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Post-colonial Identity and Power Politics. The Case of Myanmar's Civil War

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Abstract: Burma was integrated into the Japanese empire after more than a century of British colonial rule. Since obtaining independence in 1948, Burma has experienced a permanent state of internal strife, insurgencies, civil war, and military dictatorships. Myanmar started transitioning to liberal democracy in 2008, and after the 2015 general elections, it seemed that the process would create a modern functional state. The 2021 military coup reignited the flames of a brutal civil war, including the ongoing Rohingya genocide. The paper aims to explain the leading causes of failure to produce a stable democratic nation-state and end the cycle of violence. How can we expect the ongoing civil war to end, and what will be its consequences? Are there other outside relevant political actors that can influence the outcome? The methodology is linked with the realist constructivist and path dependence theories. The historical narrative, speech analysis of key political figures, and quantitative measurements of ethnicity and religion suggest that the root cause of the problem is that Myanmar was created as an artificial colonial state without taking into account any local or regional specificity.

Keywords: United Kingdom; Japan; China; postcolonialism; nationalism

1. Introduction

The region of what is now Myanmar was traditionally integrated within the tributary system of various Chinese dynasties. Rather than a protectorate, the states in Mainland Southeast Asia paid a symbolic tribute. In exchange, the Chinese emperors offered their protection to keep the peace and served as a model of governance and civilization. The region was characterized by a multitude of cultures, ethnicities, and religions. After three successive military victories against the Konbaung dynasty, a multi-ethnic empire, the British Empire established the colony of Burma. The borders were based on conquest and not on the identities of the various local communities. Burma represented an interesting case of co-colonization, as it was ruled both by the British but also by an Indian administration. The regime was so repressive that most Burma welcomed the Japanese invaders as liberators. Aung San, who is considered the father of the modern Myanmar state, was the minister of war for the Japanese Burma and fought against the British, but eventually switched sides.

London agreed to release its former colony, and Burma proclaimed its independence. This seemed extraordinary for that period, as most other European colonies in the Indochina region had to gain their independence through bloody revolutions, civil wars, and interstate conflicts. The only exception was Thailand, which was never colonized by European powers. France and the United Kingdom wanted a

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buffer state. In comparison with Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Malaya, which experienced brutal conflicts well into the 60s and 70s, Burma had a peaceful transition to independence. This should have offered Burma the chance to build a thriving democratic state. Still, this never happened because the local communities in Burma never agreed on how to share power.

Since its independence in 1948, Burma has known a perpetual state of civil war, the longest ongoing civil war in our contemporary world. In addition to various ethnic groups striving for power, the conflict was exacerbated by the ideological tensions of the Cold War. The Soviet Union, Cuba, and China sponsored communist guerillas that had the ultimate goal of turning Burma into a communist state. In response, the United States supported the right-wing nationalists from the Karen National Union. Also, the Kuomintang forces that did not make it to Taiwan retreated from China to Burma. They continued their resistance and launched raids into China until 1961, when Chiang Kai-shek agreed to retreat its forces under pressure from the United States. In this chaotic environment, the military of the Bamar ethnic majority gained the upper hand by promising to establish order and peace. The coup in 1962 replaced the fractured parliamentary system with a de-facto military junta. Still, all the other ethnic groups refused to accept the new government and continued fighting against it and between themselves. Rebellions continued, and the government only controlled a few core provinces. In 1989, the official name of the country was changed from Burma to Myanmar, but the military dictatorships continued.

After a popular referendum in 2008, Myanmar proclaimed a new constitution that promised free elections. However, the constitution still guaranteed 25% of the parliamentary seats to the military and only pledged to facilitate the transition towards a civilian parliamentary republic where the rights of minorities would be respected. The first general elections were held in 2010, and the military government resigned in 2011. The former pro-democracy dissidents were released, the most famous of whom was Aung San Suu Kyi. She was Aung San's daughter, a national hero, and the father of modern Myanmar, assassinated in 1947. Aung San Suu Kyi was seen as a possible threat by the military junta, so she never tried to get elected president. Because her party, the National League for Democracy, won the 2015 general elections, she was named the State Counsellor of Myanmar in 2016, the equivalent of prime minister.

