

LEGACY OF THE FIGHTING PEACOCK: ANALYZING THE ROLE OF STUDENT ACTIVISM IN BURMESE DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

Historically, student activism played a prominent role in Burmese democratic movements, yet today its role has diminished. This thesis investigates the rise and decline of Burmese student activism along three levels of analysis—international, state, and civil society—using over sixty first-hand interviews conducted by the author with student leaders from the past fifty years. It analyzes Burmese student movements through the “dynamics of contention” approach to social movements. Most prominently, the theory of political opportunity structures (POS) is applied to the state-level analysis. The analytical framework follows a chronological order of three phases: 1962 to 1988; 1988 to 2000s; and 2000s to today.

INTRODUCTION

The Emergence of Student Activism in Burmaⁱ

Since the final decades of the colonial era, the Fighting Peacock has remained the symbol of Burmese student movements, whether against the British colonial government or the military government of General Ne Win.ⁱⁱ In the words of Phyo Min Thein, former Secretary-General of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions, “Student activism is very deep-rooted in Burma’s history,” with students pushing for both widened student autonomy and the end of the dictatorship.¹ In the 1930s and 1940s, student leaders led the struggle for independence from British rule and later became political leaders. General Ne Win’s coup d’état on March 2, 1962, marked the beginning of Burma’s fifty years of military rule, but student activism continued to challenge dictatorship during this period. Before the coup, the Rangoon University Act had protected the academic autonomy of Rangoon University. On May 9, 1962, however, the Rangoon University Act was annulled by the Revolutionary Council that had taken over the administration of the university. On July 7, approximately 2,000 students from Rangoon University participated in a mass meeting in response to the Act’s abolition. According to student activist and author Lay Myint, “virtually the whole university” showed up to protest the suppres-

sion of university autonomy under the new military government.² Another massive protest occurred in 1974, when General Ne Win’s refusal to hold a state funeral for former United Nations Secretary-General U Thant triggered 8,000 Burmese to join a student-led protest against the dictatorship on December 10.³ The 1988 Uprising, triggered by Ne Win’s sudden withdrawal of banknotes without compensation in September 1987 and brutal suppress on student protests in March 1988, reached its climax in the student-led nationwide general strike on August 8, in which millions of Burmese demonstrated on the streets against military rule. Despite military repression, student protests broke out again in the 1990s. Hundreds of students demonstrated in Yangon in December 1996 to call for improvements in education and the right to establish student unions free from military control.⁴ Student protests took place again in August and September of 1998 to support the National League for Democracy’s (NLD) demand to convene the parliament according to the 1990 elections, as the military had refused to recognize their loss and hand over power to the League. This brief history demonstrates the influential role of student activism in Burma’s democratic movements. In short, student movements have historically been the country’s political vanguard.

Student activism has been a prominent feature of mass democratic movements across Asia.⁵ My thesis focuses on the political circumstances that led to the rise and decline of student activism in Burma along three levels of analysis: (1) the international environ-

ⁱ In 1989, Burma’s military junta changed the English translation of the country’s name from “Burma” to “Myanmar” as well as the names of places within the country. The use of names in this thesis follows this timeframe.

ⁱⁱ The peacock is the national symbol of Burma.

ment; (2) the state; and (3) civil society.^{6, iii} I also draw upon the “dynamics of contention” approach to social movements to explain the trajectory of student activism in Burma. In particular, I apply the theory of political opportunity structures (POS) in my state-level analysis to explain how state actions constrained political opportunities for opposition movements in Burma. In my analysis of civil society, I draw upon the concept of actor constitution to illustrate how Burmese student groups cultivated a student activist identity in response to state oppression. My analytical framework is divided into three phases: 1962-1988; 1988-2000s; and 2000s-present, which correspond to three historical phases of state-led changes in political opportunities that affected the nature of contentious politics among Burmese student groups.

This thesis looks at the state level in detail because of the relative insignificance of the international dimension in the case of Burma. More importantly, the state has had a decisive influence over the political context in which student and civil society groups have operated since 1962. In the first phase, the military regime isolated the country; in the second phase, the country was isolated economically through international sanctions and access to foreign media was largely limited. Today, Myanmar is still at a very early stage of global engagement.

Between 1962 and 1988 (phase 1), student groups thrived because they had a unique opportunity to emerge as the country’s sole viable opposition. However, state actions weakened political opportunities for student movement growth after 1988 (phases 2 and 3). Two significant changes in political opportunity structures helped shape the subsequent response and reactions of civil society. First, the strengthening of political control over education after 1988 destroyed the foundation of student activism and led to its decline. Second, while the release of 1,988 student leaders in 2005 contributed to the temporary re-emergence of the historic All Burma Federation of Student Unions in 2007, state-led political reforms from 2011 onwards have fostered a pluralistic society with political space for the proliferation of student groups and other elements of civil society. These developments weakened the power of Myanmar’s student groups, transforming them from significant political actors into the dis-

persed, largely apolitical entities they are today.

BACKGROUND

Dynamics of contention: a literature review

The dynamics of contention approach focuses on the interplay between the state and contentious political actors to elucidate how social movements emerge and develop. In a pioneering study of contentious politics, Peter Eisinger explained how “the degree to which groups are likely to be able to gain access to power and to manipulate the political system”—what he called the “structure of political opportunities”—affected how protests developed in American cities in the late 1960s. Eisinger believed that state actions were critical in expanding or constraining opportunities for contentious politics.⁷ Charles Tilly similarly posited that states can repress or promote social movements by “altering the relative costs of particular tactics” to potential political opponents.⁸ In other words, Eisinger and Tilly argued that state actions alter the extent to which political opportunities for contentious politics are available to political actors. Sidney Tarrow concisely defined political opportunity structures as “consistent—but not necessarily formal, permanent or national—sets of clues that encourage people to engage in contentious politics.”⁹ In other words, political opportunity structures are dimensions of political context that shape people’s expectations of success or failure in launching collective actions. When they are confident in their “capacity to bring an impact” to their social environment and have a high “prospect for successful collective actions,” they are more likely to engage in said actions since they have a greater incentive to participate.¹⁰

Douglas McAdam summarized two of the essential components of political opportunity structures: (1) “the relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system;” and (2) “the state’s capacity and propensity for repression.”¹¹ POS thus provides an appropriate framework to explain the dynamics between the state and student activism, which is the core of this thesis. Herbert Kitschelt similarly divided political opportunity structures into political input structures and political output structures, a schema that is utilized in this thesis (see Figure 1).¹² The former refers to states’ “openness” or “closeness” to inputs from non-established actors; in other words, the ability of informal political actors to make societal demands. The latter concerns states’ capacities (*strong* or

iii This thesis borrows the idea of “levels of analysis” popularized by Kenneth Waltz in international relations theory and applies it to the study of student activism. However, the “civil society level” is used instead of the “individual level” as the smallest unit of analysis.

weak) to implement effective policies, which is used to suppress opposition rather than deliver services in this thesis. Kitschelt argued that the openness of political input structures and the strength of political output structures largely influence the nature of political opposition movements, a phenomenon that we will later observe in Burma. For example, the more closed input structures are and the stronger a state's capacity to suppress the opposition, the more likely the political opposition will have to develop extra-institutionally, i.e., underground, as was the case in Burma. In this example, we can see how political opportunity structures determine how the political opposition emerges and develop in response to state actions.

In the landmark study of social movements, *Dynamics of Contention*, McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly studied fifteen political struggles throughout history and around the world, and identified "actor constitution" as one of the essential shared processes of these movements.¹³ In this process, opposition groups emerge by constructing a shared identity, or "social appropriation," which "paves the way for innovative action by reorienting an existing group to a new conception of its collective purpose."¹⁴ It may then lead to "category formation"—the "creation of a set of sites sharing a boundary distinguishing [these opposition groups] to at least one set of sites visibly excluded by the boundary."¹⁵ As Hank Johnston remarked, the process of actor constitution is "fundamental in resistant episodes...[b]ecause repressive states constrain freedoms of group formation," which means that "[the way] challengers emerge is of utmost importance."¹⁶ He also argued that "transgressive contention in repressive regimes must be innovative because claim-making channels are limited."¹⁷ We will observe in the case of Burmese authoritarian rule, how student activists resisted and responded to brutal state repression by developing a shared identity through underground activities at university campuses and had their demands for democracy and student autonomy heard through innovative, contentious political acts.

Finally, Tilly argued that "strong distinctive identities" and "dense interpersonal networks exclusive to group members" are two important components for mass mobilization; as a result, groups fulfilling these criteria are likely groups for which it would be useful to examine the dynamics of contention.¹⁸ As we will see, Burmese student activism fulfills both criteria. Moreover, since there is no systematic study on the in-

terplay between state actions and student movements in Burma, the dynamics of contention approach serves as an appropriate and novel lens to examine Burmese student movements in relation to the state.

Figure 1: Political opportunity structures: a general model

		Political input structures	
		Open	Closed
Political output structures	Strong		
	Weak		

Student activism in Asia: a brief overview

In other cases of student activism in Asia, notably in Indonesia, South Korea, and Thailand, students acted as the leading political opposition in the struggle against authoritarianism for an extended period.¹⁹

In these Asian societies, Western-style university education provided students a window to new ideas, ranging from nationalism to democracy to Marxism.²⁰ Among a small, educated elite, many students felt inclined to lead political changes. A sense of Indonesian nationality was developed among such students, who declared "one motherland, one nation and one language" at the 1928 Youth Pledge.²¹ Similarly, a doctrine of "passionate patriotism" developed among South Korean students in the late 1950s.²² In post-WWII Thailand, Marxist ideas gained popularity among educated elites and were spread by progressive publications and discussion groups that encouraged students to fight against Thailand's military regime.²³

Within campus settings, students enjoyed organizational advantages absent for many other groups in civil society and that were easily mobilized in each of these countries. Students were less restricted by family responsibilities and social constraints than other groups and were exposed to peer influence through both student groups and hostels. Being outside the political sphere and uncontaminated by political corruption, they were able to occupy the moral high ground

in Burmese society and win public support as what Edward Aspinall termed society's "moral force."²⁴ In short, students were "morally motivated and uniquely obliged to voice...political aspirations" by making use of their social capital (e.g., exposure to Western ideas, general respect in society) as well as educational infrastructure (e.g., student groups and hostels).²⁵ Therefore, students occupied a unique position in postwar Asian societies that allowed a student-based political opposition to emerge; in many ways, the political opportunities for students were greater than for many other groups in civil society.

However, as Kitschelt reminds us, the political opposition can vary greatly, as their paths are influenced largely by how much a state is willing to accommodate a plurality of opinions. While states that are open to inputs from non-establishment groups allow the opposition to work within existing political institutions, states with closed systems induce the opposition to "adopt confrontational, disruptive strategies orchestrated outside established channels."²⁶ In postwar Asia, political input structures were closed in Indonesia, South Korea, and Thailand. In the absence of political infrastructure to absorb students' discontent, students engaged in extra-systemic activism during Soeharto's New Order Regime dictatorship in Indonesia (1965-98), Park Chung Hye and Chun Doo Hwan's dictatorship in South Korea (1961-87), and the military regime of Sarit and Thanom in Thailand (1957-73).²⁷ As we will see, similar dynamics of contention played out in Burma in much of the twentieth century, where student groups enjoyed advantages over other groups in civil society but were nonetheless forced to operate underground.

