making trouble for us’. I have that kind of perception from both sides.

In this sense, proponents of the equality narrative advocated for more diversity in strategy, including both advocacy in parliament and citizen protest. Thus they were sceptical about the *benevolence* narrative emphasis on unity and discipline within the movement. The rigid focus on unity was considered by some to be an attempt to control the voices of activists who may desire more radical social action.

Overall within this study there were contrasting views on the appropriate strategy toward fostering democracy in Myanmar. For many Western aid workers, the institutional structures of state – along with the liberal values which support them - were considered to be at the centre of the process of democratization. Strengthening these institutions through capacity building was seen to be a necessary strategy in democracy promotion.

Meanwhile, for both the benevolence and equality narratives, democracy was more frequently referred to in terms of everyday life and strategies focussed on the personal and relational rather than formal institutional realm. U Phyo Maung concluded that Myanmar's issues are 'very deep...and a democratic government cannot solve the problem, only a democratic society' (Interview 47/August 2014 English). Yet there were also stark contrasts between the strategies proposed in the benevolence and equality narratives. The strategy of 'moral education' – from the *benevolence* narrative - was to strengthen unity in society and build on existing norms of relational obligations. Meanwhile proponents of the *equality* narrative emphasised 'cultural reform' - seeking to question and overturn norms of relational obligations.

## **Conclusion**

My description of the equality narrative unsettles any notion of a single Myanmar understanding of democracy. Even amongst activists and leaders within the Burmese democracy movement there were starkly opposed accounts of the challenges, visions and strategies of democracy. The equality narrative presented a radical critique of many of the key elements of the benevolence narrative.

On one hand, proponents of the benevolence narrative saw Buddhist inspired relational norms as a foundation for democracy and it was assumed that benevolent leadership, and unity and discipline, in the movement and in society

more broadly, were critical for democracy. On the other hand, within other networks of activists and writers these relational norms, and the notion of the benevolent leader, were considered to be core obstacles to genuine democratic transition. For proponents of the *equality* narrative, unless there was reform of these norms of social and political life, the country would continue to be characterised by an authoritarian culture.

Further, what was strikingly clear throughout the interviews in the study was that activists and opposition leaders often understood democracy in more personal and relational terms than international aid workers. The informal, interpersonal nature of democracy was seen by many activists and opposition leaders to be more important than its formal procedures.

Overall, in the central section of this thesis (Ch 5, 6 and 7), I have outlined three narratives of democracy drawing together interpretations of challenges, visions and strategies. There were overlaps between these narratives in their opposition to the 'disciplined democracy' of the military and in the expectation of the presence of basic formal procedures (elections, parliament and reformed constitution) in any genuine Myanmar democracy. Yet I have also described many lines of contrast between these narratives and the ways that they are informed by the unique historical, linguistic and cultural context of the movement.

Of course in unpacking these narratives I do not suggest that they are an exhaustive account of the ways in which democracy is given meaning in Myanmar. Even within Western donor agencies and the democracy movement there may be other story-lines about democracy. Amongst ethnic minority groups, religious leaders, or non-elite Myanmar citizens there are almost certainly many other varied ways of understanding and communicating about democracy.

Having established examples of the different ways in which democracy is narrated, the next chapter turns to further analysis of the questions of this thesis

about meanings of democracy and how they are constructed through contest. I argue that a narrative approach uncovers important 'other' struggles for democracy – struggles over the meaning of democracy. Examining these other struggles can help to make sense of the actions and beliefs of democracy activists, especially when they diverge from liberal democratic expectations.

## Chapter 8 Narrative and Myanmar's other struggles for democracy

I have devoted the last three chapters to describing contrasting storylines of democracy drawn on by activists, opposition leaders and aid workers - the *institutional*, *benevolence* and *equality* narratives. This chapter addresses my research questions by drawing this empirical material together with the key insights from narrative theory that I outlined earlier in the thesis. I argue that making sense of processes of democratization requires scholars to unpack context embedded struggles over the meaning of democracy itself.

My first point in this chapter is that narratives, as simplified stories, were an important means through which democracy was understood and communicated in the Burmese democracy movement. It is clear that activists in the democracy movement, and their supporters, were not all running toward the same finishing line. Thus tracing out different narratives, with their overlaps and distinctions, can make the actions and beliefs of activists, opposition leaders and aid workers more comprehensible. In this chapter I further examine the institutional, benevolence and equality narratives and argue that distinctions between them were important within the Burmese democracy movement in informing responses to a diverse set of political issues - communal violence, capacity building, and the leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

In the second section of this chapter my argument is that conceptual contests in the democracy movement were not only over contrasting versions of the plot of democracy, but also over the construction of characters. Activists and aid workers used narratives of democracy to position themselves in relation to rivals, to establish themselves and their allies as experts who could define what 'genuine' democracy was, and was not. In other words, narratives were not neutral but a means for activists, opposition leaders and aid workers to exercise power in a discursive form.

Third, while narratives were in some ways a mechanism for the exercise of power, these struggles were not always overt, and in fact the nature of narratives and their associated practices often served to mask conceptual contests. One of the striking findings from my research was not the degree of open argumentation over meanings of democracy, but rather the *lack* of open debate. Conceptual contests were obscured not only through the way people communicate, but also through everyday social practices that reflected, and reinforced, particular dominant stories. This is not however to deny the agency of aid workers and activists. In this chapter I highlight several examples where the obscuring of conceptual contests also created opportunities for political actors to circumvent the discursive power of their rivals.

Taken together these three insights reveal *other* struggles for democracy as circumstance-attached and often covert, rather than overt. I now turn to each of these three insights in turn, drawing on the material described in the previous three chapters, while also introducing some new observations from my field research.

## **Simplified stories of democracy**

The contrasting plots of the institutional, benevolence and equality narratives revealed different ways in which democracy was given meaning. As simplified stories, these narratives were an important means through which political ideas were understood and communicated in the democracy movement. The Thein Sein period of government from 2011 to 2016 was one of profound political, social and economic change. Stories of democracy could help to bring order in complexity - drawing together simplified plots that contained key elements of visions, challenges and strategies. Within the movement, narratives of democracy could provide 'an Archimedean point in an otherwise indeterminate world' (Wagenaar 2014, 216).

In the introduction I highlighted three political issues that were divisive in the democracy movement during the Thein Sein period (2011-16) - communal

violence, capacity building, and the leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. These issues were all very different in levels of national political significance. For example, incidents of communal violence in 2012 and 2013 were profoundly disturbing for many citizens around the country and also gained international attention, while in contrast the issue of capacity building was more confined to interactions within the aid sector. Yet my argument here is that responses to these diverse issues, from aid workers and activists, were entwined with differences between wider narratives of democracy. In this section I further examine the contrasts between the institutional, benevolence and equality narratives by looking through the lens of each these different issues.

### *Communal violence*

In 2012 and 2013 there were a number of outbreaks of violence between Buddhist and Muslim communities - first in Rakhine state, but then also in a number of urban centres around the country. Many international agencies, and the Western media, expressed their concern about the protection of Muslim minority communities. The response from many prominent activists and leaders however - including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi - was less decisive, and there was limited public condemnation of the violence.

The sharpest distinctions related to this issue were between the plots constructed in the institutional and benevolence narratives. For proponents of the institutional narrative, violence against Muslim minority groups was a violation of the values of rights and minority protection that were considered foundational within any liberal democracy. As I described in chapter five, there was disbelief and disappointment amongst some international aid workers that Burmese activists and opposition leaders, especially Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, did not take a stronger stance in condemning the violence. Claire, an aid manager, said that that it was 'shocking to see the degree of apathy that exists [in response to the violence]...they [members of the democracy movement] are not particularly worried enough to care and say anything' (Interview 17/Feb 2014).

Yet in contrast, proponents of the *benevolence* narrative had different reactions to the episodes of violence. U Shwe Aung said that ‘Muslims in Myanmar are systematically threatening the country, infiltrating into the country’ (Interview 46/August 2014 Burmese). He, and many activists in the movement, perceived the welfare of the Buddhist majority to be threatened by Muslim minorities. The values of unity and majority protection, in the benevolence narrative, were also closely connected to the vision of democracy. Therefore, in this view, any strong show of support for protection of Muslim minority groups would potentially destabilise the country further, undermining its democratization. As activists and aid workers responded to the prominent issue of communal violence, it exposed wider contrasts between narratives, revealed most starkly in differences between the visions in institutional and benevolence narratives.

