



Educating for Peace, the Rule of
Law and Development in a new
Myanmar

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Abstract

Seven years into Myanmar's political transition, the various political organizations competing for power, along with the public servants, seem to agree in seeing the country as facing three major challenges: bringing about peace, establishing the rule of law, and furthering economic development. Education will be key in training generations of citizens able to deal with these issues and in building a new Myanmar. But State and public institutions remain weak in the new political system established by the 2008 Constitution, described in this article as a hybrid system with elements of democracy and elements of an authoritarian system. In this context, civil society and other providers of education such as monastic schools, private

schools, and Ethnic Basic Education Providers (EBEPs), all have a role to play not only as direct providers, but also as partners to the Ministry of Education. While such collaboration already exists, it needs to be strengthened. Yet simply improving the education system will not suffice to achieve the goals professed by the government under the leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The social structure of Burmese society, described here as a social Stupa because of its pyramidal shape and notable social, ethnic, gender, and generational inequalities, must be addressed. Generally, a context more conducive to individual freedom, creativity, and critical thinking will be critical to peace, good governance, and economic development.

Keywords: Myanmar, Transition, Democratization, Civil Society, Education

Introduction

In the last seven years¹, Myanmar has embarked on an impressive process of political change. While this process, which we will try to define in this article, is not necessarily a process of democratization per se, at least not in the western understanding of democracy, it is nevertheless a process that allows for much greater space for civilian elected representatives (Egreteau, 2016).

¹ Since the campaign for the 2010 elections began, around February of that year, when the National League for Democracy and a host of other pro-democracy parties decided to boycott the elections, and when public debate and press freedom started to improve greatly, albeit gradually.

As a result of the research I have done on political change in Myanmar in the course of those recent years², I have identified three priorities which the administration led by President U Thein Sein, from 2011 to early 2016, the NLD³ administration, under the leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, since April 2016, as well as all political actors in Myanmar seem to agree on as indeed being the most important issues facing the country : peace (including the issue of establishing a federal system), the rule of law, and economic development.

This article will first describe how the specific inner workings of the Myanmar political process and its effects on education reform. It will then assess the reform of the education system itself since 2011. Finally, it will try to understand how the three objectives professed by both Myanmar political organizations and the government as mentioned above can be addressed through an improved education system. Specifically, the article will try to understand the role education plays in training a new generation that is better prepared to take on what are in fact three formidable challenges⁴.

² In 2008-2009 as an analyst with the Euro-Burma Office in Brussels, then in 2009-2012 as an analyst with Myanmar Egress in Yangon, and since then as an independent analyst researching institutional reform, politics, corporate social responsibility, education, and the peace process in Myanmar. From 2002 to 2008, I worked with Burmese civil society organizations based in Thailand, and focused a great deal on issues facing ethnic nationalities, including but not limited to federalism.

³ The National League for Democracy, a party founded and led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

⁴ I must admit here that as a political analyst education is not my primary area of expertise. As such, I am greatly indebted to colleagues with a greater understanding of issues related to education, particularly Kim Jolliffe, Rosalie Metro and Nicolas Salem, as well as Matthew Mullen and Mike Hayes.

Civil Society, An Agent of Change

I will argue that one defining trait of the transition process in Myanmar is the role played by civil society⁵. In few countries could the Deputy Minister of National Planning and Economic Development say “civil society groups and businesses in the private sector are increasingly involved in development planning through consultative meetings. They are also involved in the process of drafting laws” (Winston Set Aung, 2014).

According to Buzzi, Hayes, and Mullen (2013, p. 14), the understanding that civil society was a powerful agent of political change grew among exiled activists in the years that followed the 1996 demonstrations in Myanmar. This led, among other things, to the realization that a generation of activists, able not only to lead the fight for democracy but also to run the country once democracy would be established, should be trained, and that this constituted an absolute priority for the democracy movement. Schools that trained such activists, such as the Foreign Affairs Training, the Shan State School for Nationalities Youth, the EarthRights School - Burma, or the Journalism School, all based in Chiang Mai, Thailand, or the Burma Lawyers Council’s Law School, in Mae Sot, and others, as well as countless training courses organized by a multitude of civil society organizations, such as the Women’s League of Burma and its various founding members, for instance the Burmese Women’s Union or the Kachin Women’s Association in Thailand, were founded and

⁵ See Mael Raynaud, “*The transition in Myanmar papers, 2009-2012*”, unpublished briefing papers, available on my page on www.academia.edu

trained hundreds of so-called youth leaders⁶. Some of these schools, such as the EarthRights School, which trains young environmental activists, still function today.