Contentious politics in modern Burma: filling the gaps in research

Although many of these same dynamics were present in Burma, Burmese student movements remain understudied in English-language political science. Win Min provides a historical account from the anti-colonial struggle in the 1920s to the end of military rule in 2011 and concluded that Burmese student activism is a "historic force" in which the "historical legacy of earlier student activists...motivated subsequent generations," in particular the role of General Aung San, who was the leader of All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU) and Rangoon University Students' Union (RUSU), in Burma's independence.²⁸

Although Win Min writes about how the military government has affected "the nature and scope of Burma's student activism," the literature is notably silent in terms of its application of theoretical approach in the analysis. In William Hayes's book review, he comments that Win Min "[focuses] on constructed identities and discourse analysis during activist periods, leaving the reader searching for institutional and organizational relations that bridge the crests."²⁹

In this thesis, I will build on Win Min's claim and situate the analysis in the dynamics of contention approach—the application of the POS to examine the interplay between the state and students in an "opposition vacuum", which I argue that Burmese student activism is its product, and "actor constitution" to study how a strong student political identity developed on top of the mere claim of "historical legacy." This allows a comprehensive understanding of Burmese student activism from both macro (state) and micro (civil society) levels, exploring the institutional and organizational relations between the state and students, and among opposition groups respectively.

In addition, Win Min provides limited information on the development of student groups after the monk-led democratic movement in 2007. This thesis fills this important gap by providing a detailed account on student activism in recent years—during Myanmar's reform process—which has not been covered in any previous study.

At the state level, this thesis provides a systematic analysis on how the state has altered political opportunities for student activism to develop in Burma. I emphasize its rise and decline in relation to the existence of what I term an "opposition vacuum." I define "opposition vacuum" as a state of affairs in which substantive and effective opposition is absent under authoritarian political control. In Burma, an opposition vacuum emerged after 1962 when the military government suppressed civil society groups including political parties and other opposition groups. In Burma, as in many Asian countries after WWII, students were the only group left in the vacuum with the potential to effectively mobilize against the military regime. In recent years, however, once non-student political actors and issues beyond democracy gradually emerged after 2008, the opposition vacuum contracted and the role of student groups as a significant political opposition group diminished. In other words, students were no longer in a leading position in civil society once

pluralistic politics took shape.

At the civil society level, the concept of “actor constitution” will be applied to understand how Burmese student activists constructed a student activist identity through the “social appropriation” of political claims by pre-existing groups, including revolutionary leaders and even the current state itself. This, in turn, “[helped] redefine perceptions of threats and opportunities” among the students.³⁰ In this analysis, it is not the state, but ideas and legacies, that helped shape political opportunity structures at the civil society level.

METHODOLOGY

This thesis is based on over sixty first-hand interviews conducted by the author—mainly in Myanmar, but a few in Thailand and Hong Kong. Most of the interviews were arranged through civil society organizations (CSOs) and student groups in Myanmar as well as through preexisting personal connections. I was connected to the multiple generations of student leaders through the 88 Generation Students’ Group, the Myanmar Institute of Democracy, and the Yangon School of Political Science—founded by former student leaders in 1988, 1996, and 1998 respectively. I was able to contact members of the current generation of activists as well as ordinary university students through the All Burma Federation of Student Unions, the Federation of Student Unions, and the University Students’ Union (i.e., the Yangon Institute of Economics Students’ Union and the Yangon University of Foreign Languages Students’ Union). As the first three groups were founded by former student leaders and the latter three groups make up all of the existing student groups in Myanmar, my interviews were able to cover a variety of views and opinions across all generations of student activists.

I chose these interviewees to cover student leaders of each generation from 1962 to the present, as well as a variety of perspectives from civil society leaders, political party members, current students, and recent graduates from sixteen universities in Myanmar. Most of my interviews were conducted in Yangon, where the offices of most CSOs and student groups are located and where most former and current student leaders reside; this leads me to believe that my sample is representative of the broader student activist population in Myanmar. If interviews with former government officials and military intelligence officers had been possible to conduct, the thesis would have been able to include perspectives from members of the state

apparatus, which likely have contested many of my interviewees’ claims; this represents a methodological limitation of my work that merits further exploration in the future. Nevertheless, this paper is very likely the first academic study to include significant number of interviews with Burmese student activists, in particular those from the current generation.

In general, my interviews were divided into three parts: (1) fact-finding and verification; (2) ideology and perspectives; and (3) the development of student activism. On average, each interview lasted for two and a half hours to allow in-depth and open-ended discussions. My interviews started off with background questions that served to understand the interviewees’ past experience which might shape the way they think and act to evaluate the accuracy and identify bias, if any, of their claims. I would then continue with questions about factual information that elicited description of personal experiences (e.g. evidence of military surveillance, political pressure and underground activities), strategies, actions and outcomes to learn about the level of state repression in different phases and subsequent response of students; and figures to get a general sense of how many students were involved, and support base of and relations among student groups at different times. In particular, I was interested in how state repression shaped students’ behavior and their organizational structures, how the student opposition groups survived and sustained their mobilization capacity and contentious political claims in the first phase, and how the change in “state factors” led to the decline of student activism (and the recent divergence) in the second and third phases.

Next, I would proceed to questions about opinions, ideology and values on student activism to learn about different perspectives from students of different generations and backgrounds. My primary questions included why students took part in or refused to join student movements, what motivated or discouraged them to do so, what were their concerns, areas of interest and expected role of students’ unions (e.g. political or education reform), and to what extent a student political or non-political identity existed. These questions helped explain the decisions and actions of the interviewees which were essential to the understanding of the shift of emphasis, from revolution outside the system to minor reformism inside the system, and approach, from confrontation to negotiation, in recent years. Finally, I would engage in open-ended

discussion with the interviewees on the development of Burmese student activism to learn about its role in democratic movements in different points of history, in particular the current development.

PHASE I (1962-88): STUDENTS AS CONTENTIOUS ACTORS UNDER MILITARY REPRESSION

At midnight on July 7, 1962, the Burmese military bombed the birthplace of Burma's independence and student activist movements—the Rangoon University Students' Union Building—killing at least seventeen students.³¹ This act served to ensure student organizations would disappear and “demonstrate the government's willingness to deal forcefully with perceived threat.”³² As General Ne Win famously responded following the crackdown, “[the military had] no alternatives but to fight sword with sword and spear with spear.”^{iv} On March 28, 1964, the military government issued the *Law to Protect National Unity* to ban all political parties except the ruling Burma Socialist Programme Party.³³ However, the existence of such an opposition vacuum gave potential student activists an important political opportunity to emerge and develop even under military rule. Student activists organized underground and succeeded in sustaining mobilization capacity. Eventually, they led the general strike on August 8, 1988 against the military dictatorship, the largest nation-wide democratic movement ever in Burma's history.

How and why did students emerge between 1962 and 1988 as Burma's only dissident vanguard despite extensive military repression? This section aims to answer this question along three levels of analysis: international, state, and civil society. A parallel structure will be used in the discussion of the second and third phases of Burmese student activism to identify the political changes that transformed students' role over time.

International level: Activism in isolation

The 1960s was a watershed period of international student activism. Ideological currents and international awareness of other student movements travelled rapidly across the world through mass media and journals.³⁴ University campuses all over Asia were affected by the Leftist wave of collective actions against ruling elites that challenged the political and social status quo in many regions around the world.³⁵

The protests of the New Left in Western Europe and North America—most notably, the May 1968 student movements in France involving violent street occupations and massive general strikes—inspired numerous student movements against dictatorships in Asia.³⁶ These Western Leftist student movements demonstrated that students could become not merely participants in political dialogue but leaders of social change.

Despite the international diffusion of revolutionary ideas, however, Burmese students were only minimally influenced by international student activist trends. Pyone Cho, former Vice President of Rangoon University Students' Union, explained that, before 1962, universities enjoyed academic freedom and access to books on topics “such as democracy, political theory and world history.”³⁷ However, after 1962, the Revolutionary Council deliberately eliminated foreign economic and cultural influences through what Robert Holmes and others call “Burmanization” policies, which largely isolated the country from foreign political developments.³⁸ Burmese students could only read and discuss Western political books left behind by seniors before the 1962 coup. In this context, Burmese student groups did not reach out and connect to foreign student or political groups, suggesting that international developments from 1962 to 1988 could only have exerted a small, if any, effect on Burmese student movements.³⁹ Burmese student activism was therefore not affected when the heyday of international student activism ended in the 1970s.⁴⁰ As we will see, the trajectory of Burmese student activism did not follow world trends but rather Burma's domestic political context at the state and civil society levels.

State level: Expanding political opportunities for student activism

As shown in Figure 2, the actions of the Burmese state shaped the POS affecting student activism between 1962 and 1988 (see Figure 2). Various dimensions of Burma's domestic political context altered students' expectations of success in social movements. In terms of political input structures, Burma's closed system generated an opposition vacuum for students possessing a growing resentment toward the government, which was reinforced by the state's socioeconomic mismanagement; in terms of political output structures, the military exerted strong control over students. However, as the state did not separate students from university campuses, it was unable to eliminate the mobilization capacity of students. As we

iv The original Burmese phrase is “*dah go dah gyin, hlan go hlan gyin*.”

will see, the concept of opposition vacuum is particularly useful here, as it demonstrates that an effective opposition may take root even under closed political input structures and strong political output structures, which forces us to reassess traditional assumptions underlying the dynamics of contention approach.

Figure 2: Political opportunity structures in Burma: 1962 to 1988

		Political input structures	
		Open	Closed
Political output structures	Strong		X
	Weak		

The opposition vacuum and political opportunity structures

Christopher Rootes argues that the absence of an effective opposition is “the most general condition of political systems that [stimulates]...student movements,” an assertion that seems to hold true for Burma, where state action eliminated the potential for non-student-based anti-regime activism.⁴¹ Since 1962, the military has ruthlessly eliminated civil society in Burma.⁴² The Revolutionary Council outlawed political parties and independent unions, with parties not materializing until 1988. Political dissidents, such as former student activists from the 1950s, were either in jail or unwilling to lead an opposition because of the possibility of military suppression.⁴³ Moreover, neither farmers nor workers could organize themselves effectively given their scattered distribution and Burma’s poor transportation and communication technology.⁴⁴ Given that university campuses provided students a unique meeting place to launch an opposition movement, students were the only potential force with the capacity to fill this opposition vacuum. University campuses provided students with locations to organize activist groups and foster peer support for each other in the case that they were arrested. According to Pyone Cho, the former Vice President of RUSU,

as well as Phyo Min Thein, a former Secretary-General of ABFSU, students felt the responsibility to lead campaigns against the military government in this context.⁴⁵ As we will see, the availability of university campuses as grounds for political activism gave students a unique potential for activism in Burma.

