

Griffith Asia Institute

Regional Outlook

MYANMAR-WATCHING:
PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES

Andrew Selth

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Contents

Executive Summary.....	1
Author's Note.....	2
1. Introduction.....	4
2. Research Challenges	6
3. Reporting Problems.....	8
4. Case Study One: Surveying Public Opinion	11
5. Case Study Two: Discussing Security Issues	13
6. Case Study Three: Analysing Aung San Suu Kyi.....	15
7. Conclusion.....	17
Notes and References	18

Executive Summary

For almost 50 years, the ability of scholars and journalists to research and write about Myanmar, and to investigate their specialist areas of interest, was very limited. Since 2011, conditions have improved dramatically, leading to an increased flow of publications, of all kinds. However, Myanmar-watchers still face formidable challenges.

Before 1988, when Myanmar was under military rule, it was almost impossible to conduct primary research in the country. Foreigners were restricted to seven day visas, access to officials was restricted, the state press peddled propaganda, statistics were unreliable and documentary sources were difficult to access, if they could be found at all. Even after 1988, when restrictions were eased by the newly-installed State Law and Order Restoration Council, foreigners found it difficult to travel around Myanmar, interview people and obtain reliable data. Despite having access to special sources, official agencies tended to describe Myanmar as an intelligence black hole.

As a result, Myanmar was little known and poorly understood. Anecdotes, gossip and speculation dominated most press reports, while carefully researched, objective studies by professional analysts were few and far between. After the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, which thrust Myanmar into the world's headlines, the country became a popular subject for study. However, influenced by a worldwide activist movement, publications of all kinds were often coloured by personal, moral and political considerations. Scholars discussing developments inside the country, and Myanmar's place in the wider world, were obliged to navigate their way through a minefield of partisan positions.

In many ways, Myanmar is now a different place. Quasi-democratic governments were installed in Naypyidaw in 2011 and 2016, leading to much greater freedom of movement, expression and association. Scholars, students and journalists have flooded into the country to pursue a wide range of research projects. The flow of learned (and not so learned) works, on a wide variety of subjects, has dramatically increased. The Myanmar government and international organisations have published useful data on many aspects of the country. There have also been detailed surveys of the population and its attitudes.

Even so, there are still major gaps in our knowledge, and the literature. Key aspects of Myanmar's government, economy and society remain difficult to study and write about with any confidence. A case in point is the armed forces (Tatmadaw), which is arguably still the most powerful political institution in the country. There is also considerable debate over the attitudes and activities of the new government, and the actions (or lack of them) of Myanmar's de-facto leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. These problems have been highlighted by the current crisis over the Muslim Rohingyas in Rakhine State.

Until such gaps are filled, a comprehensive understanding of Myanmar, its fiendishly complex problems and relationship with the international community will remain elusive.

Author's Note

After the Myanmar armed forces crushed a nation-wide pro-democracy uprising in September 1988, the country's official name (in English) was changed from its post-1974 form, the 'Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma', back to the 'Union of Burma', which had been adopted when Myanmar regained its independence from the United Kingdom (UK) in January 1948. In July 1989 the new military government changed the country's name once again, this time to the 'Union of Myanmar'. At the same time, a number of other place names were changed to conform more closely to their original pronunciation in the Burmese language. In 2008, after promulgation of a new national constitution, the country's official name was changed yet again, this time to the 'Republic of the Union of Myanmar'.

The new names have been accepted by most countries, the United Nations and other major international organisations. A few governments, activist groups and news media outlets, however, still cling to the old forms, apparently as a protest against the former military regime's human rights abuses and its refusal to introduce a genuinely democratic system of government. The old names were also believed to be the preference of then opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who was held under house arrest by the military regime for almost 15 years. Questioned about the official name of the country soon after her party took office in 2016, Aung San Suu Kyi stated her continuing preference for the colonial-era term 'Burma', but said that both names were acceptable.¹ In this paper the official names have been used, although 'Burmese' has been retained to describe the dominant language of the country. Such usage does not carry any political connotations.

The armed forces effectively ruled Myanmar from the 1962 coup but, from 1974 to 1988, they exercised power through an ostensibly elected 'civilian' parliament. On taking back direct control of the country in September 1988, the armed forces abolished the old socialist government structure and created the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which ruled by decree. In November 1997, apparently on the advice of a United States-based public relations firm, the regime changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), but continued to rule through executive fiat. In 2008, it held a constitutional referendum, which was followed by carefully managed elections on 7 November 2010. The resulting national parliament, consisting of both elected officials and non-elected military officers, met in January 2011. A new government was installed under President Thein Sein in March that year.