### *Capacity building*

Between aid agencies and activists there were also contrasting assumptions about the need for capacity building for democratic governance in Myanmar. On one hand, many Western aid agencies emphasised training opportunities for Burmese political parties and activist organisations to build their understanding of democratic governance, for example, in ways to reform regional parliamentary systems. U.S. Ambassador Derek Mitchell (2013, 14) described capacity for democratic governance in Myanmar as ‘thin’ both in government, and civil society. For proponents of the institutional narrative, the development of democratic procedures and institutions was central to the strategy of promoting democracy in Myanmar. Growing technical competence in the institutions of democratic governance was seen by many aid workers to be the only way to solve the problem of personalised politics, and an overreliance on the initiative of individual leaders, whether President U Thein Sein or Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

On the other hand, for many activists and opposition leaders in the Burmese democracy movement, the international aid agency strategy of capacity building held limited appeal. For proponents of the benevolence narrative, the vision of a

moral democracy based in *sedana*, could best be fostered through building values of unity and discipline, rather than through a focus on technical competence. I have described how the office of the NLD made the centrality of unity (*nyinyutgyin*) and discipline (*si kan*) clear, with the words written in large red Burmese characters over the main office doors. Meanwhile, for activists drawing on the equality narrative, capacity building for democratic governance would do little to bring about the cultural reform required in Myanmar society-reform that could shift hierarchical relational norms.

This is not so suggest that activists and opposition leaders were opposed to building technical capacity for governance. Rather, many activists concluded that a focus on capacity building would simply not address what was perceived to be the primary obstacle to democracy. When international aid agencies sought to engage local organisations, networks and political parties in the democracy movement with offers of capacity building support, these offers were, at times, met with only limited enthusiasm. As activist networks and donor agencies sought to promote democracy during the Thein Sein period, wider contrasts were revealed between the challenges, visions and strategies contained in different narratives.

### *Leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi*

Within the democracy movement and amongst its supporters there were also divided opinions on the leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. My study revealed that many activists and members of the National League for Democracy saw her as central to the country's democratisation. Within other activist networks and amongst international aid agencies however, there were deep concerns over her leadership. Democratic political leadership was a political issue that often divided aid workers, activists and opposition leaders.

Proponents of the institutional narrative often described Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as an inspirational leader of the democracy movement. However, this respect was also mixed with considerable doubts over her competence. The core concern

for many aid workers was that Suu Kyi, and the National League for Democracy Party, would not have the technical competence to govern the country, nor the inclination to seek technical support from the West. As described in chapter five, this concern about competence in governance was so potent that it led one international aid workers to say that an NLD government in Myanmar would 'keep me awake at night' (Interview 27/February 2014).

Proponents of the benevolence narrative however, portrayed Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in a wholly different light, as a leader who has demonstrated the necessary *sedana* (benevolence) through selfless commitment to the cause of democracy. When asked about the prospects of the country's future democratization NLD member U Aung Naing reflected that 'I believe that with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's *seit sedana* (goodwill), ability and actions we can [bring] changes' (Interview 5/October 2013 Burmese). Suu Kyi established her democratic leadership legitimacy not through technical competence, but through moral character.

Yet finally, for many activists drawing on the equality narrative, the emphasis on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's moral leadership was deeply concerning. Her focus on unity and discipline was seen by some activists to be in fact reproducing authoritarian culture that was the primary obstacle to democratization in the country. A manager at an advocacy organisation, Daw Win Win, even argued that the NLD was becoming like a 'dictatorship' under Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. 'I am afraid they [the NLD] are becoming a... 'one lady show', she said, 'it is very threatening and dangerous. Alarming I think' (Interview 7/ October 2013 English). The question of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership legitimacy was a point of sharp divergence between narratives identified in this study.

Contrasting challenges, visions and strategies of democracy constructed by aid workers, activists and opposition leaders were entwined with contrasting responses to everyday issues in the democracy movement. Part of what makes a story a story is the weaving together of challenges, visions and strategies into a meaningful whole. Tracing out these narratives can help to make sense of the actions and beliefs of activists, opposition leaders or aid workers. It is not

immediately self-evident that responses to communal violence, capacity building or the leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar would be embedded within contrasting meanings of democracy. Yet by explicitly revealing challenges, visions and strategies in narratives, diverging responses to these issues between activists, opposition leaders and aid workers are more comprehensible.

In chapter two I described mainstream democratization scholarship and the tendency to use a 'precise definition' (Tilly 2007, 7) or 'ideal type' of democracy from which to measure empirical cases. 'To take democracy seriously', Tilly (2007, 7) argues, 'we must know what we are talking about'. Yet my argument here is that taking the study of democracy 'seriously' means also knowing what political actors themselves are talking about. The way we understand democratic actions and institutions in Myanmar cannot be uncoupled from the beliefs and meanings of the political actors involved. I have shown that in attempting to understand processes of democratization in Myanmar – and differing responses to issues such as communal violence - a narrative approach can bring rich insights. These insights go beyond the mapping of deviations from an 'ideal type' to reveal context specific conceptual contests.

Beyond this however, my emphasis on narratives as simplified stories in this study also challenges categorisations of conceptual contest as being either on a global-local axis, or along lines that are well established in Western political theory. On one hand, my study extends Hobson and Kurki's (2012) work on the 'conceptual politics' of democracy promotion. My analysis has revealed diverging narratives and why they matter in responding to everyday political issues. Yet contrary to many emerging studies on conceptual politics (Kurki 2010, 13) the points of divergence between different plots in the Burmese democracy movement were not obviously explainable through categories of Euro-American democratic theory – categories, for example, of participatory or liberal democracy, radical or deliberative democracy. The contrasts between narratives were circumstance attached, embedded in the particularities of Myanmar's history, culture and religion. For example, the *institutional* and *benevolence* narratives diverged in some ways over whether democracy was orientated

toward modernity, or toward restoration of the past. Meanwhile, the *benevolence* and *equality* narratives diverged not over questions of democratic institutions but over the place of moral conduct and motivations in establishing the legitimacy of democratic leadership.

Similarly, this focus on narrative plot also unsettles assumptions of a global to local axis in the ‘vernacularisation’ of democracy or other global norms. In the work of Levitt and Merry (2009), the ‘vernacularisation’ of human rights is described as analysis of the local embedding of global norms. Yet this study shows that narratives of democracy diverge along other lines, not only between ‘global’ and ‘local’ norms. Narratives diverge in response to context specific tensions, such as over the place of Buddhist values in democracy. I have also described contrasting assessments of the *origins* of democracy and the question of whether Burmese culture or Buddhist teaching is inherently democratic.

This reinforces the need for scholarship of democratization to draw on the interpretations of relevant political actors themselves as part of the starting point for analysis. The valuable agenda of the ‘conceptual politics of democracy promotion’ or ‘vernacularisation’ literature can be furthered through greater attention to diversity in conceptual contests over democracy – and especially contests involving categorisations that may be unfamiliar within Western democracy literature. These themes will be taken up in more detail in the next section.

## **Narratives of democracy and conceptual contests**

How then does narrative theory help us to understand conceptual contests, and how conceptual contests construct meanings of democracy? What is it particularly about the nature of stories, and their ‘narrativity’, that helps us to understand the construction of meanings of democracy? Central to these questions is the observation that politics is not only about the control of material resources, that there can also be a ‘conceptual politics’ (Hobson and Kurki 2012). The last section described the issues of communal violence, capacity building

and the leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and how responses to these political issues were entwined with divergent assumptions about challenges, visions and strategies related to democracy. In this section I explore conceptual contests over narrative plot, but also contests over the construction of *characters*.

Attention to these dimensions of contest sets narrative analysis apart from the approach of frame analysis, and provides an additional perspective on the 'conceptual politics' around meanings of democracy. In particular, I describe the role of narrative as a mechanism for the exercise of discursive power. Power, in this sense, 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 (Wagenaar 2014). Power can relate to the ability of political actors to position themselves or others as 'experts', set the agenda of action, or define what are reasonable, and unreasonable, courses of action in a particular situation.

### *Contest over plot*

In chapter three I described how narrative plots can be constructed by political actors in direct opposition to narratives of their rivals. In Boswell's (2013b) account of narratives of obesity in Australia and the U.K., he unpacks the ways that particular counter narratives emerged in direct opposition to dominant narratives from government departments. My own study of the Burmese democracy movement demonstrates the stark opposition – from aid workers, opposition leaders and activists - to the military narrative of 'disciplined democracy'. All participants in the study expressed opposition to a 'guardian' role for the military in Myanmar's governance. Each of the institutional, benevolence and equality narratives were, in some respects, constructed in reaction to the 'disciplined democracy' narrative. This is a large part of the reason why the *other* struggles for democracy - that are at the heart of this thesis - have been so obscured in the Myanmar context.

Yet to characterise counter narratives as constructed by political actors purely in opposition to their rivals, would be to overlook the ways that narratives also subtly reproduce elements of rival narratives. For example, while the *benevolence* narrative clearly adopted the military's 'disciplined democracy' as a counter position, it also resonated with key elements of the military story-line. *Si kan* (discipline or order) was at the core of the military understanding of democracy, yet it also featured prominently in the *benevolence* narrative. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and prominent activists such as Ko Min Ko Naing, repeatedly emphasised the importance of discipline, using the same Burmese word *si kan*. Narrative plot may be constructed through conceptual contests, yet it is not always predictable as to how political actors will oppose, or reproduce, elements of the narratives of their rivals.