The transition to democracy never had time to establish stable institutions. The government could not keep the peace, and the military junta was not happy with the turn of events. They launched a military coup on the 1st of February 2021, placing General Myint Swe as president. Pro-democracy protestors gathered in the capital, Nay Pyi Taw, but the military brutally crushed their movement. As a consequence, the protestors retreated to the countryside, where they joined various paramilitary organizations representative of various ethnic groups. These groups restarted the civil war against the military junta. A peace resolution was further complicated by China's growing involvement in the conflict and the support the United States offered to the pro-democracy camp. Myanmar is once more facing another proxy war within a civil war.

2. Literature Review

The specialized literature on the Myanmar civil war is relatively scarce. Placed outside the western area of interest and without great power competition, Myanmar was not at the center of international relations research. The trend gradually started to change after many human rights activists drew the attention of the international community over the Rohingya genocide. The violent repression of democratic protests and China's military build-up at Myanmar's border also help to popularize the story of this country. The

following synthesis does not exhaust the specialized literature on this matter. We aim to clarify key points and link previous research with our current paper.

During the 2010s, scholars initially tried to explain how, after more than fifty years of civil war, Myanmar was finally on its road to democratization. The suggested causes are multiple. First, the military dictatorship's leaders were more progressive and no longer opposed Aung San Suu Kyi's influence. Second, the country's economic problems ravaged it and created pressure for reform. Its rural economy was on the verge of collapsing. Third, the Western powers lobbied for democratic reforms and promised future economic aid. Still, the author (Hlaing, 2012) warned that despite remarkable changes, Myanmar is far from a democratic state. The military junta thinks that the reforms are too fast and create instability, while the democratic camp claims that the opposite is happening. The transition will be completed only if all the components of its society will work together.

Others (Stokke & Aung, 2019) noticed the cracks in Myanmar's political system well before the 2021 coup. The argument was that the transition from authoritarianism, in this case, created a hybrid regime rather than a democratic one. The rules and norms that guided the political transformation were imposed, not negotiated, and debated democratically. The result is some limited democratic representation counterbalanced by the over-centralization of state power, no real civilian control of the army, and no real free elections despite formal institutions that guarantee them. Myanmar might become a democracy in the future, but for the time being, no such development is in sight. The more probable outcome is for the country to remain a hybrid regime between authoritarianism and democracy. The concept of Myanmar as a hybrid regime was also defined as a tutelary regime (Bünthe, 2022). From the perspective of the author, the military junta constantly used political institutions to disrupt the transition to democracy well before the 2021 coup. The military opposed certain legislation changes that would have guaranteed the bare minimum of civil liberties. Another interesting paper written before the coup talked about a perpetual state of conflict that is neither peace nor war (Kramer, 2020). The political reforms will only restore the pre-1990s state of confrontation, only temporarily stopped by ceasefires.

After the 2021 coup and the start of the civil war, researchers interviewed the various rebel leaders. If the protesters' initial demands were the foundation of a federal national state, their actual political vision was more nuanced (Vrieze, 2023). Some made concessions to the military junta, others promised to fight to the end, while most did not agree to cooperate with other regional factions. A significant factor that contributed to the resistance was the younger pro-democracy generations (Loong, 2023). Faced with the brutality of the military junta, most became disillusioned with liberal values and embraced the principles of radical ethnonationalism. Using a postcolonial approach, Ardeth Maung Thawngmung argues that ethnic identities in Burma prior to the colonial era were irrelevant. The British categorized and organized different peoples into de-facto local political entities. The colonial authorities failed to grant them autonomy but repressed any dissent. These minorities did not have any mechanism to settle their differences, neither through institutional nor through violent means. The seeds of Myanmar's civil war were planted even before its independence (Thawngmung, 2022).