At around the same time, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a similar process started inside the country itself, albeit on a smaller scale and with many more practical limitations, at least until the aftermath of cyclone Nargis in 2008 (Jaquet, 2016; Matelski, 2016).

Education has long been associated with what, today, has come to be commonly referred to as “civil society” in Myanmar⁷. European travellers visiting Burma were impressed by the high ratios of Burmese able to read and write centuries before the colonial era (Furnivall, 1931; Lieberman, 1984), which is explained by the role played by monastic schools in the local Buddhist context.

Networks independent from the State have been active in providing education in Myanmar ever since (Salem-Gervais, 2013; Jaquet, 2016; Lorch, 2008; Matelski, 2016). This has been particularly true along the borders of the country, where networks connected to ethnic armed organizations, but with no formal links to the Burmese central government, have provided education since at least the 1970s, and to an even greater extent in the 1990s and 2000s⁸.

⁶ Field notes, 2004-2010. I have taught dozens of classes in such schools and training courses in Thailand between 2004 and 2010, and at Myanmar Egress in Yangon between 2009 and 2012.

⁷ Jaquet (2016) has shown how activities that would now be described as being part of civil society pre-date the concept itself by many centuries.

⁸ For instance, one colleague of mine from one of the main non Bamar ethnic nationalities used to teach in her mother tongue in such a school in the jungles of eastern Myanmar before she went on to study at one of the schools in Chiang Mai. She then helped me organize training courses along the Thai-Burma border and went on to study abroad in a western university. She now works for a major international institution in Yangon.

Reacting to the Failures of the State

Yet, the other critical factor in the development of civil society organizations providing education in the last two decades is obviously government incompetence and the failure of the State in its mission to educate the population. As Buzzi, Hayes, and Mullen (2013, p. 6) have argued, “capacity development by civil society groups serves to replace a dysfunctional public system”.

This is the key to understanding the Burmese political process of the last decade. While the current political process was largely designed by the military government that oversaw the writing of the 2008 Constitution (Egreteau, 2016), it has been profoundly modified in its depth as well as in its nature by civil society leaders working closely with the government, both before and after 2011 (Lall, 2016)⁹.

This specific form of political and social change really took shape when civil society actors not only started to see themselves as agents of change, but also when they realized that the State was not just unwilling to, but was also incapable of running the country “properly”. This indeed was the moment when a significant portion of Burmese civil society started to define its own role in rebuilding the nation, and, critically, the State itself as being chiefly a mission to educate a new generation capable of achieving what its forefathers had failed to achieve: turning Myanmar into a modern country.

⁹ See in particular chapter 1, “How Myanmar got from 2005 to 2010: the role of civil society” in Lall (2016), pp. 13-41.

Indeed, and as Mutebi (2005, p.141) has noted;

“regardless of its various ills, Myanmar today has a public service that refuses to wither away; for the moment it is all the country has. Accordingly, the first principle when considering reform options is to accept that it is crucial, at least in the medium term, to work with the existing bureaucratic machine, and seek merely to turn it from its negative attributes inherited from past legacies.”

Before adding

“difficulties plaguing the country’s post-1988 civil bureaucracy: poor organization, decision-making processes that are at times irrational and arbitrary; mismanaged, undertrained and underutilized staff; weak accountability mechanisms particularly in the higher ranks dominated by deputized military personnel; poorly designed public policy programmes; and badly implemented public services.”

This strategy, as defined in the early and mid-2000s by Burmese civil society activists with a vision of rebuilding the nation, and specifically the State, as opposed to opposing it has been described by Mullen (2016) as “reconstructive politics”. It was developed by:

“a loose network of individuals and organizations who sought change through engaging the junta or creating opportunities where the state was failing. Its aim was to transform conditions via the creation of new space, opportunities and relationships” (Mullen, 2016, p.9).

A New Beginning

Key to formulating this strategy was Myanmar Egress, a local think tank and training center (Lall, 2016; Matelski, 2016; Mullen, 2016)¹⁰. Nay Win Maung, its leader until his untimely death on January 1, 2012, explained as early as October 2008¹¹ (and probably even earlier) that the constitution promulgated that year contained a number of elements that could help put Myanmar on the road to change.