By constructing narratives, aid workers or activists could attempt to exert their particular version of the plot of democracy in Myanmar, and oppose narratives of their rivals. Through creating certain problems and visions, narrative plot served to form particular strategies of action and defined what 'genuine' democracy was, and was not. Yet while construction of narrative plot was embedded in conceptual contests, this study reveals how narratives, in certain ways, also reproduced elements of rival storylines.

### *Contest over characters*

Along with plot, narratives also contain portrayals of different political actors as either 'heroes', 'villians' or simply bystanders. Central to my thesis then is the insight that the way characters are constructed in narratives can also serve to produce, or undermine, the discursive power of political actors (Michelutti 2008, 641). If political actors can control how words like 'democracy' are used in certain settings, then they can construct rival uses of the word as either relevant, or irrelevant. In turn this allows certain actors to reinforce their own position. They can establish themselves and their allies as 'experts' and set the agenda for action. In narrative terms there is power associated with the trust and credibility of the narrator (Jones and McBeth 2010, 344) – certain people can hold an

‘authority to speak’ (Foucault 1972). In other words, activists or aid workers in Myanmar not only attempt to push forward their own version of the ‘plot’ of the democracy story but also position themselves and other actors in certain ways (Hajer 1995, 54).

In chapter three I described the work of Claire Moon (2006) on the narrative of ‘reconciliation’ in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and how particular characters of ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ were afforded the right to create the ‘truth’ about apartheid. In this section I reflect on the institutional, benevolence and equality narratives, how characters were constructed, and what this meant for the exercise of discursive power by different actors. I also introduce some new observations from my field research that highlight the role of narratives, and their associated practices, as a means for the exercise of discursive power.

### Institutional narrative

The *institutional* narrative portrayed Myanmar as being in transition from a traditional form of personality-based politics – with its associated intractable divisions - to a modern democratic state. Similar transitions were seen by its proponents to be occurring in various other countries around the world. As one donor manager suggested, all countries make a ‘democratic’ shift from the unregulated to the regulated, and from the informal to the formal (Interview 4 2013 English). Within this process of democratization Western aid agencies could play a valuable ‘capacity building’ role – transferring ideas, skills and knowledge to Burmese political actors. Therefore for proponents of the institutional narrative, Western aid agencies were portrayed as offering invaluable input about democracy which could assist local actors, including activist networks or local advocacy NGOs. In contrast, Burmese opposition leaders and activists were portrayed in this narrative as having insufficient technical knowledge of democratic governance. They had been ‘frozen in time’, as one international aid worker suggested (Interview 17/Nov 2013), and had little understanding of global norms or appreciation of liberal values. Therefore,

the democracy movement was dependent on international support in order to be effective. International agencies were constructed as being pivotal to the storyline of democracy.

An example from my field research highlighted the subtle differences between international and local actors in their credibility to speak about 'democracy' in particular settings. In a meeting of local and international organisations that I attended, Daw Chaw Su - the leader of a local women's network - outlined some work that she had recently completed on recommendations for amendments to Myanmar's constitution to make it more explicitly gender inclusive. She explained the key points and then offered to send the draft recommendations to others at the meeting. An international advisor from a European democracy promotion agency then suggested that Daw Chaw Su first might like to look through a constitution design 'toolkit' that his organization had used in many other countries. The 'tool kit' covered the main debates about different types of constitutions and he suggested that it might be of benefit to them in informing their recommendations (Field notes 2014).

While such offers of capacity building were common place within interactions between international and local agencies engaged in democracy or governance programs, the relationship was, in some ways, structured by assumptions within the institutional narrative. Despite the experience that Daw Chaw Su and her network had in analysing constitutional politics in Myanmar, the dynamics of the meeting would have made it unusual, or perhaps inappropriate, for her to offer advice to the international agency – for example, on how their constitution 'toolkit' could be improved. In contrast, the reverse offer of support - from an international democracy promotion agency to the local women's network - was assumed to be unproblematic.

This is not to make assumptions about the motivations or intentions of all the individuals involved in that meeting. Rather I seek to highlight the contrasting levels of credibility afforded to different actors to speak about democracy. Knowledge about democracy - including about gender and constitutional

amendments – was constructed within the institutional narrative as flowing primarily in one direction, from ‘global’ to ‘local’. The way proponents of the institutional narrative created characters in the story, was also a means for their exercise of discursive power. The construction of the story meant that aid workers could, in certain settings, position themselves as ‘experts’, and define what were reasonable, and unreasonable, courses of action.

Yet, as Moon suggests (2006) power, in a discursive form, is dependent not only on the credibility of the narrator, but also on the context in which stories are narrated. The ability of an aid worker or activist to control the way that democracy was discussed, was dependent on who their audience was and the language of their narration. Another example from my field research highlighted this contingent nature of discursive power, and its relation to social context. Early in the research period, I interviewed U Zaw Aung, a local NGO manager who was well recognized within Yangon based activist networks, giving occasional lectures (in Burmese) for young activists on topics of political theory and Myanmar’s democratization. Later we both attended a European donor partner workshop that was held in the large meeting room of another local organization with which U Zaw Aung was closely affiliated. It included around twenty participants - several senior visitors from the donor government, and representatives from Myanmar ‘civil society’ - and the workshop was chaired by a high level Western government representative.

During the meeting, the chairperson asked U Zaw Aung about his views on the role of civil society organisations in Myanmar’s political change. In the next few minutes U Zaw Aung attempted to give an explanation to the group of his perspective on the meaning of ‘civil society’. Perhaps due to the complex nature of his response, or his limitations in spoken English, many of the visiting donor country officials began to make expressions of confusion. The chair of the meeting then leaned across to another foreign official and asked quietly, ‘Did you understand that?’ The other official shook his head. The chair of the meeting then cut off U Zaw Aung’s explanation and addressed the group suggesting that they should ‘move on to a new topic’ (Field notes 2014).

While the reasons for U Zaw Aung's response being curtailed by the meeting chair may not be clear, there were striking contrasts in the extent to which U Zaw Aung was afforded credibility to speak about democracy in different social contexts. Had he been attending a workshop in that same meeting room, with a group of Burmese activists, it would have been unusual for his comments to be curtailed. Yet in the context of this particular European donor meeting – despite it being physically located in the same room – U Zaw Aung's narration of the country's democratization was given only limited weight. In particular social settings political actors may be able to establish themselves as 'experts', or as having have the 'authority to speak' about democracy. Yet changes in that social setting - whether in the language that is spoken or the people who are present - can disrupt activist or aid workers' 'authority to speak'.

These observations on the way meanings of democracy serve to position political actors in certain ways are reflected in both critical democracy promotion literature, and in Myanmar specific literature. In relation to democracy promotion or governance programs, Hobson (2009, 397) argues that:

the privileging of a specific democratic model encourages the prioritization of the agency and democratic "knowledge" of external actors, having already "achieved" liberal democracy, and therefore more "progressed" than those still seeking to make this transition.

Narratives of democracy emphasized within international aid programs serve to support the 'knowledge' that donors and aid agencies have – which in turn gives them power to define the 'correct' manner in which democracy ought to be discussed. Teivanen (2009, 164) describes this dynamic more bluntly, arguing that democracy promotion constructs a relationship where Western actors assume 'the social function of the teacher whose role is to instruct and guide the more 'child-like' countries'.<sup>99</sup> Finally, in his research on the role of discourse in

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<sup>99</sup> Teivanen's teacher-child image is a provocative one, and echoes the 'people at school' description from Burmese colonial officials such as Fielding-Hall (1916), that I highlighted in chapter four.

the peace building sector in Myanmar, Bachtold (2014) also reaches a similar conclusion, saying 'the discursive formation linking technical capacity to a legitimate speaking position...has proven very effective in structuring the interaction between international and local actors' (Bachtold 2014, 14).

Insofar as recognising the ways in which narratives of democracy are a mechanism for the exercise of power in a discursive form, I agree with these arguments from critical scholars (Hobson 2009, Tievanen 2009 and Bachtold 2014). Within aid project interactions, Myanmar actors such as U Zaw Aung were ascribed a particular, bounded role. The core 'knowledge' required for building democracy was portrayed within the institutional narrative as being held by international agencies. The 'authority to speak' was dependent on perceived access to this knowledge, and also the skills to communicate that knowledge in English language.

However, the critical portrayal of the role of donor agencies in controlling meanings of democracy is limited in two respects. First, concluding, as Teivanen (2009, 164) does, that that there is a rigid 'teacher-child' relationship - between international and local agencies in aid programs - can underestimate the agency of local activists or opposition leaders. In the next section I argue that the role of narratives, and their associated practices, in obscuring contest can also create certain opportunities for activists to circumvent the discursive power of donor representatives. The exercise of discursive power in democracy promotion programs is not fixed.

Second, this relationship between narratives and discursive power is not unique to international-local interaction. The work of critical scholars such as Hobson (2009), Tievanen (2009) and Bachtold (2014) - that I have outlined above - emphasises the privileged position of Western donor agencies. Yet they give relatively less attention to the exercise of discursive power across other types of relationships. I now address this issue by turning to the construction of characters within the *benevolence* narrative, and examples of how meanings of democracy are policed *within* the democracy movement.