If there is one thing that most rebel factions agree upon, it is that the Rohingya people do not belong to Myanmar. The interest in the Rohingya genocide has increased in recent years (Debnath, Chatterjee & Afzal, 2022). The authors reiterate that even though Myanmar formally protects all of its 135 minorities, the society has always been split up between the Bamar Buddhist majority and the rest. In addition to the ethnic and religious criteria, the genocide was also motivated by economic and strategic reasons. China's Belt and Road Initiative and India's East Policy pass through the Rakhine province, one of Myanmar's poorest regions. Despite the relative lack of natural resources, the strategic location near the

Bay of Bengal makes it so important. Beijing has blocked the UN intervention. New Delhi aims to stop China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean.

Other scholars examined the genocide from the human rights perspective (Martuscelli, Ahmed, & Sammonds, 2024). The Rohingya have been discriminated against, at least since the 1970s. They interviewed hundreds of Rohingya refugees from India, Malaysia, and Bangladesh. Faced with systemic discrimination, the Rohingya refused to pay taxes, avoided forced labor, and practiced religious rituals such as marriages in secret. To avoid systemic rape, the girls were hidden in their homes. The husbands also tried to keep their young wives constantly pregnant. Once the widespread violence started in 2017, they organized in small groups and supported each other in order to flee the country.

3. Theory and Methods

The realist constructivist has a few core, non-demonstrable assumptions about the political world (Barkin, 2010). Power does not always decide who triumphs in a conflict, but disputes are always mediated by power relations. The constructivist element refers to the intersubjectivity of this interaction. The perceptions of the political actors are neither scientifically objective nor purely subjective. Their identities and values are shaped by co-constitution. The feeling of alterity can only be possible when different communities interrelate with each other. Rather than facilitating uniformity, repeated interactions only accentuate the differences.

Path dependence is an entirely separate theory borrowed in political science from economy, history, and sociology (Munck, 2022). In short, it assumes that history matters. Political actors have agency and can theoretically choose a path from an almost unlimited number of options. When they decide to act in a certain way, they are unable to fully anticipate the consequences of their choice. Because the consequences of this path are far-reaching, it limits the viable options a political actor can have. In some cases, we can even identify a locked path dependence where the political actor is forced to behave and follow a very narrow road with no other conceivable alternative.

The above principles will be used to examine the empirical world in our case study. The speech acts of state and non-state actors are equally analyzed. Economic, educational, religious, and demographic indicators sketch the historical evolution of the various political groups developed within Myanmar. Economic growth, human development, and economic inequality not only tell us about how society evolved but also hint at how different political actors regrouped and set up their power bases in different provinces. The perception of alterity was reinforced by religious and ethnic differences. The difference between how political institutions should work on paper and how they work in reality is also a good measurement of power relations. No less significant is the implication of foreign powers. Power is also measured by analyzing the current situation on the frontlines. We aim to understand how many soldiers each side has and how solid the logistics behind the military effort are.

4. Historical Narrative and Economic Development

Myanmar's most important export partners are China 35%, Thailand 13%, Germany 6%, Japan 5%, the United States 4%, and India 3.81%. Most of its exports are natural gas, precious stones, beans, rice, seeds, and low-value clothes. Myanmar imports refined petroleum, special-purpose ships, knitted fabrics, medicine, and processed food products (OEC World, 2024). Due to the constant trade imbalance and the start of the civil war, the inflation rate reached 28.58% in 2023 (Trading Economics, 2024). The

most prominent foreign investors in Myanmar are Singapore, China, and Thailand, but the investments decreased by 60% due to the war (Zan, 2023). China is by far the most influential foreign economic force in Myanmar, and it has massive projects related to the BRI. The Belt and Road Initiative received a significant boost due to the support received from the military junta after the 2021 coup (Thuzar, 2023).