The Burmese government’s social and economic mismanagement: reducing opportunity costs and heightening political opportunities for students

Economic hardship gave students in Burma a perceived opportunity for political action. In April 1962, the Revolutionary Council issued a treatise titled “The Burmese Way to Socialism,” which served as a blueprint for economic development.⁴⁶ “Burmanization” rejected foreign investors, expelled non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and declined international financial assistance. Section 3 (1) of the *Industries Nationalization Law*, which went into effect in 1963, provided the legal grounds for the military to nationalize “any industry.” By early 1970s, all major industries except agriculture, small-scale trading and services had been nationalized.⁴⁷ Resources were used to serve generals’ private interests over the public good.⁴⁸ During 1962 to 1988, the resource gap between investment and national savings widened from -1.9 percent to 2.8 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP).⁴⁹ These policies had disastrous effects on Burma’s economy and the livelihood of many Burmese. The military turned Burma from one of the most prosperous lands in Asia—given its wealth of natural resources and prime geographical location—into one of the poorest countries in the world.⁵⁰ In December 1987, Burma obtained United Nations Economic and Social Council’s status of “Least Developed Country.”⁵¹

The Burmese government’s ineffective economic and social policies raised students’ incentives for collective action, providing them with the confidence to organize against the military regime. Burma’s economic and social mismanagement created a group of educated unemployed and thus a perceived mismatch between level of tertiary education and employment opportunities. Students could not find jobs that they believed they deserved considering their high educational attainment. The perceived absence of a promising future for students reduced students’ opportunity costs to join social movements and encouraged them

to direct their discontent toward the government, whom they held responsible for their unemployment.⁵²

While the state's economic and social policies reduced opportunity costs for student activists throughout this period, perhaps the most noteworthy event took place on September 5, 1987, when Ne Win demonetized 75 percent of the nation's banknotes without compensation and drove millions into poverty. This particularly infuriated university students who could not afford to pay tuition fees to take their examinations and incited them to action.⁵³ Thousands of Rangoon Institute of Technology (RIT) students protested on campus, making public what had previously been primarily underground.⁵⁴ Ne Win's policies rendered students hopeless about the future. As Pyone Cho and Phyo Min Thein explained, students had no choice but to cry for democracy; for Pyone Cho, "Revolution was the only hope to reform the system for a better future."⁵⁵ As Ian Holliday points out, "The [1988] revolt was the product of economic discontent spreading across the land at the end of 1987 and finding a political vehicle in student protest."⁵⁶

State control over students: a failure to prevent campus activism

Starting in 1962, the Revolutionary Council tightened university control with new campus regulations. Student groups and gatherings were banned and "hostels [were] closed at 8 p.m."⁵⁷ After bombing the RUSU Building, the military arrested at least fifty student leaders and imposed military surveillance over students.⁵⁸ Apart from forcing university lecturers to monitor student activities, military intelligence recruited poor students as informers. For instance, Maung Soe, who later served as Deputy Chief of Police, was actively involved in every student meeting and protest under former student leader Lay Myint's underground group but "was never arrested."⁵⁹ Despite his poor family background, according to Lay Myint, Maung Soe was frequently seen with "one to two hundred brand new one-Kyat notes," suggesting that "he had been paid off by the Burmese government."⁶⁰ Additionally, the military pressured family members of student activists, using tactics ranging from verbal warning to surveillance, interrogation, and arrests.⁶¹ Mya Than, father of Min Zin, the former student activist who went into hiding after 1988, experienced periodic arrests from 1989 until his death in 1997.⁶²

Despite these efforts, however, students were still able to organize underground activities given their access to university campuses. Rangoon University, which was located in the center of the city, provided student activists an excellent place to meet, organize, and mobilize for anti-government activities. Despite frequent arrests, underground groups continued to win new recruits to compensate for the loss.⁶³ Since new students would enter universities each year, even if the military arrested all of the student leaders, another group of students could easily replace those who had been arrested. Thus, student activism was not uprooted completely despite military repression. All of this suggests that students possessed a unique organizational capacity in Burmese society that allowed them to fill the opposition vacuum despite state oppression. It also indicates that students might possess a unique organizational capacity under repressive regimes more generally.

Civil society: From actor constitution to mobilization

Student activists responded to campus control after the government crackdown of 1962 with underground activities. With no room for formal structures, underground groups were essentially informal and unsystematic. Even so, however, underground activities were crucial to the process of actor constitution. In repressive states like Burma, this process is essential to sustaining mobilization capacity, constructing a revolutionary mindset among student activists, and passing on contentious claims from generation to generation because of the absence of formal, institutional channels for political claims. The creation and maintenance of a political identity among students through oppositional speech and on-campus underground mobilization allowed students to sustain and expand their sense of grievance against the regime and hence the extent of their activism.⁶⁴ In the process, students achieved what theorists of contentious politics term "cognitive liberation," the process by which students define a situation as "unjust and subject to change through group action."⁶⁵ This, in turn, fostered a collective understanding of the political situation among students and thus increased students' potential for further recruitment and mobilization.⁶⁶

Underground activism: informal and unsystematic but united

Underground activities mainly came in the form

of secret political study groups. Student Front Organization, for example, was one of the underground groups set up at Rangoon University in the 1960s with around ten active members, including lecturers who were former activists.⁶⁷ These groups usually met once a month to discuss politics, education, student affairs, and independence history, and to make plans for spontaneous actions such as throwing anti-government pamphlets into people's houses at night.⁶⁸ An unsystematic network of informal student groups was loosely maintained by personal connections, notably "trustworthy childhood friends," who, according to activist leader and writer Lay Myint and 1970s student leader Htain Wynn Aung, were used as a precaution against potential government spies. Messages were sent under very strict discipline due to security reasons.⁶⁹ Pyone Cho confirmed that, in the 1980s as well, "[Student leaders] rebuilt RUSU based on established trust and friendship among different underground group members."⁷⁰

Actor constitution occurred when former student activists with fighting and struggling experience led junior students in discussing the historic role of student activism (and other political activism) in Burma and distributing leaflets with contentious political claims, such as urging the military government to step down.⁷¹ As Johnston notes, such activities are "fundamental to the process of actor constitution in repressive states."⁷² In Burma, oppositional political speech in secret study groups disseminated revolutionary ideas, helped nourish a student activist identity, and gathered students to sustain mobilization capacity. The success of student groups in facilitating actor constitution helps explain students' persistence under "the most persistent repression" among Asian countries.⁷³

Additionally, Ne Win's dictatorship served as a common enemy that helped unite the student population toward a single goal: ending the dictatorship. Zaw Nyein Latt, a student leader in 1974, explained that, "We only [thought] of how to pull down the military government."⁷⁴ The single-mindedness of student movements at this time allowed student activists from different ideological and ethnic backgrounds to join forces. This point is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that, in August 1988, student leader Min Ko Naing was able to unite leaders of different student groups—including Maung Maung Kyaw from Burma Youth Liberation Front and Min Zay Ya of All Burma Stu-

dents Democratic Movement Organization—to call for the first national student conference since 1962.⁷⁵ The purpose of the conference was to resurrect the flag of the Fighting Peacock, which had belonged to the historic All Burma Federation of Student Unions. This conference demonstrated how the absence of pluralistic views reinforced students' solidarity and constructed a shared identity among themselves in organizing collective actions.

Underground student groups made use of Burmese political history in order to construct a student activist identity. The historic role of students in the independence struggle, the heroism of General Aung San, and the later military resistance by the Thirty Comrades were just a few of the political legacies Burmese underground student groups drew upon to inspire young activists and generate devotion to underground activism. Interestingly, student leaders co-opted the legacy of General Aung San from the state as an integrating force for student activists. The military regime made use of the historical legacy of General Aung San—who led Burma's independence through military struggle—to justify the legitimacy of "governance militarization." General Aung San's birthday and assassination were celebrated as Children's Day and Martyrs' Day, respectively. In addition, all bank notes were printed with the General's picture from 1962 to 1989.⁷⁶ Despite that General Aung San had been utilized as a symbol by the military regime, however, student groups drew upon his legacy in order to contest the legitimacy of the state and unite student activists. Most of the student leaders truly believed that their participation and sacrifice, like General Aung San's, could bring real change to Burma.⁷⁷ As Robert Taylor explains, "[The] organization of students on university campuses [in 1988] echoed the tales of student heroism in the 1930s taught to succeeding generations."⁷⁸

State violence also fostered a strong student political identity and radicalized many more moderate students. In March 1988, for example, many students witnessed the brutal treatment and arbitrary shooting of student protesters. On March 13, Phone Maw, a chemical engineering student at RIT, was shot dead by the riot police in a protest at a local police station against unfair treatment towards RIT students. In a subsequent protest on March 16, students were attacked by the riot police near the Inya Lake in which hundreds died and thousands were arrested, known as the White Bridge Incident.⁷⁹ Despite university

closure during this time period, many Burmese student activists became more radical between March and May 1988. Students returned home and told others how the military ruthlessly cracked down on students' peaceful demonstrations; in the process, they constructed the support base for the nationwide demonstration that would take place that August. In the subsequent student mobilization, according to Phyo Min Thein and Pyone Cho, "virtually all students participated, including moderates," as students were very angry about state violence.⁸⁰

Despite the limited membership base of each underground group, the existence of underground structures preserved students' mobilization capacity. In 1974, when students learned about Ne Win's ignorance toward the death of former United Nations Secretary-General U Thant, underground groups started to communicate, gather, and mobilize students within two weeks to organize memorial activities and protest against the military dictatorship.⁸¹ The general strike on August 8, 1988, was also a product of underground discussion among student leaders from different groups, who formed the general strike committee on June 23, two months before resuming the flag of ABFSU in late August.⁸² These examples demonstrate the ability of underground structures to mobilize students at critical moments.

Analysis: The irreplaceable role of student activism

State actions acted as crucial political opportunity structures that allowed student activism to take root more fully in Burma between 1962 and 1988. State repression eliminated every potential revolutionary force in civil society except that of students, as students' access to campuses gave them a unique advantage over other potential contentious actors. Therefore, while political input and output structures were highly restricted in Burma between 1962 and 1988, students still had political opportunities that other groups did not and seized upon them to become Burma's only anti-regime force during this period. Students' relatively large political opportunities can best be explained by the fact that state repression created an opposition vacuum in which students felt that they were the only group in society to challenge the regime. However, the state's socioeconomic mismanagement also raised students' incentives to act as agents of change. The processes of actor constitution, cognitive liberation, and student mobilization, all of which are essential to cultivating politically contentious stu-

dents, were realized through underground activities. It is no exaggeration to conclude that students had an irreplaceable role in challenging the military regime between 1962 and 1988.