### Benevolence narrative

For proponents of the *benevolence* narrative (outlined in chapter six) the core challenge was that the country had long been controlled by military *ar nar shin* dictators. It was only through *sedana* (benevolent) leadership and unity amongst citizens that the country could genuinely democratize. Fulfilment of relational obligations, selflessness, and discipline were also seen to be crucial components of the vision, giving the word democracy a deeply personal and moral, rather than procedural, focus. When asked in this study about the most important factor in the country's democratization, U Aung Naing, a member of the National League for Democracy said that 'we need people with true *sedana* (benevolence)' (Interview 5 2013 Burmese).

Within the *benevolence* narrative, it was the character of the selfless opposition leader or activist who was afforded credibility to speak truth about democracy. Given the emphasis on selflessness, it was often former political prisoners, such as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, or those who had shown extreme commitment to the democratic cause, who were afforded a privileged position in the movement to speak about democracy. In contrast, Western aid workers were seen by many activists to have, on the whole, not demonstrated personal commitment or sacrifice to the cause of Burmese democracy. Despite their technical knowledge they had little claim to the *sedana* (benevolence) that was at the centre of the democratic vision.

The construction of democracy movement leaders at the centre of the benevolence narrative was also supported by a self-reinforcing logic of unity. As described in detail in chapter six, embedded within the benevolence narrative were particular assumptions about relationships of mutual obligation – whether in the household, in schools or in national political leadership. Leaders and citizens were assumed, by some activists, to have certain obligations to each other and when fulfilled, unity could be fostered. In contrast, if anyone questioned the privileged voice of leaders then this opposition could be

characterized by leaders in the movement as immaturity or moral failure – where the vision of the wider group was jeopardized by a narrow self-interested few (Interview 5 2013 Burmese). To gain credibility within this sphere, activists were required to speak the language and perform the practices of ‘unity’, thereby limiting the avenues through which the dominant narrative could be questioned. In other words, proponents of the benevolence narrative created mechanisms for marginalizing the voices of those who questioned the key tenets of the narrative.

I agree with Walton (2015) that this dynamic creates a ‘disciplining discourse of unity’ in Burmese politics, which gains weight by being linked to Theravada Buddhist concepts of moral maturity. Walton (2015) suggests that a rigid understanding of unity has allowed political movements – both from within the military and opposition - in Myanmar to be characterized by highly centralized forms of leadership and control. It is ‘unity through hegemony’, he concludes (Walton 2015, 2). In this way, the benevolence narrative was a means for positioning rival actors as immoral through creating a self-reinforcing logic of unity.

This study revealed however, that the construction of characters within narratives was also malleable. As described in chapter three, when faced with ‘dilemmas’, individuals can, at times, actively reject or adapt narratives and challenge established practices which support them (Bevir and Rhodes 2003). For example U Wunna, who articulated the key tenets of the benevolence narrative, described his own dilemma in understanding the role of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and the National League for Democracy (NLD). Suu Kyi and other key figures in the NLD had crucial positions of credibility supported by the benevolence narrative. They were commonly portrayed as leaders with ‘true motivations’. However, in his interactions with the NLD, U Wunna came to question whether they indeed had the *sedana*, or benevolence, required for leadership. ‘Daw Suu controls everything, and it is a problem’, he said, ‘she has become an *ar nar shin* (dictator)’ (Interview 1/October 2013 Burmese). He expressed his ‘surprise’ in the workings of the National League for Democracy

suggesting that ‘true’ democratization would require different leadership (Interview 1/October 2013 Burmese). In this way he reassessed the dominant way in which the benevolence narrative portrayed Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Political actors are constructed as characters within narratives, yet this study shows that the portrayal of actors - as ‘villains’, ‘heroes’ or ‘bystanders’ - is not always fixed.

### Equality narrative

Finally, proponents of the *equality* narrative portrayed relevant political actors in a different way. Burmese activist intellectuals often placed themselves at the centre of the narrative. Meanwhile, opposition leaders were portrayed as an obstacle to genuine democratization.

As I described in chapter 7, the core challenge to democratization in the equality storyline was not only the role of *ar nar shin* dictators, but also hierarchical norms within Myanmar society more widely. It was assumed by some activists to be only through a wholesale transformation of culture toward more relational equality that the country could democratize. Activist leader U Tun Kyi argued that the most significant challenge to the country’s democratization was ‘the culture...the hierarchy and religious teaching’ (Interview 9 2013 English/Burmese). In other words, for proponents of this narrative, key values supported in the *benevolence* narrative were in fact considered to be obstacles to ‘democracy’. The only way to reform culture was through critical reassessment of hierarchical relational norms and that process that could be best guided by educated activist intellectuals. The story constructed activist intellectuals within the democracy movement as having credibility to speak ‘truth’ about democracy. Through formal political knowledge and education, they could challenge the dominant hierarchical norms, and gain ‘true’ perspectives on democracy in Myanmar. In contrast, prominent opposition leaders, such as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, were portrayed within the equality narrative as recreating the authoritarian values of the military, yet under a democratic guise.

As I have suggested, the credibility of the narrator depended on the context or social setting in which the story was narrated. The ability of an activist or aid worker to claim status as an expert, or to have the authority to define 'genuine' democracy, was contingent on their audience, and the dynamics of interaction, especially the language used. Within the scope of my study, and its exploration of the democracy movement, proponents of the equality narrative were the most marginalized. The equality narrative was communicated within certain pockets in the movement where there was only limited connection to the leadership of the NLD or prominent activist organisations such as the 88 Generation Peace and Open Society. It was prominent amongst informal circles of activists, writers and academics and within organisations - such as Myanmar Knowledge Society or Yangon School of Political Science - which had the aim of reform through political education.

Overall, the 'disciplining discourse of unity' (Walton 2015, 2) within the democracy movement often served to exclude the proponents of the more radically critical equality narrative. While proponents of the equality narrative constructed their own version of the plot and characters of democracy in Myanmar, they had limited opportunity to exert this storyline more widely within the movement. The dominance of the Western centric *institutional* narrative within the international aid architecture - and the potency of the *benevolence* narrative in the wider democracy movement - together served to mark out the boundaries of influence for proponents of the *equality* narrative.

Activists and aid workers in Myanmar not only attempted to push forward their own version of the democracy story, but also positioned themselves and other actors in certain ways (Hajer 1995). The way that different characters in the story were represented, and the portrayal of the relationship between them, was significant in establishing who held the credibility to define what 'genuine' democracy was, and was not - to define what were reasonable approaches to promoting democracy, and what were not. The credibility of the narrator was also dependent on the particular social setting – the audience and the language of communication.

Overall, my analysis of narratives of democracy and conceptual contest in this section helps to reassess scholarship on meanings of democracy around the world. A number of works on meanings of democracy highlight the influence of cultural, religious and historical context in constructing meaning. I have noted the work of Shi and Lu (2010) who argue that the 'shadow of Confucianism' unavoidably influences understandings of democracy in East Asia. Likewise, the interpretive studies of Frechette (2007), Baaz and Lilja (2014) and Rodan and Hughes (2014) on meanings of democracy, and accountability, in Asia describe the moral and personal dimensions of democracy and connections to cultural and religious context, particularly in relation to legitimate democratic leadership. My own study strongly supports this connection between particular languages, histories and cultures, and contrasting meanings of democracy. Yet attention to narrative also reveals the place of conceptual contest, over plot and character, in constructing meanings of democracy. Differences in meanings given to the word democracy in Myanmar are, in part, due to contests over both the plot and characters in the storyline of democracy. Meanings of democracy, in other words, are never neutral, but are inevitably entwined with 'conceptual politics'.

Finally, I have described the value of Moon's (2006) work in explicitly addressing the links between narrative and discursive power. While drawing heavily on discourse theory, Moon gives relatively less attention to other features of 'narrativity' that I have described above, for example the different elements of plot formation. This contrasts with many policy oriented narrative scholars such as Roe (1989) who emphasise the hermeneutic dimension of meaning, and in turn give less attention to discursive power. It is the combination of these different elements of 'narrativity' – related to plot formation and the exercise of discursive power - that can reveal important *other* struggles for democracy.

## Narratives of democracy and the obscuring of contest

The previous section examined how narratives are constructed through conceptual contests. Yet to leave the description of contest as one between plot and characters would be to miss a further crucial insight of narrative theory. Narratives, and their associated practices, are also a means for masking conceptual contests. Narrative is a means through which power is exercised in a discursive form, yet embedded within narratives, and their associated practices, are mechanisms for obscuring their political role. One of the striking features of the 'other struggles for democracy' that I uncovered in my research was that they were largely covert, rather than overt.

At one level, mechanisms for the obscuring of contest were contained within communication of narratives themselves. The use of 'boundary words', as Boswell (2013b) suggests in his analysis of narratives of obesity, can obscure the more profound differences between narratives. Calls, for example, for 'integration' and 'coordination' in responses to obesity, and recognition that the issue of obesity is 'complex', serve to build only 'shallow points of agreement' (Boswell 2013b, 161). In a similar way activists and aid workers in Myanmar used 'boundary words' to establish superficial points of agreement in interactions. One international observer highlighted the use of the word democracy itself as a 'code word' within the aid sector (Interview 41/August 2014). He suggested that in speeches or workshops, international aid workers would often make brief and ambiguous references to 'democracy' in their introduction, before proceeding with more specific policy discussions (Interview 41/August 2014). The code word 'democracy' was used as a legitimating device and to establish a shallow foundation for agreement.