On 8 November 2015, a new general election was held which, by most accounts, was reasonably free and fair. The result was a landslide for Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), which secured 390 of the 491 seats (or 79.4%) contested at the Union level. It secured 255 seats in the 440-seat lower house (*Pyitthu Hluttaw*) and 135 seats in the 224-seat upper house (*Amyotha Hluttaw*). The armed forces are allocated 25 per cent of the seats in both houses, but this gave the NLD a majority in the combined Union Assembly (*Pyidaungsu Hluttaw*). As a result, it was able to elect a new president in 2016 and pass a law creating the position of State Counsellor for Aung San Suu Kyi (who under the 2008 constitution is unable to become president).² The national charter states that the president 'takes precedence over all other persons' in Myanmar but, even before the elections, Aung San Suu Kyi had made it clear that she was going to be 'above the president' and act as the country's de facto leader.³

After the UK dispatched troops to the royal capital of Mandalay and completed its three-stage conquest of Burma (as it was then called) in December 1885, Yangon

(formerly Rangoon) was confirmed as the administrative capital of the country. It remains the commercial capital, but in October 2005 the SPDC formally designated the newly-built city of Naypyidaw (or Nay Pyi Taw), 327 kilometres north of Yangon, as the seat of Myanmar's government. Where they appear in this paper, the terms 'Yangon regime', or in some cases simply 'Yangon', are used as shorthand for the central government, including the military government that was created in 1962 and re-invented in 1974, 1988 and 1997. The government after 2005 is referred to as the 'Naypyidaw regime', or 'Naypyidaw', to reflect the administrative change that took place that year.

Another term used in this paper is *Tatmadaw* (literally 'royal force'), the vernacular name for Myanmar's tri-Service (army, navy and air force) armed forces. In recent years, this term has gained wide currency in English-language publications on Myanmar. Sometimes, the Tatmadaw is referred to simply as 'the army', reflecting that Service's overwhelming size and influence, compared with the other two. While the term 'Defence Services' usually refers only to the armed forces, it is sometimes used in a wider context to refer to the armed forces, the Myanmar Police Force, the 'people's militia' and sundry other paramilitary forces. On occasion, the Myanmar Fire Services Department and Myanmar Red Cross have also been included in this category.

An earlier version of this Regional Outlook was presented at a Griffith Asia Institute workshop entitled 'Political Fault Lines in Southeast Asia: Research Challenges', held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, from 12-13 October 2017.⁴ Both versions draw on a number of research papers and articles that have been published by the author over the past few years. These works have been identified in the endnotes.

1. Introduction

Famous writers have recorded Rome's early glories and disasters. The Augustan Age, too, had its distinguished historians. But then the rising tide of flattery exercises a deterrent effect. The reigns of Tiberius, Gaius, Claudius, and Nero were described during their lifetimes in fictitious terms, for fear of the consequences; whereas the accounts written after their deaths were influenced by still raging animosities.... I shall write without indignation or partisanship: in my case the customary incentives to these are lacking.

Tacitus
The Annals of Imperial Rome, 1,i.
c.109 AD

Before it was thrust into the world's headlines by the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, and became a popular subject for academic studies, activist polemics and stories in the international news media, Myanmar was little known and even less understood. For centuries, it was overshadowed in the public imagination by its neighbours, particularly India and China. As Michael Symes, the British ambassador sent to the court of King Bodawpaya by the Governor-General of India in 1795, observed on his return:

Of the kingdom of Ava, or the Birman Empire, so little is known to the European world that many persons of liberal education, when the name of the country has been mentioned, were at a loss on what part of the globe to seek for its position; and some were even unacquainted with the existence of such a nation.⁵

It also remained hidden behind a persistent veil of myths, misconceptions and misunderstandings. Even after three Anglo-Burmese wars, the fall of the royal capital of Mandalay in 1885, and the country's final annexation by the British, the country largely remained a mystery. To help illustrate this fact, the civil servant and author J.G. Scott wrote the following year:

It is related of a member of Parliament that some years ago he met at dinner a civilian from British Burma, home on leave. The conversation turned on that country, and the legislator remarked, 'Burma - oh, yes, Burma. I had a cousin who was out there for some time, but he always called it Bermuda'.⁶

Popular perceptions of the country in the West were formed on the basis of ripping yarns in news magazines and poems like Rudyard Kipling's 'Mandalay', which was first published in 1890 and was soon afterwards set to music as 'The Road to Mandalay'.⁷

Before the Second World War, even those who knew of Myanmar's existence rarely recognised it as a separate British colony (which it became in 1937), let alone a country with its own unique history and culture. As one Old Burma Hand described the situation in the 1930s:

Up to the war, Burma was an almost unknown area on the map of the Empire. Just part of India.⁸

During the war, Myanmar played a critical role, but received less attention than other operational areas, such as Europe and the Pacific. The Allied forces deployed to the 'China-Burma-India' theatre justifiably complained that they were 'the forgotten army on the forgotten front'.⁹ In 1953, the former civil servant Maurice Collis entitled a

volume of his autobiography *Into Hidden Burma*. This was not because he spent most of his time on obscure postings, but because the country itself was so little known.¹⁰ In 1957, the eminent historian Hugh Tinker observed:

The British community in Burma was so small, and the period of British rule so brief that no comparable [to India] connection ever developed. To the average Englishman Burma conjured up one poem and perhaps a short story by Kipling – Kipling, who spent three days in Burma.¹¹

Myanmar was just an occasional blip on the international radar screen. It would take a well-publicized uprising against the military regime in 1988, the emergence of a charismatic figure like Aung San Suu Kyi and a global telecommunications revolution for Myanmar to capture the world's attention and, finally, become widely known.