The economic structure is mostly composed of services and manufacturing. Around 25% of Myanmar's population is occupied with agriculture. The country lacks the necessary infrastructure for international trade, and its industrialization rate is lagging behind its neighbors (Thein & Inaba, 2023). It is also the world's largest producer of methamphetamine. The illegal drug trade only boosts the criminality rate in the country and motivates various groups of interests to keep Myanmar as unstable as possible. Journalists on the field documented that a dose of crystal meth is sold for only 0.25\$ in neighboring countries because of the flow of drugs coming from Myanmar (McCready, 2023). Organized crime in Myanmar ranks as one of the worst in the world. The criminality rate in 2023 was 8.15 out of 10, and criminal actors received a 9 out of 10 rating (Taylor, 2024). Triad members from China have become more influential.

Myanmar is a developing nation struggling to find a national plan to raise its population from poverty. It is the most undeveloped state in Southeast Asia, and in 2021, its HDI was only 0.585, ranked 149 in the world (Country Economy, 2021). Myanmar's GDP has not known the staggering growth of the Asian Tigers. On the contrary, it was marked by periods of stagnation, a sharp rise caused by a brief period of peace, and a plummeting collapse due to constant insurrections and a lack of investments. If in 1960 its GDP was 0.55\$ billion, by 1980, it had only barely reached 1.04\$ billion and 2\$ billion in 1990. Globalization supported the demand for raw materials and resources. Myanmar achieved its economic peak in 2019, with 79\$ billion, only to fall again to 62\$ billion due to the COVID crisis (Macrotrends, 2024). The GDP per capita followed an even worse trend. Between 1960 and 1990, the annual GDP per capita stagnated between 25\$ and 50\$. It has climbed to 1480\$ in 2019 and declined the next year to 1149\$ (Macrotrends, 2024). These growth rates show us how modest Myanmar's economy is, as even moderate investments can make a difference. There is a great deal of unexploited potential for growth. However, it also reflects how vulnerable the national economy is to international market disruptions. Despite some notable growth in the last decade, Myanmar's GDP per capita is extremely low in the first place, well below the OECD average of 43.000\$ or even the World average of 12.000\$ (The World Bank, 2024).

Because the country is so underdeveloped, Myanmar's economic inequality rate among its population is very high and reflects the lack of a middle class. In 2022, the bottom 50% of the population had only 2.9% of the wealth, the top 1% owned 34.4%, and the top 10% owned 67.5% of the total national wealth (World Inequality Database, 2024). The numbers also point to a society ruled by military dictators and their immediate families (the top 1%) supported by a military class (the top 10%). Even more worrying is the growing inequality between the provinces of Myanmar. A recent study (Fumagalli & Kemmerling, 2024) has pointed out that international assistance for development was mismanaged by the central government to the benefit of certain regions.

Not surprisingly, the educational system does not meet the standards of the 21st century. If 97% of the youth were enrolled in primary school in 2018, 64% continued with secondary school, and only 18% enrolled in a tertiary form of education (Statista, 2023). Starting with 2022, millions of children are now unable to attend any class due to the ongoing civil war. Universities are used as military bases by the various factions. Despite the economic problems, Myanmar's population exploded from 21 million people in 1960 to 54 million in 2024 and continues to rise with a median age of 29 (Worldometer, 2024).

Its young citizens face immense everyday hardships and no real opportunities for development. These cumulated factors increased social frustration and encouraged tribalism, where local communities united against everyone else. A youthful population structure usually means citizens are more inclined to revolution and use violence for political aims.

In addition to the widespread rate of poverty, insecurity, no real education, no fair system of justice, modest future prospects, and lack of political representation, political tensions are increased by ethnic, cultural, and religious differences. Myanmar has eight major ethnic groups. The biggest by far is represented by the Bamar majority 68%, followed by Shan 9%, Karen 7%, Chinese 2.5%, Mon 2%, Rakhine 1.7%, Kachin 1.50%, Indians 1.25%. Myanmar has a total of 135 ethnic groups. These groups are mixed and spread out unequally in different parts of the country (Minority Rights Group, 2023). More than 100 languages are spoken, the most important ones being Burmese, Shan, Karen, Arakanese, Jingpho, Tamil, and Mon. As for the religious structure, as of 2022, 88% are Buddhists, 6% are Christians, and 4% are Sunni Muslims (U.S. Department of State, 2022). There are more than one million Rohingya Muslim population that was not counted in the official census, so the actual number of Muslims is higher.