In the introductory overview of their *Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights*, the European Commission (2016, 1) call for the 'development and consolidation of democracy' and support to 'civil societies'. When unpacked in more depth the different narratives described in my study gave divergent portrayals of what 'development and consolidation of democracy' would entail.

Yet when used in ambiguous ways these boundary words or phrases could establish a shallow point of agreement. Meanwhile, in Burmese language, opposition leaders often publicly stressed the need for *sedana* (benevolence) or *nyi nyut gyin* (unity). As I have described in depth, the meanings behind these words are deeply contested. Yet when used ambiguously in workshops or meetings they could establish superficial points of overlap between different actors in the movement.

Further, discursive power was not only exercised through language but also through associated social practices – everyday practices within activist networks, political parties or aid agencies through which narratives were enacted. Proponents of different narratives had particular expectations about actions or practices that could resonate with their particular story of democracy. The dominance of particular ‘story-lines’ – and masking of difference - is often due to the way they are reinforced by these everyday actions (Hajer 1995). Though importantly, recalling the ‘everyday politics’ of Kerkvliet (2009) outlined in the second chapter, the practices associated with narrative may not be perceived as political, either by the audience or narrators themselves.

A critical example of seemingly non-political practices that both reinforced, and masked, the dominance of the institutional narrative within aid projects was cycles of funding, monitoring and evaluation. In documents or personal interactions these cycles commonly served to reiterate the institutional narrative. Donor calls for proposals for governance or democracy promotion programs detailed the particular problems to be addressed, the goals to which projects should work, and even the ‘correct’ language which should be used within applications. Proposals from local groups were then assessed by donors according to their alignment with this logic, and project goals, objectives and activities were often redrafted in order to more closely reflect it. Finally, local groups were required to submit ongoing project reports - and an end of project evaluation report - to demonstrate how closely the project had matched the original logic set out by the donor. The everyday process of proposal or report submission and review was also a way of reinforcing a ‘correct’ manner in which

to discuss Myanmar's governance or democracy. The donor cycle of project applications and monitoring and evaluation activities was routinized and seemingly non-political and yet at the same time served to police any deviations from the dominant institutional narrative.<sup>100</sup>

Importantly, these formal everyday interactions within the donor funding cycle were also commonly conducted in English. Building on Moon's (2006) observation that the discursive power of different political actors involved South Africa's TRC was dependent on the social setting of the narrator, it is also dependent on the *language* of narration. Within aid partnership meetings between international and local agencies, a story narrated in English held a higher level of credibility than one told in Burmese, or other languages. The logic within narratives, for example the *benevolence* story of Myanmar's democracy, was partly dependent on the language of its communication. Key concepts such as *sedana* (benevolence) were not easily translated or coherent within the format of an English language proposal. Thus not only the project cycle but also its widespread dependence on English language served to minimize the opportunities for overt contest over narrative plot or characters.<sup>101</sup>

However, the role of the institutional narrative and its associated practices in obscuring contest also created certain opportunities for activists in local organisations and networks to circumvent the discursive power of donor representatives. U Than Aung, a local NGO manager, acknowledged the dominance of donor perspectives within aid partnerships. Yet he suggested that rather than challenging this dominance, it was easier to take a pragmatic approach. 'At the conceptual philosophical level there are differences. At the

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<sup>100</sup> U Tun Kyi, an activist organization director, was concerned that international agencies were dictating specific agendas in their relationships with local groups. In a meeting he warned other local organisations that they need to be careful not to become *gyun* ('servants' or 'slaves') in their partnerships (Field notes 2014).

<sup>101</sup> It should be noted however that between different donors and international agencies, the practices associated with the project funding cycle varied. For example the European Union's 'European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights' was highly formalized, with funding decisions preceded by a public call for proposals where project aims and parameters were closely spelled out. In contrast, some intermediary organisations such as Norwegian People's Aid had a more flexible approach to funding partnerships. Yet whether codified in formal calls for proposals or not, the institutional narrative routinely served to establish the 'rules' of what qualified as genuine democracy promotion or governance work.

practical level it is not about ultimate role but about programmatic arrangements, and you can negotiate those', he concluded (Interview 33 2014 English).

As donor representatives dominated the 'conceptual philosophical level' oftentimes it was easier for members of local organisations to communicate using key elements of the dominant narrative where necessary, and yet keep the relationship focused on more practical topics such as budgets or activities (Interview 22 2014 English). The obscuring of contest in some ways allowed activists such as U Than Aung, and his networks, to establish their own sphere of understanding and communication about democracy that was independent from the relationship with donors. Narratives were a mechanism for obscuring conceptual contests, yet this could also create opportunities for activists to manoeuvre within aid project systems and, at times, circumvent the discursive power of donor agencies.

The work of Bridoux, Hobson and Kurki (2012) on rethinking democracy promotion supports these overall observations from my study about narrative and the obscuring of conceptual contest. They suggest that it is primarily the 'working practices' or routines within aid programs which serve to restrict 'discussion, exploration and reflection' on what the word 'democracy' means (Bridoux, Hobson and Kurki 2012, 2). The contest over the meaning of 'democracy' is often masked - embedded in routinized practices rather than overtly debated. Burmese academic Maung Zarni's (2012) analysis of the aid architecture in Myanmar emphasises that the obscuring of contest covertly strengthens the position of international aid agencies. Maung Zarni (2012, 299) argues that:

Civil society in Burma is already being made to dance to the tune of its international donors and micromanaged by the in-country INGOs and representatives, project evaluators and consultants from official governmental [agencies] such as Britain's Department for International Development, USAID, AusAID and so on. Donor funding, power and institutional prestige are used as effective instruments...while deploying highly contested assumptions.

At one level my findings support these ideas from Maung Zarni (2012) that everyday practices in the aid sector can serve to support the dominance of the *institutional* narrative. This was particularly important in the *formal* realm of interaction between donor agencies and local organisations, through project reporting and through partnership meetings. Yet I have also suggested that obscuring of contest can also create opportunities for activists to circumvent the discursive power of donor agencies. Outside of those formal systems of interaction, activist groups and networks could manoeuvre to take actions or develop strategies that they perceived to be more relevant than those promoted in the institutional narrative.

Further, to characterise this issue in democracy promotion as one concerned only with international aid agencies would be to overlook crucial ways in which conceptual contests are also obscured within Burmese political parties and activist networks. Data from my field research particularly highlighted the role of everyday practices in masking conceptual contest within the democracy movement. In late 2013, I was able to attend a large regional meeting of the National League for Democracy (NLD), held during the campaign for amendment of the 2008 constitution. The NLD were seeking a range of amendments to the constitution – including to articles related to the provision of parliamentary seats to the armed forces, the processes of constitutional amendment itself and importantly, restrictions on eligibility for the Myanmar Presidency. The meeting was described by the organisers as a *swe nwe pwe* ('discussion' meeting) and hundreds of local NLD supporters were expected.

At the entrance to the meeting room, attendees signed their names on a sheet and ticked whether they supported the amendment of the Myanmar constitution (which was the NLD policy position), or whether they preferred a complete rewriting of the constitution. Local NLD officials sat next to the sign-in sheet and by the time I entered my own name all fifty people, who had already signed in, had ticked the box indicating their support for the NLD's position. Over three hundred people sat on mats or plastic chairs and listened to four speeches by

local party leaders over the two hours of the meeting. At its conclusion, the chair asked the gathered group in Burmese, 'do we accept the constitution needs to be amended?' 'We accept', replied the participants in unison. The question was repeated three times, with the same audience response. This was followed by the question 'do we accept that the constitution needs to be rewritten?' (which was contrary to the NLD position) to which all meeting participants responded 'we do *not* accept'.

In the context of a *swe nwe pwe* (discussion meeting)<sup>102</sup> the agenda and practices in the meeting were clearly oriented towards the promotion of a unified position. Within the logic of the benevolence narrative, it was necessary that the emphasis on unity and obligation flowed into everyday interactions in political parties or activist networks. Amongst the organisers of the meeting, and the attendees, that I spoke to there appeared to be no incongruence between the expectations of a *swe nwe pwe*, and the eventual form of the meeting. For an individual to voice critical opposition to the NLD policy in that forum would have been to flagrantly disrupt the expected practices associated with the benevolence narrative. As with the dominance of the institutional narrative within aid partnerships, the central tenets of the benevolence narrative were often supported by everyday practices, within activist networks or opposition political parties, which appeared to be natural and non-political.