This pattern has been reflected in global publishing statistics. It is possible, for example, to compile a graph from Google's NGram database, a word recognition tool created from over 5 million English language books covering four centuries.¹² It suffers from considerable weaknesses – for example, it covers less than five per cent of all books produced. However, graphs generated by NGram based on the keywords 'Burmah', 'Burma' and 'Myanmar' show a dramatic increase in references to the country during and after significant historical events, such as the Second World War and General Ne Win's military coup in 1962. There were also surges of popular interest in Myanmar in 1988, as a result of the nation-wide protests that year, and again in 2007, during the civil unrest dubbed the 'Saffron Revolution'.¹³ When these statistical tools are updated, they will doubtless show a surge in publications as a result of the 2017 Rohingya refugee crisis.

Such tools are useful to illustrate fluctuations in public interest in Myanmar and related publishing trends. However, they are not much help in determining the nature of the works produced, in particular, in the case of non-fiction, the depth of research displayed and the quality of the arguments made. Nor do these electronic tools help measure the impact of certain works on public and official thinking about Myanmar, and what Timothy Garton Ash has called its 'fiendishly complex problems'.¹⁴ Yet these are important considerations as, perhaps more than most other countries, Myanmar has suffered from a dearth of comprehensive, objective and accurate analyses. Particularly over the past 30 years, this has given rise to a number of problems. This paper aims to explore some of the reasons for this phenomenon and, through three case studies, to illustrate how these problems can affect both popular perceptions and official policies.

2. Research Challenges

After Myanmar regained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1948, it slowly began to recover from centuries of neglect by the international scholarly community. However, progress in this area was effectively halted by the advent of Ne Win's conservative and intensely nationalistic military government in 1962. For the next quarter century, visitors were only granted visas for a week or less, access to officials and official records was restricted, and little confidence could be placed in government statements or statistics. The state-controlled news media mainly published propaganda. The few foreign scholars granted the rare privilege of access to the national archives were closely monitored.¹⁵ It was also difficult to travel around the country, large swathes of which were declared out of bounds for security reasons. As David Steinberg wrote in 1978:

Burma could be considered *terra incognita* in the contemporary sense, where crucial statistics are often lacking, where available data are often contradictory, and where public distribution of material is controlled.¹⁶

Added to these difficulties, few foreigners could claim fluency in any of Myanmar's vernacular languages. Anyone who wrote articles critical of the military regime was blacklisted and denied entry to the country.¹⁷ As a result of all these problems, research publications based on field work, particularly in the social sciences, were rare.¹⁸

Another characteristic of the Ne Win era was the effective division of Myanmar studies into what one scholar has described as 'research from within' and 'research from without'.¹⁹ Under the British colonial regime, and during the 1950s, there was a small but vibrant community of Myanmar scholars, notably those associated with the Burma Research Society, which was founded in 1910.²⁰ However, under Ne Win, academic research inside the country was crippled by strict censorship and other restrictions. Myanmar scholars were limited not only in what they could study but also in what they could write, and how they could publish their findings.²¹ One result of this demand for intellectual orthodoxy was a split between national and international research traditions. 'Research from within' tended to focus on Myanmar as a national entity (and then only within permitted bounds). 'Research from the outside' did not face such constraints, but was obliged by a lack of access to focus on aspects of Myanmar that could be examined relatively easily, like the country's ethnic groups, Buddhist traditions and cultural sites.²²

Even if it was possible to research and write about more sensitive issues, like Myanmar's politics, economy and civil society, the question always arose whether there was an audience for the resulting publications. For, generally speaking, local developments had little impact outside the country. The Ne Win regime favoured an autarkic socialist economic policy and strict neutralism in foreign affairs, one result of which was that Myanmar played only a minor role in world affairs. It attracted little attention from the international community. As Amitav Ghosh wrote, it had become 'a kind of lost world'.²³ There were notable exceptions but, generally speaking, academic research on the country during this period was dominated by anthropologists and cultural historians. The country's long-running ethnic and ideological insurgencies were monitored by a select group of analysts, and a few intrepid foreign correspondents, but due to the lack of information such issues were rarely mentioned in the international news media.²⁴ Even official agencies with access to special sources described Myanmar as an intelligence black hole.

After 1988, a number of restrictions were eased by the newly-installed State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), but scholars and journalists still found it difficult to

travel around Myanmar, interview people and obtain reliable data. This meant that an accurate and balanced picture of developments in the country was still hard to obtain. In 2001, for example, David Steinberg outlined the problems faced by academics:

Myanmar presents problems – problems of analysis and even data. Statistics are often whimsical, events are sometimes opaque, the complexity of the past clouds our thinking, information is filtered through skewed political lenses, propaganda is rife, and the future presents conundrums even for participants in this drama, let alone observers on the periphery.²⁵

Representing journalists and others, the travel writer Emma Larkin expressed similar views in 2010:

Given the regime's restrictions on information and association, it is difficult to form any public consensus or verifiable version of the truth. While certain events can be accounted for with certainty, there is much that remains unknown. Like those blind men in the parable [trying to describe an elephant from different vantage points], it has become impossible for anyone to see or fathom the beast in its entirety.