In particular, article 28 stipulates that: “the Union shall:

- (a) earnestly strive to improve education and health of the people;
- (b) enact the necessary law to enable National people to participate in matters of their education and health;
- (c) implement free, compulsory primary education system;
- (d) implement a modern education system that will promote all-around correct thinking and a good moral character contributing towards the building of the Nation.”

¹⁰ In the interest of full disclosure, both Marie Lall (since 2006) and I (from 2009 to 2012) were associated with Egress, but this has been widely documented by others including in other sources indicated here as well as in countless articles published by Burmese and international media at the time.

¹¹ During a speech at the Burma Day conference at the European Commission in Brussels, field notes, 2008.

Article 366 confirms that “every citizen, in accord with the educational policy laid down by the Union, has the right to education, and shall be given basic education which the Union prescribes by law as compulsory”.

As will be discussed later in this article, the constitution can, like the objectives professed by the Ministry of Education, sometimes seem self contradictory. For example, while article 33 stipulates that “the Union shall strive for youth to have strong and dynamic patriotic spirit, the correct way of thinking and to develop the five noble strengths”, article 34 makes it clear that “every citizen is equally entitled to freedom of conscience”. Whether the “correct way of thinking”, as understood by the authors of the constitution, is compatible with freedom of conscience is not specified (nor, in fact, is the “correct way of thinking” itself). Freedom of thought, nevertheless, is again confirmed in a way particularly relevant to the debates on the teaching of ethnic languages in article 354, which stipulates that “every citizen shall be at liberty in the exercise of the following rights:

- (a) to express and publish freely their convictions and opinions;
- (b) to assemble peacefully without arms and holding procession;
- (c) to form associations and organizations;
- (d) to develop their language, literature, culture they cherish.”

This new constitution came into force in March 2011 when a new, quasi-civilian government took power. Lall (2016, p.159)

reminds us that in his inaugural speech President U Thein Sein made education one of his priorities: “We need more and more human resources of intellectuals and intelligentsia in building a modern, developed, democratic nation... Therefore, we will promote the nation’s education standard to meet the international level and encourage human resource development”.

At the other end of the political spectrum, Dr. Thein Lwin, of the National Network for Education Reform (NNER), a network that was then closely associated to the NLD, said in a 2014 interview: “we need a complete shakeup of the education system. The entire education system must be democratic. A new education policy should be adopted with the input of teachers, students, members of the public, and academics.”¹²

Towards the end of 2014, as demonstrations took place in Yangon to oppose the new National Education Law¹³ enacted by the parliament on September 30, 2014, an advisor to President U Thein Sein told the author: “In the education sector, the main challenges are the need to have a clear legal and policy framework, expand education access for the poor, reduce school dropout, improve education quality, and address the issues of poor governance and weak institutional capacities. The use of ethnic languages is another issue that has to be addressed to achieve sustainable peace

¹² “I consider nothing to have changed”, by Thuzar in The Irrawaddy, November 20, 2014 : <http://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/interview/consider-nothing-changed.html>

¹³ See Mael Raynaud, “Education Protests Offer Lessons”, the Myanmar Times, November 24, 2014 : http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php_opinion/12336-education-protests-offer-lessons.html and RosalieMetro, “Decentralization – then what ?”, the Myanmar Times, December 8, 2014 : <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/opinion/12451-decentraliseeducation-then-what.html>

and mutual trust among the ethnic nationalities. In post-secondary education, a major challenge will be to ensure education outcomes to address job market requirements as Myanmar opens up.”¹⁴

Two years later in March 2016, some form of consensus seemed to have been found, and was publicized by the Ministry of Education in the National Education Strategic Plan (2016-2021)¹⁵, a slightly modified version of which is supposed to be released in the first few months of 2017.

Before getting into more specific details of the plans of the MoE, the NESP (2016, p.7) explains that

“in today’s global economy a nation’s success depends fundamentally on the knowledge, skills and competencies of its people. Countries which invest in education are likely to reap substantial long-term benefits, such as greater economic and social prosperity. Education provides individuals with the opportunity to improve their lives, become successful members of their communities and actively contribute to national socio-economic development.”