Given the sharp differences in the ways democracy was given meaning - between groups of aid workers, opposition leaders and activists - my field research revealed a striking absence of open debate and argumentation about meaning. Conceptual contest was not always dynamic and obvious, but was often routinized and almost imperceptible. As Hajer (1995, 57) importantly argues, not all actions are 'the result of an active process of taking up or denying of positionings'. Political actors often do not recognise 'moments of positioning' (Hajer 1995, 57) but rather assume that particular use of language and associated practices are natural in that circumstance.

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<sup>102</sup> There was some confusion between NLD members at the meeting as to whether the meeting should be described as a *swe nwe pwe* (discussion meeting), or a *haw pyaw pwe* (speech meeting). Most of the NLD leaders present described it as a *swe nwe pwe*.

Normalised ways of seeing within activist networks or aid agencies served to disguise the implications of particular constructions of plot and characters. Conceptual contests were often covert, submerged in everyday practices and interactions within the movement. Discursive power, as described above, is exercised not only through the way people communicate, but also through everyday social practices that reflect, and reinforce, particular dominant stories.

## Conclusion

In this thesis I have addressed two questions, what meanings were given to the word democracy in the Burmese democracy movement, and how conceptual contests served to construct meanings of democracy. I have argued that as simplified stories, narratives were an important mechanism through which democracy was understood and communicated in the Burmese democracy movement. Through tracing out different plot elements (visions, challenges and strategies) I have identified three distinct ways in which democracy was given meaning by activists, opposition leaders and aid workers - the *institutional*, *benevolence* and *equality* narratives. In this chapter I described how the distinctions between these different plots were illuminated in the ways activists and aid workers responded to political issues during the Thein Sein government - of communal violence, capacity building, and the leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

How were meanings of democracy constructed through conceptual contest? My contention in this chapter has been that conceptual contests in the democracy movement were not only over contrasting versions of the plot of democracy, but also over the construction of characters in narratives. Activists and aid workers used narratives of democracy to position themselves in relation to rivals, to establish themselves and their allies as experts who could define what 'genuine' democracy was, and was not. Meanings of democracy, drawn on by activists or aid workers, were not neutral but rather entwined in conceptual contests and the exercise of power in a discursive form. This study strongly supports the

connection between particular linguistic, historical and cultural contexts, and contrasting ways in which democracy is given meaning by political actors. Yet attention to narrative also reveals the role of conceptual contest, over narrative plot and character, in constructing meanings of democracy.

Finally, to leave the description of conceptual contest there would be to miss a further crucial insight from my study. I also argued in this chapter that while meanings of democracy were constructed through conceptual contests, these struggles were not always overt. In fact the nature of narratives and their associated practices served to mask conceptual contests. Routinized aid project cycles or political party meeting practices reinforced certain narratives, and yet these practices were often considered to be non-political. This meant that interactions within the democracy movement, and with its supporters, were characterised not by constant argumentation over how democracy is given meaning, but rather by the absence of open debate.

## Chapter 9 Conclusion- the implications of other struggles for democracy

Myanmar has now freed itself from the 'choke hold' (Callahan 2004, 207) of military rule, and the word 'democracy' has become a point of consensus in political discourse. Yet as the word democracy becomes a point of agreement, rather than one which polarises different political actors, it is increasingly important to examine the various meanings to which it is attached. Examination of the ways democracy is given meaning amongst activists, opposition leaders and aid workers in Myanmar reveals important conceptual contests and I have described these contests as 'other' struggles for democracy. These struggles were not between 'authoritarians' and 'democrats' but struggles *within* the democracy movement over the meaning of democracy. They were struggles over who was able to define 'genuine' democratization. They were also struggles that are not always overt but often obscured through vague 'boundary' words and routinized practices. I have argued that it is particularly through a narrative approach that these struggles can be illuminated.

Revealing these other struggles for democracy serves to both extend, and challenge, the different literatures that I outlined in chapter two – mainstream democratization studies (and the contrast with Gallie's idea of 'essential contestability'), and interpretative studies of democracy, including the emerging literature on the 'conceptual politics of democracy promotion', and studies on the transmission of global norms. In this conclusion I reinforce my contributions to these bodies of literature and then turn to explore the implications of my research for democracy promotion scholarship and practice.

This study was situated in democracy promotion and governance programs in Myanmar and therefore a crucial audience for my findings are scholars and practitioners working in this field. Along with the literature on meanings of democracy and conceptual contests, my findings also speak to both mainstream and critical perspectives on *democracy promotion*. On one hand, by largely

focussing on questions of how to promote democracy, rather than what democracy means, mainstream approaches to democracy promotion often fail to recognise activists or opposition leaders as 'able players' (Schaffer 1997) in their own context. Uncovering contrasting narratives of democracy highlights that local activists or opposition leaders may be highly capable, though engaged in strategies that diverge from the expectations of Western aid agencies.

Yet on the other hand, my findings also extend critical democracy promotion scholarship by emphasising the covert nature of conceptual contests over democracy, and thus the challenge of making democracy promotion a more inclusive and participatory endeavour. Before addressing these points in detail, I first return to the key contributions of my study to the bodies of literature outlined in chapter two.

## **Meanings of democracy and their contests**

Responding to the research questions of this study – about meanings of democracy and how they are constructed through conceptual contests - I have taken a different path to that of mainstream democratization studies. Rather than beginning with an 'ideal type' from which to analyse meanings that citizens give to the word democracy, I have instead drawn on Gallie's idea of 'essentially contestable concepts'. Using 'essential contestability' as the conceptual foundation – especially recognising Gallie's (1956) key criteria of internal complexity, diverse describability and openness - allows meanings of democracy, in countries like Myanmar, to be considered *on their own terms*.

There are of course few democratization scholars who would deny that there is normative contestation over how democracy should be practiced. However, this study has revealed contests over both the application of democracy in Myanmar but also contests over the very components of the concept of democracy itself. This is a crucial distinction. The institutional, benevolence and equality narratives portray profoundly different versions of challenges, visions and strategies related to democracy in Myanmar. It is this finding that supports

Gallie's (1956) arguments and challenges notions of an 'ideal type' of democratic values and institutions that transcends cultural or temporal context.

It should be noted however that critics of Gallie's idea of democracy as an 'essentially contested' concept (Sartori 1987, Gray 1977, Clark 1979, Lawson 1995) are, at least at one level, justified in their caution. Authoritarian leaders through modern history, including in Myanmar, have undoubtedly abused the word 'democracy'. I have no intention in this thesis of validating the use of the word 'democracy' from Burmese military elites, who simultaneously spoke of democratic goals while holding many of the participants of this study as political prisoners. Yet, as Whitehead (2002, 14) argues, to acknowledge the essential contestability of democracy is not to argue that democracy can mean anything at all. There is no taken-for-granted meaning of democracy, yet this does not mean that 'anything goes' (Whitehead 2002, 14). The tendency in democratization scholarship is to draw the lines too tightly around the 'ideal type' of democracy. Critics of Gallie (1956) set up an unnecessary dichotomy where they assume that any questioning of a universal meaning of democracy necessarily descends to a situation where any meaning of democracy is acceptable. Engaging with democracy activists and opposition leaders and the diversity of contests over democracy's meaning reveals that such stark dichotomies are overly restrictive.

The danger of this dichotomy is that it leads scholars such as Diamond (2008) to reject, or describe as 'deviant' (Seeberg 2014), any meanings of democracy that stray outside the borders of the liberal 'ideal type'. Democratization scholarship is therefore prone to dismissing vast sections of democratic thought. My study has underscored the point that the actions of democracy activists or opposition leaders cannot be understood without grasping the underlying meanings that they attach to the word democracy. I have shown that a crucial means of understanding the responses of political actors in Myanmar to issues such as communal violence, capacity building or political leadership was through considering circumstance-attached meanings of democracy *on their own terms*. The challenge for scholars of democratization is to prise open new analytical

spaces where meanings of democracy and their contests around the world can be examined as more than just 'deviations'.

Recent interpretive scholarship on meanings of democracy around the world has gone some way toward this goal. Authors such as Schaffer (1997) and Michelutti (2008) have valuably traced out how the word democracy is given meaning in particular cultural, linguistic, religious and historical contexts. The findings of my own study about the prominence of moral notions of democratic leadership, support the central arguments of these interpretive studies about meanings of democracy being circumstance-attached. Yet my own study highlights the need for attention on a further analytical step. It is one thing to illuminate the links between meanings of democracy and the cultural and religious context in which political actors create them. It is another to unpack the ways that these circumstance-attached meanings might also be created through conceptual contests.

The emerging 'conceptual politics' of democracy promotion literature was sparked by recognition that meanings of democracy are inevitably political. Authors such as Hobson and Kurki (2012) and Wolff (2012) make an important contribution by demonstrating that politics around 'democracy' is not only over control of material resources, but there is also a conceptual politics around meanings given to the word democracy itself. My own study within the context of democracy promotion programs in Myanmar reinforces the arguments of Hobson and Kurki (2012) by highlighting that between aid workers and Burmese activists there was often divergence in meanings given to the word democracy. The procedural focus of the institutional narrative contrasted with far more personal emphasis in both the benevolence and equality narratives.