In a society where nothing can be taken for granted, distorted truths, half stories, and private visions are, by necessity, woven into the popular narrative of events. Burma is a place where the government hides behind convoluted smoke screens. It is a place where those who sacrifice themselves for their country must go unrecognised and can only be lauded or remembered in secret. It is a place where natural disasters don't happen, at least not officially, and where the gaping misery that follows any catastrophe must be covered up and silenced. In such an environment, almost anything becomes believable.²⁶

A measure of the problems encountered by researchers during the post-Ne Win period can be gauged by the fact that this passage was written by a resourceful and experienced observer who spoke Burmese and was thus able to travel and speak to the local population more easily than most other foreign visitors.²⁷

After 2011, when the armed forces (Tatmadaw) handed over direct power to a moderately reformist government under President Thein Sein, conditions eased and field work became easier to carry out. This process was taken a stage further by Aung San Suu Kyi's quasi-civilian administration, which took office in 2016. That said, anyone wanting to learn and write about Myanmar still faces many challenges. Apart from any obstacles encountered within the country, they need to be wary of publications and online posts about the country that do not meet the high standards usually expected of scholars and other professional observers.

3. Reporting Problems

Many of the shortcomings in publications about Myanmar that have been identified above stem from restrictions imposed on foreign researchers by the military regime, and the difficulty of reporting accurately on what was still an isolated and relatively undeveloped country. However, mention also needs to be made of problems for which researchers and authors themselves need to accept responsibility.

In surveying the publications about Myanmar produced over the past few decades, it is not difficult to find examples of inaccurate, misleading and biased works that cannot be excused by referring to the difficult research and reporting environment. As Robert Taylor saw the situation in 2008:

Often the prevailing ideological or foreign policy interests of the society or government from which the analyst hails has shaped their lenses. Sometimes they write in minute detail but more often, and less helpfully, in broad sweeping generalities. The scholarly goal of objectivity and empirically informed theory occasionally gives way to the activist's wishful thinking and / or the policy advisor's creation or 'shaping' of the fact to fit the desired outcome.²⁸

Some of the most obvious examples of shoddy reporting on Myanmar arise simply from inadequate research and poor analysis. In this regard, it might be salutary to look at a few past cases which, in different ways, demonstrate a lack of intellectual rigour.

Perhaps the best known example of inaccurate reporting was the claim that China had established at least one, and possible several, military bases in Myanmar. This notion was first raised in a story published by a Japanese wire service in 1992.²⁹ From this small beginning the tale grew in the telling, with each subsequent reference in the news media making increasingly exaggerated claims. Before long, respected academic observers were stating, without qualification, that a military base on Myanmar's Great Coco Island in the Andaman Sea was China's largest and most sophisticated signals intelligence collection station outside the South China Sea. In 1998, even the Indian Foreign Minister publicly referred to 'a massive electronic surveillance establishment'.³⁰ Despite the absence of any supporting evidence, the presence of a strategically important Chinese military base in Myanmar had become accepted as an established fact. Yet, in 2005, India's armed forces chief acknowledged that the story was a complete fantasy.³¹

In another celebrated case, that of Myanmar's purported nuclear weapons program, it is possible to see how a kernel of fact, plus some circumstantial evidence, gave rise to a number of exaggerated claims and unsupported arguments. A good case could be made that Myanmar was interested in constructing a nuclear reactor, and was conducting small scale experiments that may have had relevance to a weapons program. It was also true that Myanmar had developed a close relationship with North Korea. Yet, in the hands of activists, journalists and even a few academics, these facts soon became inflated into a major strategic threat. Before the story effectively collapsed in 2011, it was claimed that Myanmar had secretly built two reactors, and was well on the way to acquiring a nuclear weapon by 2014 and a 'handful of devices' by 2020.³² These stories were unsupported by any evidence and have since been discredited.

In its examination of this issue in 2009, the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) concluded that 'there is insufficient information to make a well-founded judgement about Myanmar's nuclear intentions and the North Korean connection'.³³ While it did not answer all the questions surrounding this issue, the IISS

report helped put into a proper perspective the more outlandish claims that had been made over the years. In discussing the difficulties of assessing Myanmar's actual nuclear status, the IISS listed a number of problems. It observed, for example, that 'Clouding the picture even further, Myanmar has long been at the centre of a highly politicised, and highly polarised, debate over the most effective way to deal with the repressive military government, ensconced since 2005 in Naypyitaw'.³⁴ This statement points to another problem that has dogged Myanmar studies ever since the 1988 uprising.

There have been many excellent academic studies of Myanmar over the past 30 years, and first class reports by journalists and international organisations. However, these publications have had to compete for attention with a host of stories and commentaries that can more accurately be described as advocacy. Either openly, or in more subtle ways, they have been more concerned to promote the adoption of a certain policy position or to encourage a particular moral stance, than to provide objective, evidence-based analyses. As Morten Pedersen wrote in 2008:

The main obstacle, though, is not so much access as it is misinformation. The struggle for state power and legitimacy has compounded the researcher's problems by politicising data collection and analysis, resulting in strong biases in reporting on all sides of the political spectrum, including much overt propaganda. The government's censorship and manipulation of economic and other data for political purposes is matched in many ways by the well-organised and well-funded lobby networks of the democracy movement, which work actively to propagate the worst possible image of the military regime and obfuscate issues or developments that might throw doubt about the core strategy.³⁵

Some publications seemed aimed solely at attacking individuals holding different views.³⁶ As David Steinberg has observed, all these problems clouded the ability of observers, and the general public, to make accurate and sensitive appraisals of developments in Myanmar.³⁷

As noted above, there has also been the problem of reports, mainly in the news media and online, which have indulged in sweeping generalisations. Also, many of those reporting or commenting on Myanmar affairs have favoured simplistic binary interpretations of developments that lack nuance or acknowledgement of their complexity.