In other words, the notion that education is key to developing Myanmar into a modern nation is widely shared by all sections of Myanmar’s body politic. The two core missions of education, to participate in State and nation building (Salem, 2013; Metro & Salem, 2012), and to alleviate poverty and participate in development (Lall, 2008), have become consensual priorities for the various political organizations and government agencies, as well as civil society organizations (particularly those associated with the NNER, which

¹⁴ Interview with a presidential advisor, Yangon, December 2014

¹⁵ See NESP, 2016 in the bibliography.

includes the main student unions)¹⁶, as detailed in Metro (2016).

Regarding a third mission that should be assigned to education, if we are to believe Emile Durkheim¹⁷, namely to transform individuals into social beings so that future citizens are prepared to navigate society as responsible adults, there are reasons to be more cautious as we will see in the following paragraphs of this article.

Reforming the State

This, of course, is largely due to the complex nature of the political system that has been built in Myanmar since 2011 within the frame of the 2008 Constitution.

As we have seen, the process and the constitution itself were designed by the military (Egretau, 2016). Yet, notably through the 600 to 800 policy papers sent by Myanmar Egress to the government in the years leading up to the U Thein Sein presidency (Lall, 2016, p. 28) plus those sent by a number of other civil society organizations¹⁸, civilian intellectuals and activists played such a significant part in designing the political process that the so-called transition cannot be understood without acknowledging that the role of civil society was one of the defining traits of the process. As the leader of a key local civil society organization involved in development issues told me in October 2011:

¹⁶ See Rosalie Metro, “What does the NNER really want”, the Myanmar Times, July 19, 2016: <http://www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/opinion/21461-what-does-the-nner-really-want.html>

¹⁷ As reported in Salem-Gervais (2013, p.17)

¹⁸ Field notes, 2008-2012.

“ what has changed in the last few months is who pays the telephone bill. A year ago, we spent our time calling Naypyidaw to ask our contacts within the government to help us solve this or that problem that our teams on the ground were facing, or to tell them what we thought should change in the way they worked. Now they are calling us so often to ask our advice that it’s almost hard to keep up with their requests”.¹⁹

At the institutional level, I have defined the new political system, the much discussed “discipline flourishing democracy” instituted by the 2008 constitution, as a hybrid system, comprised of elements of democracy, as witnessed in the new NLD administration led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and elements of dictatorship, embodied by the remaining powers of the military (25% of the seats reserved in the various national and regional parliaments, three ministries outside the control of democratically elected representatives, etc.).

The present political system witnessed in Myanmar would be, in that sense, a hybrid system made of elements of democracy and elements of dictatorship, with a strong role being played by civil society and its leaders in particular.

The limit to this logic, obviously, is that it is clear that one player, the military, remains more powerful than the others. As Egretau (2014, p. 260) has argued, “the Burmese military institution has transferred to civilians much of the power it had monopolized during the years since 1988. Yet the military retains a good deal of

¹⁹ Interview with a local NGO leader, October 2011, Yangon.

its policy influence, albeit through more indirect and subtle means than it used to.”

And Reforming Education

The consequence for education of all that has been discussed in this article so far is that the Ministry of Education is now, at least in theory, controlled by a legitimate civilian political organization, the NLD, that after having won the 2015 elections in a landslide enjoys an undisputable popular mandate. While the NLD has built strong links to civil society organizations through the NNER²⁰, it still needs to work within an institutional frame designed by the military and under the clear condition that it does not upset the military, all while working with the existing corps of civil servants and infrastructure that is remarkably similar to what was described by Mutebi (2005) more than ten years ago.

One major issue facing any government attempting to reform the education system, and indeed anyone attempting to reform any public institution at any level and in any given country, is the issue of the funding available to design and implement said reforms. As stated in a variety of academic articles and most notably Turnell (2008), the coffers of the Myanmar State are far from ready to support the massive efforts associated with rebuilding the national education

²⁰ Although it must be noted that relations between the NNER and the NLD have gone sour since then. Furthermore, Matthew Arnold, of The Asia Foundation, has argued in a public talk given in Washington, DC in October 2016, that the NLD government was not necessarily as receptive to advice given to it by civil society, which could be explained by the fact that the NLD had received a popular mandate and could, therefore, claim that it didn't necessarily need to always ask for (an unelected) civil society approval when it took political decisions. <https://asiafoundation.org/video/myanmars-governance-reform-challenges/>

system. This is a clear paradox in a country that could, at the very same time, suffer from the so-called “resources curse”. Although this article cannot get into the specifics of fiscal policy and economic development per se, there is no doubt that here lies a major issue anyone interested in education reform in Myanmar needs to address.