Within the vast Euroamerican scholarship on democratic theory there are countless debates about the merits of different models or theories of democracy. Kurki (2010) is right to point out that the breadth of these debates – about social or liberal democracy, radical or deliberative democracy – is not sufficiently carried into debates about democracy promotion. Yet in tracing out the nuances

of different narratives my own study highlights that the conceptual contests over meanings of democracy are themselves circumstance-attached and may have only tenuous links to established scholarly categories and debates. The particularities of Myanmar's democratic struggles against military regimes - and the backdrop of, for example, Buddhist thought, and Myanmar intellectualism - have created contests that are not easily pinned down along established lines of debate. What's more, these conceptual contests were not only those between Western aid agencies and local activists, there were also profound conceptual contests *within* the democracy movement.

Wider scholarship on 'vernacularisation' and 'framing' of global norms such as human rights, addresses these limitations to a degree. Merry (2006) nuances the global to local contest over human rights by highlighting the role of intermediaries, and the opportunities and constraints they face as 'knowledge brokers'. Further, social movement scholars such as Benford and Snow (2000) importantly reveal how norms are 'framed' in unique ways in relation to the context in which they are used. The way they are framed also determines whether or not those ideas are adopted or adapted by different groups. These contentions, about the way global norms are uniquely vernacularized into different contexts, are supported by my study of the Burmese democracy movement. I have shown that activists, aid workers and opposition leaders play a role as intermediaries, drawing, to varying degrees, on global discourses about democracy and on context specific ideas and debates.

Yet these insights still leave considerable questions about the nature of conceptual contests and how these contests construct meanings of democracy. To build on this existing literature I have drawn on both narrative, as a concept, and narrative analysis, as a methodology. My argument has been that a narrative approach can unlock new perspectives on meanings of democracy and their construction through conceptual contest.

I described, in this thesis, three different narratives drawn on by activists, aid workers and opposition leaders in Myanmar- the *institutional*, *benevolence* and

*equality* narratives. Democracy is understood and communicated through these simplified stories containing challenges, visions and strategies related to democracy. Contrasting activist and aid worker responses to key issues – such as communal violence, capacity building programs and the leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi - were often embedded in these wider stories.

Yet using a narrative approach I have suggested that further steps need to be taken in grasping how meanings of democracy are constructed. Activists and aid workers used narratives to position themselves in relation to rivals. There were contests within the Burmese democracy movement over both narrative plot and the construction of characters. In this sense, narratives were a mechanism for the exercise of power in a discursive form. Meanings of democracy were not just neutral reflections of cultural or religious context, they were, in part, embedded in conceptual contests. Finally a narrative approach also alerts us to the way that these conceptual contests are often covert rather than overt. Within the Burmese democracy movement, narratives, and their associated practices, were also a mechanism for the masking or obscuring of contest.

## **Democracy promotion and other struggles for democracy**

In this conclusion I have reinforced the key contributions of my study to different bodies of literature. Yet my aim here is also take a step further in my arguments, to explore some *implications* of revealing these other struggles for democracy. As I have said, this study was situated in democracy promotion and governance programs in Myanmar and therefore a central audience for this research are scholars and practitioners of democracy promotion. I particularly target my discussion of implications toward this audience. How might attention to multiple meanings of democracy, and their construction through conceptual contest, change the way we think about promoting democracy?

This question is important as democracy promotion remains a significant focus for Western donor agencies. Under the labels of ‘human rights and democracy’ (European Union 2013), ‘civil society strengthening’ (Ministry for Foreign Affairs

Sweden 2013, 1), 'governance' (AusAID 2013, 3) or 'strengthening the work of parliament' (DFID 2012, 3), global democracy assistance spending exceeds five billion U.S. dollars per year (Burnell 2008, 414). USAID's 2017 budget alone - for democracy, human rights and governance programs globally - is \$2.3 billion (USAID 2016). Democracy assistance remains a major policy instrument for Western governments. What might attention to other struggles for democracy mean for democracy promotion scholarship and practice?

In my literature review in chapter two, I highlighted two streams of scholarship that explicitly addressed the issue of democracy promotion - mainstream democratization studies, and also more critical literature on 'conceptual politics of democracy promotion' (Hobson and Kurki 2012, Wolff 2012). My argument here is that attention to other struggles for democracy extends the analysis of democracy promotion within these mainstream and critical streams of literature, though in different ways.

### *Mainstream perspectives*

As I have described, the tendency in democratization scholarship is to assume the existence of a universal 'ideal type' of democracy and then use this as a yardstick from which to map 'deviations' around the world. Yet this is not to suggest that mainstream democracy promotion scholars advocate for a simplistic, one-size-fits-all template for democracy promotion. There is in fact a chorus of scholarly voices emphasising the need for contextualisation and greater fostering of local ownership in democracy promotion programs (Carothers 2002, Stewart 2009, Borzel and Risse 2004, Diamond 2008, Hyman 2002, Wollack 2002). Few scholars would dismiss the idea of making democracy promotion programs more sensitive to context. The focus of mainstream democracy promotion scholarship however, is still largely on questions of how democracy promotion might be more effective, rather than on the way democracy itself is given meaning in different contexts. In the words of Youngs (2015, ix), democracy promotion research has largely been on the 'how' of 'democratic advancement' rather than 'what'.

The corollary of this narrow focus on questions of 'how' rather than 'what', is that planning and evaluation of democracy or governance programs is most commonly debated through the, implicit or explicit, framework of progress toward liberal democracy (Ethier 2003, Burnell 2008). In their program frameworks in Myanmar, DFID and USAID use the Freedom House index (2015), to track changes toward a liberal model of democracy.

In contrast, the findings of my own study in Myanmar highlight the importance of putting questions of *what 'democracy' is* back into studies of democracy promotion. My argument is that scholarship and practice of democracy promotion would be enhanced by turning to questions of how democracy is given meaning amongst activists and opposition leaders, and to trace out the ways that these meanings might be constructed through conceptual contests. Activists and opposition leaders in Myanmar understood democratic progress with reference to contrasting visions - visions that did not always align with for example, the measures contained in the Freedom House index. There was no universal yardstick from which success in democracy promotion could be evaluated

It is therefore deeply problematic to assume that activists in democracy movements around the world are all running toward the same finishing line, toward building the same 'ideal type' of democracy. Perceptions of success and failure amongst political actors cannot be taken for granted. For example, I have described how the vision in the institutional narrative was largely a modernist one - communicated as part of a global story that was focussed toward the future. In contrast the benevolence narrative was more locally oriented and drew more extensively on the past. These differences in orientation flowed into different assumptions of the vision of democracy, and to what extent the vision ought to reflect global norms, or certain interpretations of Myanmar's past. The endeavour of democracy promotion needs to be reconsidered within mainstream democratization studies in a more multidimensional framework – not in terms of success or failure along one linear axis of change.

A key aim of democracy promotion scholarship should be to uncover the ways that political actors may be, in Schaffer's terms (1997), 'able players' within their own context. The narrative approach I have used in this study can help scholars and practitioners to make sense of the actions and beliefs of activists and opposition leaders, their enthusiasm for certain strategies and visions, and their resistance to others. Analysing the actions of activists, aid workers or government through narratives can help to understand how these actors might be highly capable within their own logic of democratic progress.

In contrast, mainstream scholars of democracy promotion are in danger of constructing local activists or opposition leaders as deficient in their 'capacity', or lacking in their understanding of democracy. False assumptions can easily be made about democratic practice if the underlying meanings attached to democracy by relevant political actors are not sufficiently explored. Failing to examine the plurality of meanings of democracy can lead to what Gallie (1956) cautions as the 'chronic human peril' of underestimating the value of rival positions. Unpacking rival stories of democracy on their own terms can help democracy promoters to reassess their own assumptions about what democratization ought to entail in different contexts.

In addressing the challenges of democracy promotion, scholars and practitioners should avoid a reinvigorated emphasis on issues of implementation or strategy alone. Rather, this study points to the need for examination of the way democracy itself is given meaning – a need to address the question not only of 'how' to promote democracy but 'what' democracy is.

### *Critical perspectives*

In contrast to mainstream scholarship, a common refrain within critical democracy promotion literature is toward the vision of 'democratizing democracy promotion' (Kurki 2010, Wolff 2012, Sousa Santos 2005, Bridoux and

Kurki 2014, Koelble and Lipuma 2008).<sup>103</sup> This vision is of aid agencies taking a more inclusive and open approach to the question of what kind of democracy should be promoted around the world. This emphasis from critical scholars is a welcome one, and one that resonates with the key arguments in this thesis. Yet my findings - especially about the construction of meanings of democracy through *contest* - also highlight some of the challenges to 'democratizing democracy promotion'. I first outline how this vision is described within critical democracy scholarship before highlighting how my own findings nuance this vision.

There are growing calls, amongst critical scholars, for democracy promotion itself to be democratized (Kurki 2010, Hobson and Kurki 2012, Bridoux and Kurki 2014, Wolff 2012, Youngs 2015). In her work on the conceptual politics of democracy promotion, Kurki (2010) argues that 'democratic' values should also be applied to democracy promotion programs themselves. Kurki (2010, 377) suggests that,

If we take "listening to different perspectives" to be a key democratic value...then hearing and explicitly encouraging a plurality of views on the meaning of democracy in academic and policy debates, would seem to be desirable.