For example, during the so-called 'Saffron Revolution' in 2007 there were numerous stories in the news media and online which pitted Myanmar's Buddhist monks against the army. The former were cast as the heroic representatives of popular opposition to the generals, while the latter were cast as the villains of the piece. Few of those reporting on the civil unrest delved below the surface of this particular episode to explain to their readers that the Buddhist hierarchy was deeply divided over the protests, and that many monks resented their initial demonstrations over cost of living increases (and attacks against members of the *sangha*) being hijacked by pro-democracy campaigners.³⁸ Nor was much attention paid to the fact that senior army officers reached peaceful settlements with many Buddhist communities outside Yangon, and that there were grave misgivings on the part of many soldiers ordered to suppress the protests.

Similarly, before 2011 many foreign observers liked to portray Myanmar as a country starkly divided between those who wanted democracy and those who supported the military dictatorship. In articles and online posts, they described two camps, perpetually facing off against each other. Occasional bouts of civil unrest, which seemed to justify this point of view, were described in detail. Yet of equal importance was the fact that 'every day, every hour, and in every corner of the country people sought ways to

undermine the system, even if only symbolically'.³⁹ At the same time as they were engaged in this everyday resistance, individuals, families and civil society groups established relationships of various kinds with the authorities, 'going with the flow', simply to survive and get things done.⁴⁰ Also, as Ardeth Maung Thawngmung has described, there were ethnic minority communities in Myanmar which chose not to take up arms against the regime but tried to live peaceably with it.⁴¹ Attention to these sorts of factors would have helped paint a richer and more balanced picture of life in Myanmar.

Indeed, the over-simplification of life and developments in Myanmar underscores another problem, namely the tendency of foreign observers to treat large, diverse groups of people in the country as homogeneous entities with a single point of view. For example, there are around 300,000 Buddhist monks in Myanmar at any one time.⁴² It is stretching credibility to claim that they all think alike. In fact, there are many shades of opinion within the *sangha*, as demonstrated by the emergence of the extremist 969 movement. Similarly, the Tatmadaw, estimated to be about 350,000 strong, is another large organisation that, despite appearances and the efforts of the military high command, includes members with differing political views.⁴³ Throw-away references to 'the government' and 'the NLD' are also misleading, as there are deep divisions within both institutions over policy and other issues.⁴⁴ Likewise, not all non-state armed groups represent everyone in the ethnic communities after which they are named. Labels like 'the monks', 'the army', 'the party' or 'the Karens' fail to take into account the enormous complexity of these groups and the wide range of views found within them.

To help appreciate these and similar problems, it might be instructive to examine three case studies in a little more detail.

4. Case Study One: Surveying Public Opinion

As noted above, Myanmar watchers, activists and other commentators have long been making assessments about developments in the country on the basis of very little hard information.⁴⁵ Before 2011, the government's statistics could not be trusted, official spokesmen rarely gave away anything of value and the state-run press largely peddled propaganda. Reports generated outside Myanmar were often highly politicised. In such circumstances, gauging the popular mood in Myanmar was always fraught with risk. Structured assessments of public opinion were forbidden.⁴⁶ There were occasional household surveys and attempts by embassies and international organisations informally to sound out target groups about specific issues. However, access to some parts of the country was difficult and the regime's coercive apparatus was so pervasive that the likelihood of gaining an accurate picture was low. People were afraid of speaking out, particularly on sensitive issues. As Stan Sesser found in 1989, for a local to be cited as a source in a news story or academic paper was tantamount to a jail sentence.⁴⁷

As a result of all these constraints, Myanmar watchers were reliant on fragmentary information derived from relatively small numbers of personal contacts, anecdotal sources and gossip. Whenever there was a major incident of any kind, the Yangon rumour mill went into overdrive, adding to the difficulties of sorting out fact from fiction. This did not prevent educated speculation about what people in Myanmar felt about certain issues, but such assessments invariably lacked hard empirical evidence. After the advent of President Thein Sein's government, however, the atmosphere changed. Within a few years, both civil society groups and international organisations began to test the limits of the government's tolerance.⁴⁸ Even under Aung San Suu Kyi's government restrictions remain, but there is now much greater freedom to conduct comprehensive surveys that give reasonably reliable views of public opinion. Two such exercises, both conducted by US institutions with the support of foreign governments, stand out.

One of the first publicly reported opinion polls was carried out in April 2014 by the International Republican Institute (IRI), and enjoyed the backing of the United States Agency for International Development. It canvassed the views of 3,000 adult men and women from 208 rural and 92 urban locations in all 14 states and regions of Myanmar. The results were released as *Survey of Burma Public Opinion, December 24, 2013-February 1, 2014*.⁴⁹ Not surprisingly, the survey showed that there was overwhelming support for democracy as the most desirable form of government, although peoples' understanding of what 'democracy' actually meant seems to have differed widely. Those surveyed were also generally supportive of the Thein Sein government's advertised reform programs, although their views seem to have been strongly influenced by the perhaps unrealistic optimism then prevailing about Burma's future economic development.