PHASE 2 (1988-2000S): THE EROSION OF STUDENT ACTIVISM

The 1988 Uprising ended in military repression. The military established the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) on September 18, 1988, and tightened political control across Myanmar. The exertion of *state control over education* was the most notable reduction in political opportunities, as it strengthened political output structures. Despite the continued presence of an opposition vacuum as well as socioeconomic mismanagement, the state effectively destroyed the foundation of student activism by weakening its mobilization capacity. Although underground groups were not entirely uprooted, it was difficult to organize students after 1988. A slight change in political output structures—Aung San Suu Kyi's release in 1995, which was regarded as a signal of democratic change—helps explain why student protests took place in 1996 and 1998, albeit on a small and confined scale.⁸³ However, no student-led political movements have taken place in Myanmar since 1998.⁸⁴

International level: sanctions and censorship

Myanmar's isolation was reinforced after 1988 by international sanctions enacted in response to Myanmar's severe human rights violations. Since 1990, the United States has imposed a range of economic sanctions against Myanmar, including trade, assets, investment, and financial assistance restrictions.⁸⁵ In addition to economic sanctions, the European Union adopted an arms embargo and suspended defense cooperation with the country.⁸⁶ These sanctions severely severed the limited connections that had existed between Myanmar and the rest of the world, such as foreign investment, and halted possible personal interactions between citizens of Myanmar and citizens of other countries, which placed limits on potential interactions between Myanmar's student groups and international actors.

In addition, during this period, foreign media had a limited influence on student activism due to severe censorship. Under Part (7) of the 1962 Printers and Publishers Registration Law, all newspapers and publications had to be scrutinized by the government. The Law Amending the Printers and Publishers Reg-

istration Law, 1962 was enacted on June 18, 1989, to heighten the punishment for not complying with the law. For instance, the name of Nelson Mandela was removed from newspapers after his public call for releasing Aung San Suu Kyi in 1993.⁸⁷ Foreign broadcasts were also restricted. A Myanmar government-sponsored newspaper called the BBC a tool “to install British cronies in positions of power in Myanmar and through them to manipulate Myanmar political and economic life.”⁸⁸ Following a BBC interview with Aung San Suu Kyi, in August 1995, the Myanmar government has restricted access to the BBC Burmese Service as well as the Voice of America.⁸⁹

In addition, according to the International Telecommunication Union, internet and mobile penetrations were below 1% in Myanmar in 2006.⁹⁰ Affordable SIM cards were not available until very recently.⁹¹ As Chit Min Lay, a student leader in 1996, recalled, “It was difficult [for us] to reach the outside world when we were in university.”⁹² Thu Tha Sen, Managing Director of *The Young Generation’s Note*, a newspaper based along the Thailand-Myanmar border, and who spent her childhood in southern Myanmar (Mon State) in the 1990s and 2000s, said that she “didn’t even know who Aung San Suu Kyi [was] until I arrived in Yangon.”⁹³ These examples illustrate the obstacles to communication and the free flow of ideas in Myanmar. Interestingly, among the ten student activists from 1996 and 1998 I interviewed, only three mentioned Aung San Suu Kyi’s influence on their motivations in organizing the protests.⁹⁴ Under such circumstances, the international environment could only have had a limited influence on the development of student activism in Myanmar during this phase.

State level: tightened control over university campuses

The state continued to shape the political opportunity structures of student activism after 1988, first by creating an anarchy-like situation, which significantly raised the cost of committing contentious political acts and eroded public support for the student movement, and then by tightening control over university campuses and student activities (see Figure 3). Although non-student political actors emerged, they were basically dysfunctional under government repression, as was the case for the National League for Democracy, whose leaders, Aung San Suu Kyi, Tin Oo, and Win Tin, were arrested in July 1989.⁹⁵ The military’s social and economic management did not improve during this period. Political input structures remained *closed*

but political output structures became *very strong*, with tightened political control, particularly over education. This reduction in political opportunity structures generated a sense of fear among students and detached them from anti-government activities. As a result, it was detrimental to student activism and contributed to the gradual decline of student activism in Myanmar.

Figure 3: Political Opportunity structures in Myanmar: 1988 to 2000s

		Political input structures	
		Open	Closed
Political output structures	Strong		X
	Weak		

Hobbes’s dilemma: anarchy in action

After the largest democratic movement in Burma’s history took place on August 8, 1988, the military strategically created a “stateless” situation to prolong its rule and separate student activists from the support of ordinary people. Political output structures remained strong as the military intelligence continued to arrest student activists and suppress opposition groups. Upon appointing Dr. Maung Maung to form a civilian government, the military purposefully compromised the “public good of social order” by withdrawing security forces from streets and releasing 4,800 criminals from jails which succeeded to separate student activists from the support of ordinary people.⁹⁶ Federico Ferrara described it as a twentieth-century application of Hobbes’s dilemma.⁹⁷ In *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes deduced the “natural condition of mankind,” or the state of nature, as “the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe.”⁹⁸ In creating an anarchic situation in Burma, the military aimed to simulate a Hobbesian state of nature.

In doing so, the state successfully generated a sense of fear among ordinary people and students, who ceased to participate in and support student activists’ anti-government movements. Consequently,

the state destroyed the support base of Burma's student groups. After more than a month of stateless anarchy, ordinary people realized that the military was the only group in the country with the resources and capacity essential to enforcing law and order. After all, the military's ability to do so is suggested by its name: the State Law and Order Restoration Council. At this time, the majority of Burmese thus stayed away from oppositional politics and submitted themselves to heightened repression in exchange for security. This explains the people's silence—in stark contrast to the August 8 general strike—during the internal “coup” on September 18, 1988, by the military junta. It is at this point that we can begin to trace the decline of student movements in Myanmar.⁹⁹ The application of Hobbes's dilemma in this analysis illustrates how state action shaped Myanmar's political opportunity structures and led to the decline of student movements.

**Tightening political control over education:
separating students from university campuses**

The 1988 Uprising alarmed the military about the underground mobilization capacity of students despite their being under political control. As discussed earlier, the physical presence of a cluster of university campuses in Rangoon's city center had served as a focal point for student activists to gather, organize, and mobilize.¹⁰⁰ The State Law and Order Restoration Council thus targeted underground structures and imposed stricter controls to shatter the institutions that supported student activism. These measures included university closures, campus relocations, and the introduction of distance learning, all while military surveillance remained at a high level.¹⁰¹

The SLORC repeatedly shut down universities to prevent students from gathering. All universities were closed for three years after 1988.¹⁰² They reopened in June 1991, but closed again on December 10 of that year following a student demonstration celebrating Aung San Suu Kyi's Nobel Peace Prize award.¹⁰³ In 1996, the military junta shut down universities again for four years following a student protest.¹⁰⁴ From 1988 to 2000, universities in Myanmar only opened for thirty-six to forty months.¹⁰⁵ University closure effectively constrained the organization—and especially recruitment activities—of underground student groups.¹⁰⁶ Students were only able to organize in 1998 when some universities opened for ten days before examinations, which led to a small-scale protest.¹⁰⁷ This example demonstrates the importance of

the university campus in providing a place for underground structures to develop.

The military junta opened the University of Distance Education in Yangon in 1992 to supplement university education during campus closures.¹⁰⁸ It encouraged students to transfer to this program by keeping daytime universities closed. As 1990s student leader Aung Kyaw Phyto attests, “Many students shifted to distance courses because they were not sure when [daytime] universities would reopen again.”¹⁰⁹ Aung Kyaw Tun, former student leader of 1998 echoed, “This also allowed them to earn their living [while studying] in a period of economic hardship.”¹¹⁰ According to 2002 figures, despite the fact that daytime universities had reopened in 2000, the daytime university students were limited in number (90,000 students) compared to the distance university students (560,000).¹¹¹ With fewer students on campuses, underground groups had difficulty surviving, let alone mobilizing, in the 1990s and early 2000s.¹¹²

Additionally, the military junta split and relocated existing universities, and established new universities—without student hostels—in remote locations far away from urban centers. While I was unable to interview former military intelligence officers to learn about their actual reasons for doing so, the military's displacement of students nonetheless prevented the physical concentration of students that had promoted mobilization in the first phase.¹¹³ The number of students at each university dropped significantly because of the split up and relocation after 1996. The government also forced students to spend a long time on transportation—on average, three to four hours—so that they would have less time and energy to meet and organize after class.¹¹⁴ Yangon Technological University (formerly the Yangon Institute of Technology) was shut down in 1998 and replaced by the newly built Pyay Technological University in Bago Region.¹¹⁵ The University of Yangon, which ceased to admit undergraduates after 1996, was split into Dagon University, University of East Yangon, University of West Yangon and other institutions.

The prohibition of student hostels served another purpose: to prevent students from building the close personal bonding and mutual trust that is inherently crucial to underground activities. According to Hein Min Tun, a 2007 graduate of Yezin University of Veterinary Science, his university was one of the three exceptions that had “informal residence” for students

due to its remoteness.¹¹⁶ However, the 500 students of Yezin University were closely “monitored” by a military base nearby and warned by teachers to “never do politics.”¹¹⁷

Universities continued to operate under the absolute control of government ministries over their curriculum, syllabus, and teachers. Students were taught to be “absolutely obedient to the authority” and were subjected to heightened levels of surveillance.¹¹⁸ Military intelligence officers regularly and explicitly visited universities to check student activities.¹¹⁹ The existing informers’ network became systematic and comprehensive. Teachers were held responsible if they failed to report potential student activities.¹²⁰ Former student leader Chit Min Lay recalled that some teachers would remind students not to discuss politics on campus and in teashops, as “many colleagues [were] recording conversations.”¹²¹ Former student leaders Aung Kyaw Phyoo, Khin Cho Myint, Nobel Aye, and Zin Mar Aung also alluded to the existence of the informers’ network.¹²² Students continued to be hired as spies in the early 2000s. In 2004, a student who was a member of Generation Wave at Taungoo Technical University was arrested and, according to Hein Min Tun, his close friend was found to be the informer.¹²³ By hiring students as informers, the military built distrust among students, who dared not discuss politics even with close friends. In general, the tightened military surveillance and repression created a sense of fear among ordinary students. Large-scale student mobilization became impossible even when there were underground structures in 1996 and 1998.¹²⁴ Only a few hundred students in Yangon participated in both demonstrations.¹²⁵

In short, the SLORC launched numerous policies, ostensibly to prevent students from gathering together, organizing themselves, and mobilizing others. Essentially, SLORC policies reduced the likelihood that underground movements would succeed (i.e., commit contentious acts without being arrested). As a result of this widening of political output structures, student activists were less likely to organize. The military regime seems to have discovered the reason why student groups had been able to thrive under the opposition vacuum during the first phase: the existence of university campuses provided them with an organizational capacity unavailable to other segments of civil society. Students thus had little incentive to get involved or had given up in student movements, as underground

mobilizations were unlikely to succeed.¹²⁶

Confined changes in political opportunities in 1996 and 1998

Under the dynamics of contention approach, the dominant incentive for students to participate in anti-government protests is expected success. Despite that this period can be characterized in general by a strengthening of political output structures (which reduced students’ expected successes), events in the late 1990s slightly raised students’ expectations of success. Aung San Suu Kyi’s release in 1995 and her subsequent weekend political speeches outside her residence gave hope to students; in other words, the state’s release of Aung San Suu Kyi widened perceived opportunities for political action by making political input structures slightly more open. The NLD also gave students a message of support, which facilitated the process of actor constitution—the construction of a clear political identity among student activists. Most of the student leaders, including Aung Kyaw Phyoo, Nobel Aye and Zin Mar Aung, thus calculated that a “final battle” and sacrifice could bring a real impact and “realized [it was] the time to reorganize,” as they had very high expectations that the NLD could generate a democratic transition.¹²⁷ The NLD’s statement on August 21, 1998, had been spread through leaflets and personal connections, and was interpreted by the student leaders as a signal that the “People’s Parliament” would be called “within a few days.”¹²⁸ It directly encouraged students to demonstrate; as Aung Kyaw Phyoo recalled, “We expected to stay in prison for just a few months” given the NLD’s “expected success in [a] power transition.”¹²⁹