Postcolonial and decolonial theories tend to criticize European powers for neocolonial practices. According to this narrative, great powers keep their former colonies undeveloped and oppose democratic reforms so they can exploit the newly independent states. In this acceptance, these states never escape their former masters. Myanmar's case is at the opposite pole. The modern state of Myanmar was founded on the ruins of the Konbaung Empire (1752–1885) and British Burma (1824-1948), both illegitimate political entities created by the use of force. When it gained independence, Myanmar had no solid political institutions to mediate between the numerous different factions. The concepts of liberal democracy and human rights norms were foreign to the population. The political culture was characterized by indiscriminate violence, ethnic tribalism, and an isolated subsistence economy. Britain's exit from the region in that political context was a recipe for disaster. Of course, London is not the only one responsible for Myanmar's disastrous political life. The international community and the UN had the moral obligation to supervise the transition, but the Cold War tensions of the West with the Soviet Union and PRC did not allow an international intervention. Myanmar was spared of the destructive regional wars and genocide in neighboring Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, but unlike those countries, it has failed until now to create a functional state. The political heritage created a cyclical path dependence on brutal authoritarianism followed by chaotic insurrections.

5. Rohingya genocide and Nobel Peace Prize

The Rohingya Muslim people are not native to Myanmar. They were brought to Burma from the British Indian province of Arakan (West coast of Burma) by the British authorities to boost the local workforce. When Myanmar proclaimed its independence, they were promised autonomy but, in practice, faced systemic discrimination, especially after the 1962 coup. Most Rohingya lost their citizenship after the 1982 law. From the perspective of the government, their presence in the country is illegal. Violence escalated between October 2016 and January 2017, when the military started an operation of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya. More than 25,000 people were killed, with over one million refugees that fled to Bangladesh, India, Thailand, and Malaysia. The genocide was recorded and acknowledged by independent think tanks, the UN institutions, and the International Criminal Court. The United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken concluded his speech at the Holocaust Memorial Museum with a

warning. “The day will come when those responsible for these appalling acts will have to answer for them” (U.S. Department of State, 2022). Systemic genocide against the Rohingya continues to this day. The participants included the majoritarian Bamarese and other Buddhist ethnic minorities. Reports tell us about mass rape, plunder, burned villages, torture, mass graves, and summary executions (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Rohingya’s cultural heritage is being erased as more than 150 religious buildings were destroyed between 2016 and 2022 (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

The genocide was ordered before the military junta’s coup in 2021 when a theoretically democratic civilian government ruled Myanmar. Aung San Suu Kyi, the State Counsellor of Myanmar at that time, is representative of most of Myanmar’s society. Educated in London and having a respectable experience working for the UN, Aung San Suu Kyi returned to Burma after being exiled. She founded the National League for Democracy in 1988 and militated for a peaceful transition to democracy. Because of her stance, the military junta placed her under house arrest until 2015. Aung San Suu Kyi’s activism was admired in the West, with many comparing her with Mahatma Gandhi. Thanks to her political activism and pledges to non-violence, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. Many ignored that she was the daughter of the authoritarian figure Aung San. Aung San Suu Kyi refused to criticize or even recognize the genocide against the Rohingya. In her own words, the Rohingya are foreigners who have no place in Myanmar. After she was placed on house arrest once again after the 2021 coup, the former political activists recognized that her critics would have only made things worse for the Rohingya (Tonkin, 2024).