As noted by UNICEF in a report authored by Bissinger (2013, p. 2):

“One of the key lessons learnt globally when transitioning from a lower to middle income country and upwards to an advanced economy is that successful countries do not first become wealthy and then decide to invest in human capital, rather they become wealthy by investing in both physical and human capital simultaneously. Equitable access to quality social services is both good for people and for the economy. For mineral-rich countries, investing natural resource revenues in expanded health and education services and social transfers is fundamental. Such investments build human capital and generate employment. They reduce distributional conflicts, enhance social cohesion, and lessen gender, ethnic and regional disparities. Myanmar is blessed with an abundance of natural resources which can be turned into meaningful, sustainable, impactful social investments right now, starting with children.”

The first priority, then, seems to be to provide schools, teachers, and teaching materials to all the children of Myanmar, a country where 25% of the population is aged 14 and younger (Han Tin, 2008, p. 113). Here, the Ministry of Education can legitimately claim bigger successes than most critics generally acknowledge. Under the U Thein Sein administration, 7,616 new schools were built, and 11,776 new classrooms have opened their doors to 72,000 new teachers, offering education to almost 9 million students in the MoE's 45,387 schools (NESP, 2016, p. 8-11). In fact the NESP claims (2016, p. 50) that public spending on education has increased by 351% under President U Thein Sein (although it must be said that this is explained, to a large extent, by the very low levels of public spending on education prior to 2011).

Still, the situation, when it comes to basic education, remains dire. The numbers of children dropping out of school, not receiving any form of education, or whose education constitute a huge financial burden for their families remain significant and the student-teacher ratio is still one of the main issues facing teachers (Lall, 2016, p. 161-163). Classrooms often host over 50 students while European teachers usually agree that a class made of 20-25 students is preferable²¹. Last but not least, many of the children who do not attend school are working instead, an issue that will be all the more difficult to tackle because their income is more often than not vital to their families.

But insufficient funding, numbers of schools, and teachers are far from being the only shortcomings of the Myanmar education system²². The most noteworthy of the additional shortcomings have

²¹ Interview with French education experts, December 2016 .

²² For a more complete picture on this issue, see chapter 6, "The Reform of Myanmar's Education System" in Lall (2016), pp. 159-184.

to do with the training teachers receive, their own academic capacity and knowledge, and the teaching methods they use²³.

Lall (2016, p. 163) has explained how the Ministry of Education has tried to replace rote learning with the child-centered approach, but has had to face the reality of the unpreparedness of its teachers and their unwillingness²⁴ or inability to apply teaching methods so contrary to those used in Myanmar for centuries (Salem, 2013, p.47).

In a general context where many teachers nevertheless show a great willingness to provide their students with the best possible education and are indeed prepared to question their own ways of teaching²⁵, rote learning and the very limited amount to which students are taught to think critically (in particular because it is only through asking questions and receiving enlightening answers that students can develop a critical mind in the classroom), remain major obstacles to training a new generation ready to face the global realities of our time.

As U Htan Tin (2008, p. 119) puts it: “the joy of learning and the idea that school can be a place for socializing and fun as well as for learning are stifled from the very outset of a child’s life”.

Moreover, and as noted by Salem (2013, p. 196), a strong priority is given to discipline, respect of the social hierarchy, and

²³ See my article in the Myanmar Times in 2014 referenced above.

²⁴ It must be noted that it is also important to leave room to manoeuvre for each individual teacher in choosing the methods they’re most comfortable using, and that it is good for students to encounter different teaching styles in their formative years – Interview with French education experts, December 2016.

²⁵ Personal correspondence with Kim Jolliffe, Rosalie Metro and Nicolas Salem, 2016.

the perpetuation of “traditional culture” in the Burmese education system, which could hardly be conducive to training independent minded and creative “intellectuals” such as those President U Thein Sein vowed to nurture.

Rosalie Metro has summarized this contradiction between the ideals being professed and the reality in the classroom²⁶. “as a scholar of curriculum studies and an anthropologist of education, it seems to me that there is a tension between objectives such as teaching students ‘the right ideas based on Myanmar national characteristics’ and asking them to ‘think for themselves’”.