Civil society: a decline in underground activities

In addition to effective political control over education, the absence of former student leaders—who were either in jail or in exile—from university campuses was detrimental to the sustainability of underground student group structures. Without having seniors to recruit new members, the construction of a student political identity through discussion and mobilization around contentious claims became very difficult. In other words, the existence of a “lost generation” of student leaders undermined the process of actor constitution and cognitive liberation among students. As a result, student groups failed to “redefine perceptions of threats and opportunities” among students, which Johnston explains is crucial to mobi-

lizing contentious action.¹³⁰

A “generation gap” and reduction in mobilization capacity

As demonstrated earlier, an important element in the actor constitution of student activism between 1962 and 1988 had been its overwhelming emphasis on passing the torch and inspiring the next generation by channeling the legacies of previous generations. Fifteen former student leaders from 1962, 1974, 1988, 1996, and 1998 explained that Burmese student movements have been a combination of both former student leaders and new students who learned from experienced seniors in underground political discussion and secret meetings.¹³¹ According to and Khin Cho Myint, Pyone Cho, Zaw Nyein Latt, seniors would help the new members “turn their demands and discontent into politics,” which helped develop a Burmese student activist identity.¹³² It usually started with low-risk activities, such as distributing leaflets and music tapes, as a form of training.¹³³ Former student leaders also had an imperative role in recruitment. “They identified potential candidates, discussed politics with them, checked their backgrounds, and eventually gave the flag to suitable students,” former student activist Zaw Nyein Latt recalled.¹³⁴

After 1988, however, student leaders were either in jail or in exile.¹³⁵ This created a shortage in experienced seniors who could guide the new generation. In other words, a “generation gap” emerged. No prominent leaders were released until the early 2000s.¹³⁶ The remaining activists fled to Thailand and formed exile groups, such as the ABFSU Foreign Affairs Committee based in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and the All Burma Students’ Democratic Front (ABSDF) based along the border.¹³⁷ In the absence of seniors, political recruitment and training in contentious politics abated.¹³⁸ As actor constitution and cognitive liberation became limited, the mobilization capacity of student activism could no longer be sustained by underground activities.

The 1996 and 1998 student demonstrations were possible partly because of the release of 427 and 163 political prisoners in 1992 and 1995, respectively.¹³⁹ The majority of them were former student activists in the 1988 Uprising who then continued to study in universities and organize with the younger generation (i.e., high school students who were merely followers).¹⁴⁰ However, the organizational structures of underground activities were gradually uprooted

after 1998, when most of the student activists from the 1990s (such as Aung Kyaw Phyoo, Aung Kyaw Tun, Chit Min Lay, Khin Cho Myint, Nobel Aye, and Zin Mar Aung), were either in jail or in exile.¹⁴¹ Once this had occurred, no one could stay and lead the remaining students. Clearly, actions at the civil society level could not take place during this period, as events at the state level highly reduced the potential for collective action among university students.

Analysis: State actions and a decline in student activism

From 1988 through the early 2000s, the military junta had a predominant role in transforming the political opportunity structures that were previously favorable to student activism, thereby altering the dynamics of contention between student activists and the state. The state effectively minimized the possibility for students to organize anti-government activities through exerting a very strong control over the educational system, i.e., strengthening a vital political output structure that had earlier allowed student movements to develop. It utilized a variety of methods—from university closure and relocation, to distance education and military intelligence—to extinguish the spark of student activism before it could take shape in the form of a threat to the regime’s stability. These measures significantly reduced students’ chances to succeed, and hence, lowered their incentives to put their lives at risk. Even though the elements of student historic heroism did not entirely fade away, underground activities faded tremendously by the early 2000s, as most of the student activists were either in jail or in exile. In sum, the state orchestrated the gradual decline of student activism in Burma after 1988.

PHASE 3 (2000S-PRESENT): THE GROWTH OF CIVIL SOCIETY

In 2005, the military junta released 361 political prisoners, including Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi, the two most prominent student leaders of the 1988 Uprising.¹⁴² Together with other former student leaders, they founded the 88 Generation Students’ Group (88 Generation) and played a crucial role in the monk-led Saffron Revolution in 2007. In contrast to the movements discussed in Phases 1 and 2, this movement was marked by limited student participation. However, as a response to Cyclone Nargis in 2008, which killed over 138,000 people, many youth relief groups emerged and raised students’ awareness of community service.¹⁴³

In this period, a civilian government comprised of former generals replaced the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), which was dissolved on March 30, 2011.^v This officially marked a transition period for Myanmar and is the most significant change in political opportunity structures observed thus far. Most student leaders arrested in 2007 were released by early 2012. The aboveground ABFSU, Federation of Student Unions (FoSU) and University Students' Union (USU) were then organized. However, the *opening of political space and enlargement of civil society* eliminated the opposition vacuum, resulting in the students' losing their monopoly status as the sole opposition group.

International level: Limited global connections

Under the new civilian government, Myanmar is less isolated than before. In recognition of the reform process that began in 2011, international sanctions have been gradually lifted. The United States dropped its ban on foreign investment in Myanmar and the European Union suspended all restrictive measures except its arms embargo.¹⁴⁴ With improved Internet access and increased exchange opportunities, students are more aware of developments abroad such as the recent student strike in Hong Kong known as the "umbrella movement." In March 2014, The ASEAN Youth Forum was held in Myanmar for the first time.

However, student groups in Myanmar are largely independent of foreign influence and lack political connections. Neither FoSU nor USU have international networks. Only student groups in exile have formal international connections. ABSDF is a member of the International Union of Students, but the organization has been inactive, with its last updates released on November 18, 2002.¹⁴⁵ Another example of student groups' limited international engagement is the attendance of the ABFSU Foreign Affairs Committee at a regional student conference in New Delhi in 2009 alongside member organizations of the World Federation of Democratic Youth.¹⁴⁶ Within Myanmar, ABFSU has no formal connections with international student organizations due to the organization's "non-existence" prior to its latest reorganization in early 2012. Since then, ABFSU has occasionally participated in regional functions; for instance, Phyto Phyto Aung and Han Nee Oo, members of ABFSU's Central Working Committee, participated in a political work-

shop organized by the International Union of Socialist Youth in the Philippines in January 2014.¹⁴⁷ Even so, neither student activist is a daytime university student anymore.

International influences on student activism are still limited. Although international political movements may serve as a source of inspiration for the student groups in Myanmar, there is no strong evidence of formal and informal ties between Burmese student groups and their foreign counterparts at the moment.¹⁴⁸ The end of Myanmar's isolation, however, means that students are increasingly exposed to foreign ideas and events, a development that deserves investigation in future studies.

State level: State-driven political and economic developments

The state continued to repress political groups and arrest activists during the Saffron Revolution in 2007 and the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in 2008. However, a remarkable change in POS started in 2011 when the transition period began (see Figure 4). Although the government still holds absolute control over university administration, the political control on student organizations has been largely reduced, especially after 2013. According to Nyein Chan May, Vice Chairman of Yangon University of Foreign Languages Students' Union (YUFLSU), the university has been more lenient on student organizations, "at least we are allowed to exist in campus and operate above-ground."¹⁴⁹ Min Thu Kyaw, Secretary-General of Yangon Institute of Economics Students' Union, echoed, "Sometimes members of the university [administration] may even join our Discussion Club."¹⁵⁰ For instance, on July 6, 2012, the eve of the 50th anniversary of military's bombing of the RUSU Building, police detained 23 members of ABFSU for one day to prevent them from mobilizing students to join a memorial.¹⁵¹ A year later, students were allowed to march inside the University of Yangon and in the streets.¹⁵² This decline in government repression of student activism represents a notable weakening of political output structures.

The opposition vacuum ceased to exist with the gradual end of suppression through measures like the legalization of political parties and CSOs. This opening of the political space has allowed civil society to develop and has prevented students from taking leadership over the democratic transition. The state is also opening its economy for foreign investment and trade.

v The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) was renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997.

At present, political input structures in Myanmar have, for the first time in since 1962, become more open.

Figure 4: Political opportunity structures in Myanmar: late-2000s to today

		Political input structures	
		Open	Closed
Political output structures	Strong	X	
	Weak		

The gradual opening of political space: the end of the opposition vacuum

The SPDC tactfully controlled the opposition after 2007 to provide a stable and peaceful environment for the referendum on the new Constitution in 2008, the parliamentary election in 2010, and the final state-led reform in 2011 to “[build] a modern, developed and democratic nation by the state leaders elected by the *Hluttaw* (Parliament).”^{vi} These political changes were in accordance with the “Roadmap to Discipline-flourishing Democracy” adopted in 2003.¹⁵³ The military jailed former student leaders and the 2007 generation following the Saffron Revolution, and civil society activists in 2008. Among those arrested in 2008 were Phyo Phyo Aung and her father Dr. Nay Win, a student activist of 1988. They were arrested for organizing the collection of bodies of Cyclone Nargis victims for burial.¹⁵⁴

Civil society started to develop in 2008 when many CSOs emerged to perform community service in response to the government’s incapability to provide disaster relief. From 2010 onwards, the rule of law began to supplant brute force as the *modus operandi* of the state, which started to open up political space within its control. Under Section 6 (b) and (c) of the *Political Parties Registration Law* enacted on March 8, 2010, registered political parties have to safeguard “law and order and tranquillity” and the Constitution.

Section 354 of the 2008 Constitution states the conditions of citizens’ constitutional freedom of association—“not contrary to the laws, enacted for Union security, prevalence of law and order, community peace and tranquillity or public order and morality”—which, in practice, gives the government legal power to arbitrarily limit such freedom. Nonetheless, it provides a legal basis for political parties to operate above ground. As of April 4, 2014, sixty-three political parties are registered, including the opposition NLD and the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) consists of former generals.¹⁵⁵

The state also intends to relax the registration of CSOs, which will facilitate the growth of civil society. Section (6) of the *Law Relating to Forming of Organizations* enacted on September 30, 1988, prohibits organizations from political activities and punishes such activity with imprisonment for up to five years. The non-transparent registration process requires a high fee of 500,000 Kyat and requires long waiting time.^{vii} For instance, Ratana Metta Organisation waited for two years and “had to promise to do only social affairs.”¹⁵⁶ On January 24, 2014, the government submitted the drafted *Association Registration Law* to the Parliament with voluntary registration provisions, a certificate processing time of between 30 and 60 days, a maximum registration fee of 30,000 Kyat, and a right to appeal.^{viii} Over 300 local CSOs have registered since 2012.¹⁵⁷ Such growth would not have been possible without state-led reforms.