Interestingly, when asked about the three biggest problems facing Myanmar as a whole, respondents identified unemployment, ethnic or sectarian violence, and high prices.⁵⁰ Almost all other issues mentioned related to daily life, such as poor healthcare, the lack of electricity and inadequate transportation. Politics only featured at the lowest end of the scale, with the need to amend the constitution (an abiding preoccupation of Aung San Suu Kyi and her party) scoring lower even than natural disasters. To the surprise of many foreigners, the survey also revealed that, in certain sectors, such as the fight

against corruption, there was considerable support for the Tatmadaw and its tame political organisation, the Union Solidarity and Development Party.

The second survey was conducted in May and June 2014. It was sponsored by the Asia Foundation, with help from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Australian Aid. The results were released as *Myanmar 2014: Civic Knowledge and Values in a Changing Society*. It too canvassed the views of 3,000 respondents across all fourteen states and regions, once again through personal interviews.⁵¹ The Asia Foundation survey was more comprehensive than the IRI exercise, and yielded more nuanced results. It found, for example, that there was very limited knowledge about the structure and functions of Myanmar's central and regional governments, particularly at the subnational level. Respondents still hoped for a real democracy, but there was little understanding about the principles and practices that underpinned a democratic society.⁵² These attitudes doubtless contributed to the unrealistically high expectations that accompanied Aung San Suu Kyi's accession to power in 2016.

The Asia Foundation survey suggested that the Myanmar people were generally positive about the situation in the country at the time, and welcomed the results of reform programs introduced since 2011, as far as they went. However, there was a pervasive underlying uncertainty, particularly in the peripheral areas where the ethnic minorities tended to live. Governments were viewed with suspicion, political disagreements were deeply polarising and social trust was low. Once again, the country's economic fortunes figured prominently in the thinking of most of those surveyed. As the IRI project also found, economic performance not only served as a key indicator of how the country was seen, but it also strongly affected attitudes towards the central government. There was a high expectation that the government would play a strong role in ensuring economic growth, and an equitable and inclusive society. These attitudes seem to have hardened as the NLD government has failed to deliver on its promises.⁵³

None of these conclusions were surprising to those who followed Myanmar closely. Also, there was still a dearth of reliable information about many critical issues, such as the political views of the armed forces leadership. Another continuing difficulty was the reluctance of many people to speak publicly on controversial issues, such as the future role of the armed forces, the behaviour of the Myanmar Police Force and so on. However, these and other surveys, such as a second IRI opinion poll conducted in 2017, have provided the basis for more reliable judgements about the public mood in Myanmar and the wishes of the population.⁵⁴ It is expected that data surveys and opinion polling will become regular features of the Myanmar political and social scene in the future. Ideally, they should result in more accurate information and better informed policy decisions.

5. Case Study Two: Discussing Security Issues

Since 1988, Myanmar-watchers have paid greater attention to defence and security issues.⁵⁵ Some useful works have been produced but these efforts have highlighted the pitfalls that lie in wait for the unwary. For example, despite being at the heart of Myanmar's national life for almost 50 years, it is still impossible confidently to describe the Tatmadaw's size, order of battle, budget and military capabilities.⁵⁶ There is simply not enough reliable data available. Also, as noted above, over the past 15 years the public debates about Burma's nuclear ambitions and possible missile purchases have generated more heat than light. This is perhaps to be expected, given the dearth of reliable information on these and other sensitive issues, the emotive nature of the subject matter and the fact that since the pro-democracy uprising Myanmar-watching has become highly politicised. Yet there may be another reason why the debate over security issues has at times been unproductive, and that is the nature of the language employed.

Academics and other professional analysts are under considerable pressure to write deliberately, and to choose their words with great care. They are encouraged to pay almost forensic attention to questions of terminology. For whatever they say will be scrutinised by other subject experts ready and able to test their data and weigh every nuance of their argument. Reputations and important policy decisions can hang on questions of accuracy and balance. This emphasis on precision, however, is not usually characteristic of journalists and activists. There are many exceptions of course, but generally speaking the interests of these groups lie more in telling a good story or promoting a particular line. Also, some of those watching Myanmar have not been familiar with the relevant technical issues, leading them, in the words of one former International Atomic Energy Agency inspector, to be 'very loose with terminology'.⁵⁷

The result has been a large number of articles and blogs which make casual and misleading references to quite specific issues. To a certain extent this is inevitable, and understandable. As the Australian politician Lindsay Tanner has pointed out, albeit rather trenchantly, in his 2011 book *Sideshow*, the news media demands concise stories written in simple prose that can be easily understood by non-specialists.⁵⁸ Advocacy groups appeal to a mass audience that is more likely to respond to short, catchy phrases and dramatic claims. Also, to be fair, even professionals sometimes resort to familiar terms and common phrases in order to refer economically to complex issues, or to convey subtle arguments, particularly when writing for a public audience. Often this practice is harmless. It can in fact aid popular understanding and advance the debate. At other times, however, it can cause confusion and take the discussion in unhelpful directions.