This aim of 'democratizing democracy promotion' is set out in practical terms by Wolff (2012) in his study of democracy promotion in Bolivia. Wolff (2012, 12) argues for democracy promotion to be understood as a 'joint search process'. Local organisations and international donors could work together to develop new context specific models of democracy. Wolff (2012,12) envisages 'a peaceful and inclusive process of constructing a model appropriate for the specific country'. There may be no prescribed end point for democratization and democracy promotion. Rather, meanings of 'democracy' could be co-constructed between international and local actors, or at least a conceptual pluralism could

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<sup>103</sup> Koelble and Lipuma (2008) focus on 'democratizing democracy' especially through rethinking the 'measurement' of democracy.

be emphasised within programs. Amidst the perception of a 'backlash' against Western interventions around the world (Carothers 2002), A number of critical scholars hope that a more participatory approach to democracy support can make it a more a 'democratic' endeavour (Kurki 2010, Wolff 2012, Sousa Santos 2005, Bridoux and Kurki 2014, Koelble and Lipuma 2008). As Youngs (2015, 159) suggests, 'much can be gained by a cooperative search for new forms of democratic quality'.

Insofar as the desire is to reorient democracy promotion scholarship and practice to give more attention to the plurality of meanings given to democracy, I agree with these critical scholars. However, the findings of my own study - about the construction of meanings of democracy through conceptual contests - highlight some challenges to 'democratizing democracy promotion' in such a way. The narrative approach I have used has not only illuminated the ways in which religious, linguistic or cultural context informs meanings of democratization, it has also shown the ways in which narratives are a means for the exercise of power in a discursive form. The construction of characters in *institutional* narrative served to create an unequal 'teacher-student' relationship between international and local agencies. Meanwhile proponents of the *benevolence* narrative created a 'disciplining discourse of unity' (Walton 2015) in Myanmar politics, where dissenting views from activists or minority groups were often dismissed by democracy movement leaders as immoral.

This is not to suggest that individual activists or aid workers do not have the agency to challenge or negotiate the construction of characters in narrative. In the previous chapter I gave several examples of the agency of actors in the democracy movement to creatively adapt or circumvent dominant narratives. However, the construction of meanings of democracy through conceptual contests presents challenges to the ideal of a wholly 'peaceful and inclusive process' of creating new meanings within democracy promotion programs. One implication of my study is that there are no neutral ways in which democracy can be discussed. However 'participatory' the approach of democracy promoters might be, the word democracy is never used in a neutral way in workshops or

aid program meetings. Communication about democracy always invokes particular constructions of plots and characters, while marginalising others.

Making the 'democratization of democracy promotion' even more challenging is the role of narratives, and their associated practices, in obscuring conceptual contests. Aid workers, and democracy activists and opposition leaders, can simply play out everyday routinized interactions and are not necessarily aware of the ways in which meanings of democracy are contested. They may be engaged in activities which in themselves are not considered to be 'political' (Kerkvliet 2009). Yet at the program level, the 'peaceful and inclusive' process described by Wolff (2012) requires, at least to some degree, a conscious dialogue or debate about meanings of democracy and conceptual contests. Such dialogue in programs may of course be possible. Yet attention to conceptual contests, and their often-obscured nature, brings a more sober assessment of the potential for co-constructing meanings of democracy in a way that is wholly inclusive.

The narrative approach taken in this thesis can thus help scholars and practitioners of democracy promotion to unpack both the possibilities and constraints related to the vision of democratizing democracy promotion. A narrative approach can bring greater awareness of the plurality of meanings of democracy. Yet a narrative approach can also assist scholars to recognise the limits of attempts to make the practice democracy promotion more inclusive and participatory.

I began this thesis with the observation that democracy is central to the global political lexicon of the twenty first century. It is the 'the single most powerful political formula in today's world' (Dunn 2014, 12). Democratization scholars such as Diamond (2008) are right to point to the stunning levels of citizen support around the world for democracy as a form of government. From South America to Africa and Asia, public opinion surveys reveal the widespread popularity of the word 'democracy'. Democracy, in Gallie's (1956, 184) terms, is indeed the 'appraisive political concept *par excellence*'.

Yet as democracy is held up ever more widely as a valued political concept, both in Myanmar and more broadly around the world, it becomes increasingly important to unpack the many ways in which it is given meaning, and the conceptual contests that help give birth to different meanings. Democracy may be a highly valued concept, yet it is impossible to pin down. The word democracy may be a point of consensus, yet the narratives surrounding it are diverse. Uncovering *other* struggles for democracy is therefore crucial if aid agencies and scholars are to make sense of the actions and beliefs of democracy activists around the world. Greater understanding of these struggles, and their circumstance-attached nature, must be at the heart of future efforts to foster democracy.

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## Appendix 1 Interview List

| Interview | Date        | Role of interviewee                             | Sex |
|-----------|-------------|-------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 1         | Oct 22 2013 | Burmese writer and activist                     | M   |
| 2         | Oct 29 2013 | Burmese staff of advocacy organisation          | M   |
| 3         | Oct 29 2013 | Burmese staff of advocacy organisation          | M   |
| 4         | Oct 29 2013 | International donor representative              | M   |
| 5         | Nov 2 2013  | Burmese member of National League for Democracy | M   |
| 6         | Nov 5 2013  | Burmese manager of advocacy organisation        | M   |
| 7         | Nov 7 2013  | Burmese manager of advocacy organisation        | F   |
| 8         | Nov 9 2013  | Burmese member of National League for Democracy | M   |
| 9         | Nov 11 2013 | Burmese advocacy organisation director          | M   |
| 10        | Nov 11 2013 | International political analyst                 | M   |
| 11        | Nov 12 2013 | Burmese writer and activist                     | M   |
| 12        | Nov 13 2013 | Burmese writer and activist - member of NLD     | M   |
| 13        | Nov 13 2013 | Burmese manager of advocacy organisation        | M   |
| 14        | Nov 14 2013 | Burmese writer and activist                     | M   |
| 15        | Nov 17 2013 | Burmese activist and aid consultant             | M   |
| 16        | Nov 18 2013 | Burmese writer and activist                     | M   |
| 17        | Nov 19 2013 | International aid organisation manager          | F   |
| 18        | Nov 20 2013 | International embassy staff                     | M   |
| 19        | Nov 20 2013 | International donor agency manager              | F   |
| 20        | Nov 20 2013 | Burmese advocacy organisation staff             | M   |
| 21        | Nov 21 2013 | International donor consultant                  | M   |
| 22        | Nov 21 2013 | International donor agency manager              | F   |
| 23        | Nov 22 2013 | Burmese writer and activist (repeat interview)  | M   |
| 24        | Nov 23 2013 | International embassy staff                     | M   |
| 25        | Feb 17 2014 | Burmese writer and activist (repeat interview)  | M   |
| 26        | Feb 17 2014 | International aid agency adviser                | M   |

|    |             |                                                          |   |
|----|-------------|----------------------------------------------------------|---|
| 27 | Feb 18 2014 | International aid agency manager                         | M |
| 28 | Feb 19 2014 | International donor agency manager                       | M |
| 29 | Feb 19 2014 | Burmese writer and advocacy organisation manager         | M |
| 30 | Feb 19 2014 | Burmese writer and advocacy organisation manager         | M |
| 31 | Feb 20 2014 | Burmese advocacy organisation manager                    | M |
| 32 | Feb 20 2014 | International aid agency manager                         | M |
| 33 | Feb 20 2014 | Burmese advocacy organisation manager                    | M |
| 34 | Feb 21 2014 | Burmese activist (repeat interview)                      | M |
| 35 | Feb 22 2014 | Burmese local organisation leader                        | M |
| 36 | Feb 22 2014 | Burmese activist                                         | M |
| 37 | Feb 24 2014 | International donor agency manager                       | M |
| 38 | Feb 25 2014 | Burmese manager of advocacy organisation                 | F |
| 39 | Feb 26 2014 | International donor agency manager                       | M |
| 40 | Feb 26 2014 | Burmese activist                                         | M |
| 41 | Feb 27 2014 | International political analyst                          | M |
| 42 | Aug 11 2014 | Burmese writer and activist (repeat interview)           | M |
| 43 | Aug 12 2014 | International aid agency manager                         | M |
| 44 | Aug 13 2014 | International donor consultant                           | M |
| 45 | Aug 13 2014 | Burmese advocacy organisation manager                    | M |
| 46 | Aug 13 2014 | Burmese local organisation leader                        | M |
| 47 | Aug 13 2014 | Burmese activist (repeat interview)                      | M |
| 48 | Aug 14 2014 | Burmese writer and activist                              | F |
| 49 | Aug 14 2014 | International donor agency manager                       | F |
| 50 | Aug 15 2014 | Burmese advocacy organisation manager (repeat interview) | M |