According to international law and norms, the ongoing genocide should have activated the Responsibility to Protect principle (Commission for International Justice and Accountability, 2022). This means an international intervention led by the UN institutions (Evans, 2021). We suggest multiple reasons for why this did not happen. First, the United States and the West collectively have no major economic interests in this affair. International interventions usually take place when moral values meet power politics considerations. Second, the United States is already facing strategic overextension, so it does not have resources to spare for another risky adventure. This is especially true after the failures of Iraq and Afghanistan. Third, there is no serious international pressure to solve this issue, and the United States will not register a severe prestige loss for not acting. Myanmar is a widely unknown country in the West. The apparition of numerous major conflicts in the last decade in the vicinity of Western Europe and the growing competition between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific has monopolized the space of mass media headlines and academic debates. The liberal left is not interested in the conflict because it does not fit the narrative of a revolutionary communist power struggle against unscrupulous capitalists. Burma is too undeveloped to support the creation of a cosmopolitan society. Feminists are too focused on contesting power relations in their developed nations or blinded by intersectionality problems that have little practical value in Myanmar.

Rohingya’s case mirrors the problems in Myanmar’s society. The other ethnic minorities are now temporarily united only by their common resentments towards the majoritarian Bamarese and the military junta. These movements of armed resistance have not negotiated how the country should look like, even if the government will be defeated. The idea of a federation with guaranteed local autonomy was hypothetically proposed, but most political leaders opposed it. Similar to Aung San Suu Kyi’s perception, the political elite generally believes that democracy and equal rights in Myanmar should only be applied to their identity group, and all the other parasites are excluded.

6. Spring Revolution, Civil War, and Possible Outcomes

The Western media labeled the demonstrations a spring revolution inspired by the Arab Spring specialized literature. At the peak of the movement, there were more than 150,000 protests in 2020. They initially supported the democratically elected government. After the coup, they opposed the new military junta regime. More than 4,700 protests were registered all over the country as a response to the coup (Bynum, 2021). At least 2,000 civilians were killed by the authorities that responded in full force against peaceful demonstrators between February and June 2021. The figure reached over 6,000 as of 2023 (Zaw & Tønnesson, 2023). The repression turned into a full-blown civil war, as protestors and the various local militias took arms. Until the present date, at least 50,000 people have been killed in the conflict, and 26,000 were imprisoned. Three million were internally displaced, with another 19 million required humanitarian assistance (The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, 2024). Half of the population lives below the poverty line (Regan, 2024).

The military junta has around 150,000 troops named Tatmadaw, while the combined force of the other groups is close to the same number. However, there is little to no coordination between the various factions, which makes them vulnerable to defeat in detail (Lintner, 2023). The hit-and-run tactics of the armed resistance also spread out the government forces thin. The government receives weapons from countries such as South Korea, China, Russia, India, and Pakistan (Andrews, 2024). The military junta even requested the help of Russia to build up a nuclear arsenal (Lee, 2024). The government also has an almost complete air superiority that it uses to bombard the militias that do not possess anti-air defense systems. The rebels are in control of the border regions, so they illegally smuggle weapons into the country.

After an initial stalemate in 2022, the guerilla style of warfare continued. The war has become one of attrition, with small squadrons engaging in sporadic firefights between snipers, assault rifles, machine gun nests, grenade launchers, and mortar crews. The opposition launched the famous Operation 1027, 1107, and 1111 in 2023. The rebels occupied more than 30 small towns. Arguably, the greatest achievement was conquering the town of Kawlin, the first significant settlement from central Myanmar occupied by the PDF (People's Defence Force). The Karen National Liberation Army is currently sieging Loikaw, the capital of Kayah province. As of March 2024, they controlled half of the city, but heavy street-by-street fighting caused significant casualties on both sides.