For example, surveying the literature on Myanmar since 2000, there are numerous references to its 'nuclear program'. Yet it is not always clear whether the author is referring to the peaceful nuclear research program which has been subject to prolonged negotiations between Myanmar and Russia, or a secret military program which some activists claim was launched by Thein Sein's military regime, with North Korean help. Indeed, the term 'program' itself means different things to different people. To specialists, a program is a systematic plan to reach a specific goal, accompanied by the full panoply of political endorsement, bureaucratic oversight, budgetary allocations, dedicated infrastructure, assigned personnel and technical support. As the Washington-based Institute for Science and International Security has pointed out, based on the

fragmentary and ambiguous evidence available it was always premature to apply this term to Myanmar's possible interest in nuclear technology.⁵⁹

To take another example, there have been a large number of reports about Myanmar's apparent wish to acquire 'missiles'.⁶⁰ Yet it is rarely stated what kinds of missiles are being referred to. Myanmar has long had an interest in buying or manufacturing a wide range of such weapons, including surface-to-surface missiles, surface-to-air missiles, air-to-air missiles, anti-ship missiles and anti-tank missiles. Some activist websites have even included artillery rockets in this category.⁶¹ Even when a reference is made, specifically or by implication, to ballistic missiles, a clear distinction needs to be made between tactical, short-range, medium-range, long-range and inter-continental weapons. Each kind has quite different technical characteristics, and requires different levels of supporting infrastructure and expertise.⁶² Their purchase prices too are different. More to the point, they have quite different values as military and political weapons.

Another term used very loosely in discussions about missiles in Myanmar is 'Scud'. However, this name can be applied to several ballistic missile variants, with widely differing capabilities. Used in the right context, the broad phrase 'Scud-type missiles' can be more useful, but it still needs to be understood by the author and the reader that this term covers an entire family of weapons, made by several countries, with ranges estimated to vary from 180 to 1500 kilometres.⁶³ Similar confusion surrounds the phrase 'weapons of mass destruction', or WMD. It is used either as a synonym for nuclear weapons or as shorthand for a wide range of exotic weapons ranging from ballistic missiles through to chemical, biological and nuclear weapons. At times, it has even been applied to certain conventional weapons, such as fuel-air explosives. There is no agreed definition of the phrase, even among experts.⁶⁴

Raising issues of this kind will doubtless strike some as nothing more than academic pedantry, or a futile attempt to impose specialist criteria on the wider public discourse. But it would not take much to raise the level of an important debate that demands accuracy and mutual understanding. And it is worth bearing in mind that discussions of this kind not only influence popular perceptions, but also consideration of official policy.

6. Case Study Three: Analysing Aung San Suu Kyi

Not so long ago, Myanmar's de facto ruler Aung San Suu Kyi was hailed as 'the bravest and most moral person in the world ... the immaculate heroine who allows us all to feel a little better about human nature'.⁶⁵ She was showered with prestigious awards and prizes. More than a dozen universities granted her honorary doctorates. When she took power in 2016, thoughtful observers accepted that popular expectations were unrealistically high and that there would be teething problems, and grumbles at the slow pace of change.⁶⁶ Even so, few expected that she would fall from grace so quickly, or become the target of so much bitter invective, mostly from the same foreigners and foreign institutions which had once idolised her.⁶⁷ She is now the subject of worldwide condemnation, with some critics describing her as an 'Ignoble Laureate'.⁶⁸ There are even calls for her to be stripped of her Nobel Peace Prize for failing to protect the human rights of the Muslim Rohingyas.⁶⁹ Faced with this dramatic reversal in her reputation, the question is now being asked; how did the world get Aung San Suu Kyi so wrong?⁷⁰

For the 15 years she was a prisoner of conscience, Aung San Suu Kyi was not just admired, she was idolized. This cult of personality helped her become a household name around the world and boosted her cause, but it had a downside. In journalistic and even academic circles she was rarely subjected to the same level of critical analysis as other world figures, or members of the military government she opposed. When more objective Myanmar-watchers dared to point out examples of her occasional poor judgement and tactical missteps, or suggested that, like everyone else, she had flaws in her character, they were subject to an avalanche of abuse.⁷¹ One outspoken critic who wrote disparagingly about The Lady (as she became widely known), and the tunnel vision of her more extreme supporters, was sent a death threat. This had the effect of silencing many commentators aware of her imperfections, or who disagreed with some of her decisions. Even professional analysts began to self-censor what they wrote about her.⁷²

To be fair, they did this not just out of fear of being attacked by Aung San Suu Kyi's legion of supporters, who were adept at using the power of the Internet and social media to spread their messages. Serious observers of Myanmar were aware that to openly criticise Aung San Suu Kyi risked giving the military regime ammunition to use against her. For years, a virulent campaign was waged against the opposition leader in the state-run news media, where she was cast as a traitorous renegade who had turned her back on her own people. Countless stories and cartoons, including jibes about her marriage to a foreigner and her schooling abroad (in India and the UK) were published with the aim of undermining her popularity with the Myanmar population. Anything written by foreign commentators in the international press, or said by them in public, that could be used to support the regime and bolster its case against Aung San Suu Kyi, was seized upon and exploited.⁷³ Conscious of that danger, more critical and aware foreign observers tended not to write openly about her shortcomings as an alternative leader of Myanmar.