Although government control persists, political parties and CSOs can now be formally and legally established. This has ended the opposition vacuum previously filled by students. Four of my interviews suggest that people no longer look to them (student leaders) but to prominent political figures such as Aung San Suu Kyi and the 1988 leaders who have the capacity to make a real difference.¹⁵⁸ The ABFSU that re-emerged in 2012 was not as attractive as it was before. The students’ capacity to act as the political vanguard has largely reduced. The political role of student groups has been replaced by political parties and CSOs, particularly by the NLD and 88 Generation. The role of students has become less important.

vi According to the translation in the Myanmar government-owned newspaper, *The New Light of Myanmar*.

vii The exchange rate is roughly 1,000 Kyat to \$1, i.e., 500,000 Kyat is approximately \$500.

viii \$30.

Economic developments: the higher opportunity cost of political participation

Myanmar's "open door policy" has raised the opportunity cost of political participation for students. Myanmar's economic situation has improved. GDP rose from \$6.5 billion in 1998 to \$53.1 billion in 2012.¹⁵⁹ Although the mismatch between university education and job opportunities is still severe, students have more choices than before, such as studying abroad and working in international organizations. Three of my interviews suggest that, with better career prospects and economic opportunities, current students have fewer incentives to risk their lives in political movements.¹⁶⁰ The state has created better socioeconomic conditions, which have turned students away from politics. As Hpone Myint Thu, a student at the University of Medicine in Yangon from 2009 to 2010, remarked, "Economic issues are considered [by students] as more important than political issues."¹⁶¹

Education remains under state control

Although the government has relaxed its control of the education system, it continues to undermine students' prospect of success (i.e., incentives) to engage in contentious political acts, and constrain their organizational capacity.¹⁶²

At present, university campuses are in general freely accessible. Since 2011, some universities have even invited prominent civil society leaders to give guest lectures on social issues that indirectly touched political issues.¹⁶³ The University of Yangon reopened on December 5, 2013, with the first 1,000 undergraduate students since 1996, undertaking nineteen arts and science degree programs including a political science program in collaboration with Johns Hopkins University.¹⁶⁴

However, some universities under government control state in their admissions forms that students must "promise not to participate in union or political affairs."¹⁶⁵ This sends a clear signal to the students: there is a cost to engage in political activities, which discourages them to do so.¹⁶⁶ The government has further proposed the establishment of the Central University Council to control higher education, which would consist of ministry officials and rectors (75 percent), academia (9 percent), private schools (7 percent), CSOs (4 percent), administrative staff (3 percent), one lecturer and one student.¹⁶⁷ Although the issue is still in debate among policy makers and stakeholders, the government's proposal has shown that the

state is still in control over universities despite having somewhat relaxed political control. To date, university administrations are still under the hierarchical, top-down control of government ministries. Institutional, financial, academic, and curricular autonomy are absent.¹⁶⁸ Furthermore, the government is particularly concerned about the presence of the 2007 student leaders on university campuses. At least seventeen former political prisoners from ABFSU were either expelled or daytime education. For instance, Phyo Phyo Aung, a civil engineering student at the Technological University (Hmawbi) in 2007, was expelled, and Han Nee Oo, a law student at Dagon University in 2007, was forced to switch to distance learning after being released in 2012.¹⁶⁹ Si Thu Maung is the only exception, as the Ministry of Education allowed him to resume his studies at the Yangon Institute of Economics in December 2013. The remote locations of campuses and the large number of students undertaking distance education continue to make it difficult for students to gather for political activities. Dormitories are only provided in a limited scale, while students studying away from their homes account for over 70 percent of the country's total student population.¹⁷⁰ Universities are generally closed within one to two hours after class.^{ix} These government policies serve to limit students' capacity to organize collective actions by undermining the prospect of success, likelihood of the process of actor constitution and formulation of a student political identity.

State-influenced decline in students' political activism

The state has successfully instilled a sense of fear among students to deter them from engaging in political activities. Students' parents have often been witnesses to the military's bloody repression in the past and, consequently, many students do not dare to participate in political movements. Such activities could result in the whole family being sent to prison.¹⁷¹ In fact, many of the 2007 student leaders and current student group members were born into "political families." For instance, the fathers of Phyo Phyo Aung and Han Nee Oo of ABFSU, as well those of D Nyein Lin of FoSU and Nyein Chan May of YUFLSU, were former student leaders and activists in 1974 and 1988.¹⁷²

Moreover, for half a century, Myanmar's military junta sustained itself through "propaganda, surveillance and fear," the effects of which outlived the

ix The author personally paid a half-day visit to Yangon Institution of Economics during a regular school day on January 9, 2014.

junta itself.¹⁷³ Even in 2007, people still believed that military intelligence officers were everywhere, transmitting public conversations to generals' ears, and such fear discouraged political action.¹⁷⁴ Moreover, with the decline of underground student discussion groups, which used to counterbalance government propaganda, the military junta depoliticized students through education and propaganda that promoted ideas such as "politics is dangerous" and "politics is adults' business." Additionally, the imprisonment of hundreds of students in the past has made students reluctant to engage in political action. Consequently, "pretending to be obedient [to authority] is a norm among students."¹⁷⁵ After decades of military repression, students are still skeptical of the growing political freedom. Only six students chose political science—a subject in which there were fifty available seats—at the University of Yangon in this year's reopening to undergraduates, as the subject is still considered to be controversial and to have dim career prospects.¹⁷⁶ According to many student leaders, the most challenging obstacle to student group recruitment and mobilization is the sense of fear among students regarding political participation.¹⁷⁷

The absence of pressing political storms to act as triggers also restrains students' incentive to engage in political action. Students have less of an incentive to organize along political lines without having experienced direct suffering under Ne Win's dictatorship.¹⁷⁸ As Myanmar is changing and seemingly becoming more democratic, students do not see the urgent need to agitate against the government. The country has ceased, at least in official terms, to be ruled by the junta. It is thought to be unrealistic to start a revolution. Students thus have few incentives to participate in political movements.

Civil society: Divergence among student activists

When the reform process began in 2011, divergence emerged between student groups, which proved damaging to the ability of student groups to mobilize in concert with one another. There is also a shift of focus from political issues to community service.

The re-emergence of on-campus student groups

On August 28, 2007, four students studying English at the United States Embassy's American Center—Kyaw Ko Ko, Si Thu Maung, Han Nee Oo and Lin Htet Naing—began a new incarnation of ABFSU under the guidance of former student leaders released

in 2005.¹⁷⁹ As it was very difficult to in the absence of underground structures to recruit students on campuses, which were still under political control, the four students drew twenty members from the American Center.¹⁸⁰ However, it was very difficult for ABFSU to cultivate a student political identity because it lacked links with current students. Thus, actor constitution, cognitive liberation and student mobilization were limited. Less than 10 percent of the protestors in 2007 were students.¹⁸¹ This further proves the indispensable role of underground activities in sustaining students' mobilization capacity and the military's success in destroying the foundations of student activism after 1988.

Most of the student leaders of ABFSU in 2007 were jailed afterwards and released by January 2012. Making use of the change in political input structures, the more open political space, ABFSU regrouped again and founded the 12-person Central Working Committee (CWC) on January 18, 2012. With no existing campus networks, they were unable to recruit daytime university students. Even today, none of the CWC members are daytime university students. In time, members within the group began to disagree about the group's approach, emphasis, and organization. In March 2012, D Nyein Lin, the former Vice Chairman of ABFSU, quit ABFSU; he subsequently formed FoSU on June 1, 2012.¹⁸² USU is another student group but acts as a network rather than a centralized organization, and does not have a known founding date. In USU, students' unions of various universities "group together by consensus."¹⁸³ The establishment of the Yangon Institute of Economics Students' Union (YIESU) on July 6, 2012, was extraordinarily significant. Not only was it the first students' union within the USU network. It was the first on-campus student group to operate since the 1990s. In addition, members of USU are necessarily current students.

Divergence among student groups: student pragmatism and a shift of focus

The opening of political space has eliminated the opposition vacuum and promoted the proliferation of multiple sources of student agitation. In addition, the end of military rule has reduced both state repression and the incentives for many students to press for political change beyond education reforms. This could explain the greater influence of student groups such as USU that focus on university-based issues relative to student groups such as ABFSU that advocate broader

political change.

The split of FoSU and USU from ABFSU illustrates the divisions within the student population itself. Despite sharing a desire for peace and democratic development, the three student groups diverged in emphasis (university affairs vs. political activities), approach (negotiation vs. confrontation) and organizational structure (bottom-up and independent vs. top-down and centralized). While political opportunity structures will be used to understand the divergence in approach and emphasis, actor constitution will be used to study that of organization.

Emphasis and approach

To start with, ABFSU focuses on political activities and activism. It maintains a certain distance from the government given its substantial distrust of the government as a result of the military's poor record (e.g., its refusal to transfer power following the 1990 election). Members restrain from "negotiation and compromise" to remain consistent with the student activist tradition of anti-government tactics. It has not conducted any formal negotiation with the government so far.¹⁸⁴

Meanwhile, USU separates student rights and university affairs from political activities, while emphasizing the former. This position can be seen in a comment made by Nyein Chan May, a leading member of USU and Vice Chairman of YUFLSU: "politicization alienates many ordinary students who still consider politics as a dangerous adults' business."¹⁸⁵ Min Thu Kyaw, another leading member of USU and Secretary-General of YIESU, also stressed the necessity of "compromise and negotiation."¹⁸⁶

FoSU positions itself in between the other two student groups, considering student rights as a precondition to political engagement, which is currently, according to D Nyein Linn, President of FoSU, "beyond students' capacity."¹⁸⁷ However, FoSU still adopts a dual approach involving both participation in both government meetings and street protests to "engage those who are ready [in politics]."¹⁸⁸

Various examples illustrate the divisions among the groups. On August 8, 2013, 88 Generation invited government officials to the twenty-fifth anniversary memorial of the 1988 Uprising as a form of outreach. While FoSU and USU joined the memorial, ABFSU refused to attend due to its reluctance to stand on the same stage with former generals. According to Phone Pye Khwel, the Foreign Affairs Officer of ABFSU,

"ABFSU would not participate before the government apologizes and recognizes the movement."¹⁸⁹ Similarly, when 88 Generation demonstrated against Section 18 of the *Law on Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession* on January 5, 2014, ABFSU did not participate because 88 Generation followed the law by seeking police permission to protest. Phone Pye Khwel explained that ABFSU "[has] to be consistent... and should challenge the unjust law by civil disobedience."¹⁹⁰ However, a third example shows the different relationship between the USU and political engagement. Only student groups affiliated with USU were invited by the Ministry of Education to "send student representatives" to government meetings on higher education reforms in December 2013 and January 2014.¹⁹¹ Although students' unions have not been officially recognized by the government since 1962, this demonstrates the government's commitment to encouraging students to work within the system by opening up political input structures.