The offensive was not a decisive victory, as presented by Western media (Sun, 2024). The government retreated hastily and left behind valuable military equipment that could be used in future battles. The humiliation affected the morale of the Tatmadaw. Still, the fighting retreat also meant that most battalions escaped encirclement. The military junta kept its forces almost intact with minimal casualties. They can regroup and be armed by foreign powers, and they will be capable of launching new offensives. Since that moment, the government has escalated the level of violence. It has set up armed checkpoints on every key strategic road so they will decrease the chances of their convoys getting ambushed. They also launched a campaign of terror. The military has burned villages to the ground and committed crimes against humanity by executing any civilian suspected of helping the rebels with information and supplies or by hiding them. The army also committed abductions and mass rapes (The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2023). The new military objective seems to be isolating and wiping out armed resistance groups. With no other alternative, the rebel factions started cooperating more and organized themselves into federations. They also retaliated with brutality.

The situation was so desperate that the communist factions disbanded after the fall of the Soviet Union and reemerged under the name of the Communist Party of Burma in 2021. They are calling for the PLA to intervene. They are already active in the Tanintharyi region, the most southern province of Myanmar. On the background of the intense fighting, China is organizing military exercises near its border with Myanmar and is ready to intervene at any moment. China's security minister visited Myanmar in October 2023. Beijing seems to be making promises to various factions and trying to support whoever might have the upper hand (Myers, 2024). This is a clear violation of Xi Jinping's declared policy of non-intervention in the sovereignty of other states. Beijing has every interest in not allowing a democratic transition. The military junta officially accepted the use of the yuan currency for foreign trade to the detriment of the US dollar (Frontier, 2023).

The forested mountainous landscape of Myanmar's outer provinces favors a guerilla style of warfare where the defending rebels have the upper hand. Similarly, the griding warfare of urban centers such as Naypyidaw advantages the military junta defenders. Both sides are able to smuggle weapons from the neighboring countries. The ideological motivation to continue the fight no matter the casualties suggests that the civil war will continue without a clear winner for the next several years.

However, many analysts have already raised the question of the aftermath post-conflict. If the military junta wins, then a ruthless campaign of repression will continue. Myanmar will transform itself into a military dictatorship or a hybrid authoritarian regime at best. The other political groups will not give up. They will rearm for a future conflict and wait for an opportunity to restart the hostilities. Pro-democracy advocates hope that the rebels will be victorious. In that case, a liberal democratic federal state would be created. All the ethnic and religious minorities would be respected, and every province would have a high degree of autonomy. A closer analysis shows that this is just wishful thinking. There is no guarantee that the various factions would reach a compromise. The more probable outcome would be that they would start fighting between themselves, and the military junta would again try to establish order. Another scenario takes into account that both sides reach a stalemate and agree on a compromise. The center of the country will remain Myanmar and will be governed by the majoritarian Bamar group. The other entities will create a separate federal state. It is hard to imagine such an outcome, as the central government would lose access to crucial resources and access to the sea, while the others would have to figure out how to share power in the newly created state. A fourth possible path is the disintegration of Myanmar into several different nations. We find this to be much more probable in the long term, but it is not clear how the new states would be delimited. They will be even more vulnerable to Chinese influence and risk being partially absorbed into neighboring Southeast Asian countries. Finally, the long-term possibility that this civil war spills over its borders and provokes a regional conflict should not be underestimated. China might step up to restore order and proclaim a de-facto protectorate over Myanmar.

7. Conclusions

Since its creation, Myanmar has been set on a perpetual conflict path dependent locked by cultural differences and the fragility of political institutions. The rational power struggle between the different political groups is exacerbated by an identitarian existential crisis. The culture of tribalistic nationalism encouraged in the past 75 years leaves little room for compromise. The generalized state of poverty and lack of education only feeds the cycle of violence. The almost complete invisibility of the conflict on the agenda of global politics is another proof in a long line of the false promise of international institutions. Regardless of what the outcome of the civil war started in 2021 might be, Myanmar has

little hope for becoming a prosperous, democratic state. We should not forget that religious tolerance, human rights, the rule of law, industrialization, and the democratic transition took several centuries in Europe to mature. Myanmar might be no exception to this rule.

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