Doubtless, in private counsels and confidential reports prepared for senior officials, diplomats and strategic analysts took a hard-headed approach and produced unvarnished assessments of Aung San Suu Kyi's character, political skills and suitability for high office. Presumably, they also warned that, should she ever find herself in a position of real power, she would inevitably be forced to choose sides between

contending factions, and make hard decisions about contentious issues, in ways that would leave some of her admirers dissatisfied. She would not be able to please everyone, or avoid controversy, simply by referring to broad principles and abstract concepts. However, for obvious reasons, the recipients of such assessments were unlikely to share them with the public. Some senior officials may have even been reluctant to accept them.⁷⁴ Thus the net effect of the world-wide campaign being waged on her behalf was to strengthen the popular image of her as being without fault or peer, existing above the grubby political fray.

Particularly in the case of human rights campaigners and former advocates of Aung San Suu Kyi in Western capitals, there now seems to be a strong sense of loss, even betrayal. They feel badly let down by a figure who was once considered the custodian of their most treasured ideals, someone who was different from other politicians, someone in whom all people of goodwill could place their complete trust.⁷⁵ Almost like spurned lovers, these former admirers now seem to be lashing out with extra force against someone once held dear, giving a particularly sharp edge to their comments. Some criticisms may be personal in other ways too, as politicians and activists who were once vocal champions of Aung San Suu Kyi try to distance themselves from their fallen idol, lest they too become targets for criticism, or are accused of having been too credulous or naive.⁷⁶ Others have simply withdrawn. Notable acolytes like former First Lady Laura Bush and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, for example, have remained silent about Aung San Suu Kyi's attitude towards the Rohingyas.

Whatever may emerge from the future analysis of modern Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi's reputation as a champion of universal human rights has been irreparably damaged. Most history books will probably record her as a fallen star, an idol whose feet were found to have been made of clay. Her extraordinary achievements over decades, both as a prisoner of conscience and an inspiration to millions in Myanmar and elsewhere, will be forever cast in shadow. She had so far to fall, however, because the international community raised her up so high. She was rarely judged against the same criteria as other world figures. Granted, there was an element of political opportunism on both sides, but less journalistic hyperbole and more measured scepticism along the way might have resulted in a more balanced view of her natural strengths and weaknesses. If her foreign admirers had been able to see her more as a real person, with human failings, and a tough politician with an unblinking eye on the ultimate prize, as much as a democratic icon and reflection of their own ideals, they may not feel quite so angry and disappointed now.⁷⁷

7. Conclusion

Since the 2010 elections, much in Myanmar has changed, and much has stayed the same. Two quasi-democratic governments have been installed in Naypyidaw and most of the population is now enjoying greater freedom of movement, expression and association. Newspapers and books are no longer subject to the strict censorship of the past and, while the standard of journalism in Myanmar may leave something to be desired, many publications have broken new ground in their investigation of local issues. Official bodies have published data that has filled in gaps that had existed for decades. There have also been surveys of the population, the economy and civil society by respected local and international organisations. Foreign scholars, students and journalists have poured into Myanmar to conduct research, or to travel and become more familiar with a country that for decades was cut off from mainstream academic studies. The flow of learned (and not so learned) publications has become a flood.⁷⁸

All that said, there are still some areas of Myanmar society that pose major research challenges. A case in point is the Tatmadaw, which is arguably still the most powerful political institution in the country. Until such gaps are filled, a comprehensive understanding of Myanmar and its complex and shifting internal dynamics will remain beyond reach. Also, the advent of a new administration in Naypyidaw, and the harsh military crackdown against the Rohingyas in 2017, have aroused strong emotions around the world. Once again, Myanmar's government and armed forces are the target of passionate denunciations in the press and online. Not all these publications stand up to scrutiny. Questions have arisen over some of the 'facts' and statistics being cited. Some reports fail to take into account factors that could throw a different light on the issues being examined. A few bizarre conspiracy theories have been given a public airing. While her own government has clearly been guilty of peddling 'fake news', Aung San Suu Kyi was not entirely wrong when she pointed to 'an iceberg of misinformation' about contemporary issues.⁷⁹

In these circumstances, Myanmar-watchers still need to exercise caution in evaluating rumours, gossip and news reports. There are powerful groups promoting partisan views about Myanmar through publications, online and through the social media. Despite all the changes that have occurred over the past few decades, it is important that the same level of intellectual rigour is exercised to determine exactly what is happening, why and with what consequences. This can only be done through careful, objective and evidence-based analysis. As Peter Perry has written:

No exercise in geography or history can be better than its sources. Where these are meagre in quantity and/or dubious in reliability and accuracy scholarly expertise, understanding, manipulation and the extraction of every drop of insight has an essential role, but it must also recognise its limits and the fact it can only go so far and will leave many questions unanswered or even unasked. This commonplace experience, and for that matter assertion, is no reason to abandon the enterprise. It does serve to underline the provisional and even tentative character of all scholarship.⁸⁰

The same can be said for other academic disciplines which researchers seek to apply in investigating and describing developments in Myanmar. The greater the challenges, however, the greater the potential rewards.

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