Such divergence reflects the increasingly pluralistic nature of Burmese society, now featuring a broader political spectrum and more diversified interests. The elimination of an opposition vacuum means that students not only lose the advantage as the only opposition group in civil society, but also holds diversified views among themselves. Without a single student group uniting the student population outside the system, political mobilization capacity and hence threat to the government diminished.

Organizational structure

As the opposition vacuum faded away, a vibrant civil society gradually emerged in Myanmar. The state became less repressive in terms of political output structures, which meant that students were less likely to take on political and anti-government issues but pluralistic claims. No longer having a single unifying goal, students were less incentivized to unite within one leadership structure, since they were able to form and join groups that represented their more specific viewpoints. The process of actor constitution had turned from a political-activist identity to an education-and-social-service identity.

The three student groups are now at a primitive stage of internal organization, as reflected in their small membership base. This undermines the process of actor constitution, cognitive liberation, and hence, student mobilization. Although the USU is better organized as a site of mobilization than either the

ABFSU, it focuses on education over political issues, which limits the type of identity it cultivates among student actors. ABFSU aims to develop a single student organization and group all students' unions at district level under its flag for united collective actions. As of January 2014, ABFSU covers 26 out of 38 districts in the seven regions, including Nay Pyi Daw (the capital), Southern Yangon (Yangon region), Maubin (Ayeyarwady region), Magway (Magway region) and Monywa (Sagaing region).¹⁹² Despite its wide geographical coverage, ABFSU's ability to mobilize and influence current students is limited. As mentioned, none of ABFSU's CWC members are current daytime students. Without direct linkages with students at universities, it is difficult for ABFSU to "truly understand students' needs and concerns" and earn their trust.¹⁹³ This is a major obstacle for ABFSU to recruit members and hence construct a student-activist identity among them.

Although a considerable number of District Committee members are current students, they have a limited influence on other students, since "some [students] are even reluctant to sit with and talk to [ABFSU members]" due to fears of political involvement.¹⁹⁴ Perhaps most importantly, each District Committee only consists of ten to thirty members.¹⁹⁵ Even while activists within ABFSU had declared themselves "student leaders," ordinary students were dissatisfied with ABFSU's poor representation of the actual student population, which greatly impedes the organization's ability to cultivate a student political identity. These are all detrimental for ABFSU's ability to sustain the process of actor constitution, as the students they are purporting to represent are in fact dispersed among multiple groups.

On the other hand, according to D Nyein Lin, FoSU envisions a "federal system" of students' unions under a "students' parliament."¹⁹⁶ It adopts a three-step approach to "sow the seeds of democracy in student life:" enlightenment, capacity-building, and action.¹⁹⁷ But it has no outstanding progress so far. For almost two years, students have yet to be inspired to set up unions under FoSU. This suggests that FoSU's bottom-up approach is too idealistic in Myanmar's politically apathetic student community. As a result, its ability to cultivate a student-activist identity through contentious practices is very limited.

The organizational principle of USU allows students' unions within its network to have different

policies while seeking cooperation in activities and statements. It maintains diversification and denies the necessity to organize under one flag.¹⁹⁸ Since it comprises current students who have a physical presence on university campuses, these unions have relatively more members and therefore USU has a greater potential for student mobilization and actor constitution than the other two groups. As of January 2014, eight unions in Yangon have joined the USU network.¹⁹⁹ Among them, YIESU has 200 members out of 5,500 students, DUSU has 200 members out of 30,000 students, and YUFLSU, which was newly established on 1 June 2013, has 50 active volunteers out of 2,000 students.²⁰⁰ Additionally, two unions under USU, the Myanmar Maritime University Students' Union (MMUSU) and YIESU, held the first two elections of students' unions within a university campus since 1962 in January and February 2014. These elections were promoted online and on campus through "voter education" and election campaigns.²⁰¹ These efforts gave the unions a sense of legitimacy that ABFSU lacked and helped garner student support. However, that being said, USU is still at an early stage of organization with limited members (relative to the total student population) and mobilization capacity. For instance, YUFLSU had to call off a campaign against China's dam construction project in Northern Myanmar scheduled for March 2014 because it still needed to draft a constitution and recruit members.²⁰²

The relatively higher influence and membership of USU over the other student groups represents a clear shift in focus from anti-government political campaigns to education reform, university affairs, and community service. In fact, USU is constructing a student identity based on non-political issues, which represents an alternative actor constitution, with the potential to mobilize students to engage in "education activism."

From an organizational perspective, student groups under USU tend to avoid being too political in order to keep their organizations alive and attract more students to participate. They focus on issues that directly affect students' lives. Campus petitions about university affairs have been common in recent years, especially those rejecting increases in motorbike parking fees and school bus fares.²⁰³ Even some ABFSU members attempted to follow when they began to operate the Wings Capacity Building School in November 2013. Currently, it offers a range of non-

political activities, from free Wi-Fi to English and Japanese classes, in order to attract students to gather at the school for possible collective actions in the future.²⁰⁴

With the rise of USU, social and volunteering activities have largely replaced anti-government political campaigns. For instance, YIESU organized a fundraising campaign for poor families on Full Moon Day in September 2013 and a campaign for the Global Day of Humanity in March 2014.²⁰⁵ Furthermore, the existing political activities, such as holding memorials, aim at raising awareness, rather than launching substantial actions. For example, YIESU cooperated with DUSU to initiate the first memorial events on the military's bombing of RUSU Building on July 7 and Martyrs' Day on July 19, 2013, in Yangon.²⁰⁶ On January 4, 2014—Independence Day—YUFLSU, together with activists from the Yangon School of Political Science, distributed the Independence Statement in Maha Bandoola Park, where the Independence Monument is located.^x Similarly, DUSU also held a memorial drama on General Aung San's birthday on February 13, 2014. Another one of USU's semi-political activities is YIESU's Discussion Club. In late December 2013, YIESU established the first aboveground, on-campus Discussion Club in Myanmar in fifty years with the passive consent of university authorities. With discussion topics such as "Is what adults say always correct?" student leaders aim at stimulating students' critical thinking with limited political elements on a weekly basis.^{xi} The Discussion Club regularly attracts hundreds of students. In recent years, students have become more pragmatic. Despite the decline of opposition vacuum and subsequent growth of political space (indeed, perhaps because of it), most students are politically inactive and have been more inclined to concentrate on career goals and future prospects.²⁰⁷ Students tend to have a substantial interest in student rights, university affairs, and education issues that directly impact their lives. The majority of student groups argue that students' unions should work solely on student affairs rather than political activities, which should be the business of political parties and CSOs. This distinction is new, and has resulted from the growth of civil society and lack

of an opposition vacuum. As many student leaders have proclaimed, "SU [students' union] is for the students."²⁰⁸ In addition, students share different views on the notion of "responsibility" compared with the previous generations. Students have an impression that revolution cannot make a difference or rebuild the country, for, as civil society activist Sit Maw points out, "Nothing has been changed after 1988 even with huge sacrifice."²⁰⁹ Instead, students have developed a more influential role in social issues, as evidenced by the rapid growth of youth NGOs after Cyclone Nargis in 2008. Youth NGOs support a wide range of causes, including capacity-building movements, humanitarian aid, rural empowerment, and think tanks.²¹⁰ For example, the Myanmar Youth Union, founded in December 2011, collaborated with many CSOs, including 88 Generation, Burma Centre for Ethnic Studies and Triangle Women Support Group, on capacity-building programs.²¹¹ Such collaborations embody students' current interpretation of "young peoples' responsibility."

Analysis: From Burma's political vanguard to one of many groups in an emerging civil society

Phases of political development directly influence the intensity and nature of student activism, including the form of government and availability of non-student political actors. State control (2000s to 2011) and gradual reforms (2011 to today) continue to shape political opportunities that constrain students' incentives and capacity to act as agents of political change.

The reform process puts an end to the opposition vacuum and gradually produces a controlled political space for non-student opposition to develop. Students are no longer irreplaceable. The general public look for prominent political parties and CSOs, especially those established by former student leaders who served in prisons for decades, as recognition of their sacrifice that earned them legitimacy and public popularity. Today, Min Ko Naing remains a symbol of democracy and student activism despite disappearing from public eyes for twenty years.²¹² Current students can hardly be comparable to them. Since students no longer represent people's pluralistic demands, the public has no incentive to submit themselves to the leadership of current students.

Divergence among student groups emerged as a product of the widening political spectrum. The ability of CSOs to openly and freely organize means that they

x The author personally joined the students in distributing leaflets to local people on January 4, 2014.

xi The author personally attended the Discussion Club as a guest speaker on January 9, 2014. I was asked "not to talk too politically in order to avoid frightening the students." Myanmar students were generally interested in Hong Kong's campus (especially hostel) life and how foreigners view Myanmar.

can diversify and represent multiple interests, unlike in the past, when underground groups had only one major aim: overthrowing the government. In the early formulations of political opportunity structures, both Eisinger and Tilly suggested how significant threats could inspire opposition groups to cooperate and mobilize.²¹³ In her research on student movements in the United States from 1930 to 1990, Nella Van Dyke explained the ability of threats and grievances to foster cooperation and “inspire within-movement coalition work” among student groups.²¹⁴ After the end of military rule, it is less likely for students to feel the need to unite as a single entity against repression.

Nevertheless, the growth of civil society provided politically aware students with more choices. For instance, some former student activists in 2007 joined NLD’s newly established youth wing, which aims to recruit 60,000 to 100,000 young people under the age of thirty-five to prepare them for future parliamentary elections.²¹⁵ Student activism is no longer the only option.

In short, students lost their monopoly over the political opposition in Myanmar. Political parties and CSOs replace students’ role as the political vanguard to press for democratic transition. Students are in a position to struggle for their roles and identities in the transition period. As former student leader Aung Kyaw Tun commented, “The current generation no longer enjoy the monopoly of challenging the government.”²¹⁶

CONCLUSION: A HISTORICAL PRODUCT IN AN OPPOSITION VACUUM

Student activists as unique contentious actors

Using the dynamics of contention framework, this study illustrates how, through state repression, authoritarian regimes can inadvertently (and perhaps counterintuitively) expand political opportunities for activist student groups to emerge. When state repression renders most civil society groups unable to effectively challenge the regime, an opposition vacuum can emerge in which students become society’s only viable (and hence most influential) political opposition. In the case of Burma, while Burmese students failed to overthrow the military dictatorship and generate a democratic transition, the existence of an opposition vacuum reinforced students’ unchallengeable leadership as the only political opposition against the military dictatorship between 1962 and 1988.

The concept of “opposition vacuum” might also

help us better understand the aforementioned cases of Indonesia, South Korea, and Thailand. Being the only sustained opposition force in New Order regime, Indonesian students were the first to protest against Soeharto.²¹⁷ From 1970s protests regarding elections’ legitimacy (1971 Golput Movement), to the decisive 1998 Reformasi Movement, students took the leading position due to an absence of opposition forces who were either suppressed or absorbed by the regime. Similarly, in South Korea, where even moderate political dissenters were highly suppressed at that time, students led the call for democracy. For instance, Progressive Party leader Jo Bong Am was executed in 1959 for advocating peaceful reunification with North Korea.²¹⁸ In Thailand, the 1971 coup and abrogation of the 1968 Constitution dissolved the parliament and disbanded political parties.²¹⁹ Again, students became the only potential opposition left with the capacity to mobilize against the military. This framework therefore illustrates a potential direction for future studies on the emergence of student activism in non-democratic societies where an opposition vacuum exists.

Moreover, it intimates that students may possess a unique organizational advantage over other potential political actors in civil society under repressive regimes, likely because they have access to university campuses as organizational bases. These analyses also suggest that, even under circumstances where political input and output structures seem highly constraining, students may nonetheless have crucial political opportunities that are absent for other groups, which highlights the importance of students in oppositional movements and necessitates the further examination of student activism in contemporary and future oppositional movements under authoritarian regimes. The concept of “opposition vacuum” is therefore useful in reassessing traditional assumptions underlying the dynamics of contention approach and theory of political opportunity structure, which argues that “groups will not mobilize unless they believe that they have some access to the political system.”²²⁰

Student activism in Burma: past, present, and future

In Burma, from 1962 to 1988, underground structures were crucial in cultivating a student-activist identity through discussion groups and political mobilizations. Such social appropriation of contentious claims fostered students to learn about the injustice that resulted from the military dictatorship. This fa-

cilitated the process of actor constitution and cognitive liberation that sustained the legacy of the Fighting Peacock, political awareness, and mobilization capacity, despite the absence of civil society. After brutal repression in August 1988, the military junta purposefully eliminated the underground structures, creating a “lost generation,” which hindered the construction of a student-activist identity through underground political activities. It effectively prevented students from passing on the historical legacy of student activism to later students, and rendered the process of actor constitution and cognitive liberation unlikely. State-led democratic transition from 2011 onwards and the growth of civil society ended the opposition vacuum and students’ monopoly on challenging the government. Divergence among students also arose in the developing, pluralistic society, which allows multiple student groups to emerge that collectively represent a wider political spectrum and boarder viewpoints. A group of students are reconstructing students’ unions under the flag of the Fighting Peacock, yet there are differences in how the various groups want to function: some prefer negotiation, while others challenge the government. With the end of opposition vacuum and the beginning of gradual reforms, students are exposed to less political opportunities and thus less incentivized to urge for progressive political changes. While democracy, political freedom, and human rights were the most important issues in the past, the main task of student groups has recently shifted away from politics toward education reform as a pragmatic response to the change in POS.²²¹ It also formed their support base as the majority of current students clearly prefer students’ unions to focus on student and university affairs and leave “high politics” to politicians. This, in turn, facilitates an alternative form of actor constitution: the cultivation of “education activism” among students with a clear emphasis on non-political claims such as education reforms.

Objectively, political parties and CSOs have taken over students’ leadership in the past. Despite the aging of opposition leaders, Myanmar still has plenty of former student leaders from 1988, 1996 and 1998 to lead the democratic transition even should all NLD leaders step down. While we cannot rule out the possibility of student movements in the process of democratization, current students are unlikely to take the lead in the absence of favourable POS—i.e., the contraction of the opposition vacuum. Students’ historic role as

the political vanguard of the country has faded away. The re-emergence of student groups reflects students’ struggle for a new identity, but at best, students will be just one of many potential participants in Myanmar’s democratization. As student leader Min Thu Kyaw said, “Students’ unions cannot take the leading role in Myanmar’s democratic transition.”²²²

List of Interviewees

- Lay Myint (author of various books about student activism in Burma; former student leader in 1950s, tutor in science at Rangoon University in 1962 and lecturer in English at Rangoon Institute of Technology in 1988)
- Htain Wynn Aung (former student leader in 1974)
- Zaw Nyein Latt (former student leader in 1974)
- Ko Ko Gyi (Secretary-General of 88 Generation Students’ Group; former student leader in 1988)
- Pyone Cho (Secretary of Human Right Sector of 88 Generation Students’ Group; former Vice President of Rangoon University Students’ Union in 1988)
- Phyo Min Thein (Member of the Parliament; former Secretary-General of All Burma Federation of Student Unions in 1989)
- Chit Min Lay (Deputy Person-in-charge of Education of 88 Generation Students’ Group; former student leader in 1996 and student activists in 1988)
- Khin Cho Myint (Public Relations Officer of Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma); former student leader in 1996 and activist in 1988)
- Nobel Aye (former student leader in 1998 and activist in 1996)
- Aung Kyaw Phyo (Director of Myanmar Institute of Democracy; former student leader in 1998 and activists in 1996)
- Aung Kyaw Tun (former student leader in 1998)
- Hlaing Win Swe (former student activist in 1998)
- Kyaw Min Than (former student activist in 1998)
- San Zaw Htway (former student leader in 1998)
- Thar Linn Tin (former student leader in 1996)
- Zin Mar Aung (Founder of Yangon School of Political Science; former student leader in 1998 and activist 1996)
- Han Nee Oo (Financial Secretary of All Burma Federation of Student Unions; one of the four student leaders who reestablished ABFSU in 2007)
- Lin Htet Naing (Vice Chairman of All Burma Federation of Student Unions; one of the four student leaders who reestablished ABFSU in 2007)
- Phone Pye Khwel (Foreign Affairs Officer of All Burma Federation of Student Unions; former student activist in 2008)
- Phyo Phyo Aung (Secretary-General of All Burma Federation of Student Unions; former student leader in 2007)
- D Nyein Linn (President of Federation of Student Unions Organizing Committee; former Vice Chairman of All Burma Federation of Student Unions; former student leader in 2007)
- Ye Min Oo (Secretary-General of Federation of Student Unions Organizing Committee; former Secretary-General of All Burma Federation of Student Unions; former student leader in 2007)
- Min Maung (Vice President of Federation of Student Unions Organizing Committee; graduate student at University of West Yangon)
- Zin Lin Aung (Vice President of Federation of Student Unions Organizing Committee; second year student in economics at Yangon Institute of Economics)
- Min Thu Kyaw (Secretary-General of Yangon Institute of Economics Students’ Union; third year student in economics at Yangon Institute of Economics)
- Zay Yar Lwin (former Secretary-General of Yangon Institute of Economics Students’ Union, member of All Burma Federation of Student Unions and Federation of Student Unions; third year student in development studies at Yangon Institute of Economics)
- Aung Kyaw Min (Activity Board Director of Yangon University of Foreign Languages Students’ Union; second year student in Japanese at

- Yangon University of Foreign Languages)
- Nyein Chan May (Vice President of Yangon University of Foreign Languages Students' Union; third year student in German at Yangon University of Foreign Languages)
- Hta Nuu (first year student in psychology at Dagon University)
- Kyaw Kyaw Lin (first year student in economics at Dagon University)
- Eaint Ray Kyaw (third year student in Myanmar at Pakokku University)
- Min Min Taw (Member of All Burma Federation of Student Unions; second year student in physics at Technological University (Maubin))
- Ei Pone (Member of All Burma Federation of Student Unions; first year student in laws at University of East Yangon)
- Ei Thiri Maung (third year student in mathematics at University of East Yangon)
- Yu Par Myo Shwe (third year student in mathematics at University of East Yangon)
- Han Htoo Khant Paing (Member of Yangon Institute of Economics Students' Union; second year student in business administration at Yangon Institute of Economics)
- Moe Myint Zu Thiri (second year student in accounting at Yangon Institute of Economics)
- Naing Htet Lin (third year student in economics at Yangon Institute of Economics)
- Phyo Tin Oo (master student in public policy at Yangon Institute of Economics)
- Po Po (Member of All Burma Federation of Student Unions; second year student in history at Yangon Institute of Economics)
- Pyae Phyo Nyein (second year student in business administration at Yangon Institute of Economics)
- Suu Suu Linn (second year student in development studies at Yangon Institute of Economics)
- Yu Yu Mon (Member of Yangon Institute of Economics Students' Union; second year)
- Htet Thiri Shwe (graduate student at National Management College in 2010)
- Aye Thein (graduate student at Sittwe University in 2006)
- Hpone Myint Thu (graduate student at University of Medicine 2 (Yangon) in 2009 and University of Medicine 1 (Yangon) in 2010)
- Hein Min Tun (graduate student at University of Veterinary Science in 2007)
- Su Mon Thazin Aung (graduate student at University of Yangon in 2004)
- Zar Nei Maung (Member of All Burma Federation of Student Unions; graduate student at Computer University (Monywa) in 2012)
- Thein Than (Member of All Burma Federation of Student Unions; graduate student at Magway University in 2012)
- Wai Yan Phyo (graduate student at Mandalay Technological University in 2012)
- Phyo Dana Chit Linn Thike (Member of All Burma Federation of Student Unions; graduate student at Taungoo University in 2012)
- Aye Myad Mon (Member of All Burma Federation of Student Unions; graduate student at Technological University (Magway) in 2013)
- Seint Seint Thu (graduate student at University of East Yangon in 2013)
- Le Le Khaing (Member of All Burma Federation of Student Unions; graduate student in economics at Yangon Institute of Economics in 2013)
- Eaint Thiri Thu (civil society activist; former Vice President of Myanmar Youth Union in 2012; graduate distance student at Dagon University in 2013)
- Sit Maw (civil society activist; former Secretary-General of American Center Student Council in 2009; former student at West Yangon Technological University in 2009)
- Thu Ri Ya (civil society activist; graduate student in law at Dagon University in 2013)
- Thu Tha Sen (Managing Director of The Young Generation's Note)
- Htoo Aung Lwin (District Officer of National League for Democracy; former student activist in 2007)
- Kyaw Swar Oo (Central Member of National League for Democracy Youth Commission)
- Soe Win Oo (Vice Chairman of National League for Democracy Yangon Region Central Executive Committee)
2. Lay Myint, interview by author, Yangon, Myanmar, January 10, 2014.
 3. Htain Wynn Aung, interview by author, Yangon, Myanmar, January 9, 2014.
 4. Khin Cho Myint, interview by author, Maesot, Thailand, January 2, 2014.
 5. Meredith Weiss, Edward Aspinall and Mark Thompson, "Introduction: Understanding Student Activism in Asia," in Meredith Weiss and Edward Aspinall, eds., *Student Activism in Asia: Between Protest and Powerlessness*, (Minnesota: The University of Minnesota Press, 2012), p. 1.
 6. See Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).
 7. Peter Eisinger, "The Conditions of Protest Behavior in American Cities," *American Political Science Review* 67:1 (1973): 11, 25; see also David Meyer and Douglas Imig, "Political Opportunity and the Rise and Decline of Interest Group Sectors," *The Social Science Journal* 30:3 (1993): 256.
 8. Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1978), pp. 98–100; see also David Meyer and Suzanne Staggenborg, "Movements, Countermovements, and the Structure of Political Opportunity," *American Journal of Sociology* 101: 6 (1996): 1633.
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