This is where Myanmar faces a choice in the type of education it wants to build. While some local practitioners²⁷ are greatly interested in the Scandinavian model and generally in models that focus on the personal development of each individual student, others look to countries such as South Korea, with more rigid student to teacher relations deemed more appropriate in the Burmese context, for inspiration²⁸.

It must be noted, though, that beyond the education model chosen, the entire society surrounding schools plays at least as important a role²⁹, notably in terms of providing a general sense of freedom and hope in the future, encouraging individual as opposed

²⁶ Rosalie Metro: “Looks good on paper: education reform in Burma”, New Mandala, February 25, 2014 : <http://www.newmandala.org/looks-good-on-paper-education-reform-in-burma/>

²⁷ Such as, for example, Daw Hla Hla Win, founder of the Silicon Valley based start-up 360ed, or Dr Kyaw Moe Tun of the Parami Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

²⁸ Interview with an official from the Ministry of Education, July 2016.

²⁹ This has been brought to my attention by, among others, Mike Hayes at Mahidol University.

to group thinking, as well as giving space for critical thinking, new ideas and, generally, creativity and forward thinking.

At the university level, there has been much debate on the issue of autonomy for universities³⁰ and academic freedom for scholars and professors. Regardless of the organizational structure of the 170 public universities and other higher education institutions currently training half a million students in Myanmar (NESP, 2016, p. 8), and leaving aside the many issues associated to the quality of “largely dysfunctional” universities (Matelski, 2016, p. 8), academic freedom is key to developing an education system able to meet the objectives defined by the Ministry of Education, both major political parties, the NLD, and the USDP (at least under the leadership of then President U Thein Sein).

As I wrote in 2014³¹.

“Students want education to be free from State control. This stems from education having been used by successive military governments as a tool for peddling its own propaganda rather than a means to improve the lives of its citizens. Academic freedom also means being able to research any topic one is interested in, and being free to write and publish one’s findings, including on topics that are sensitive to the government. It is well understood that such freedom is key to

³⁰ See, as mentioned above, my article and that of Rosalie Metro in the Myanmar Times, in 2014.

³¹ See footnote 13.

developing an education system where critical thinking is encouraged. Myanmar as a whole would benefit from greater academic freedom”.

The Ministry of Education agrees³². As stated in the NESP (2016, p. 15):

“Myanmar’s education system needs significant improvement in terms of curriculum, learning environment, research and teaching processes. Myanmar’s higher education institutions need to improve their research capacity in order to foster the development of new ideas and innovations”.

Civil Society, Monastic, and Private Schools

This generally poor quality and, in many areas, lack of availability of public education explains the fact that the government is far from being the only provider of education in Myanmar, where government provided education is to a great extent complemented by civil society schools and training courses, monastic schools, and private schools (Buzzi, Hayes and Mullen, 2013; Lall, 2016; Lorch, 2008; Matelski, 2016; and Salem, 2013). This range of non-state education providers supply basic education, primary, secondary, as well as tertiary, extra-curricular, and vocational education.

³² As does the constitution. Article 366 (c) states that “*every citizen has the right to conduct scientific research explore science, work with creativity and write to develop the arts and conduct research freely other branches of culture.*”

Civil society, indeed, does not only act as an unofficial advising committee to and incubator of new ideas for the Ministry of Education, it is also an important direct provider of both education and, down the line, jobs³³.

At the primary level, and to a certain extent at the secondary level as well³⁴, education is provided as follows: the main provider by a very significant margin is the State, complemented, especially (but not only) in remote areas, by monastic schools or, in Christian areas in particular, schools run by other religious networks, as well as to a lesser extent by schools run by civil society organizations.

In conflict areas, contested areas, and generally in areas where ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) have a strong presence and influence, ethnic basic education providers (EBEPs) with various degrees of relations to EAOs provide a significant portion of, and often the only, education available (Jolliffe and Speers Mears, 2016; Lall and South, 2016.a; Lall and South, 2016.b).

At the very top of the Burmese social hierarchy, what I will call Myanmar's "social Stupa" to represent the pyramidal shape of the country's social structure, children are increasingly taught in private and international schools³⁵.

³³ See Mael Raynaud : "Engineers, doctors, and the future of Myanmar's youth", December 10, 2016, Oxford Tea Circle : <https://teacircleoxford.com/2016/12/10/response-to-aung-khant-engineers-doctors-and-the-future-of-myanmars-youth/>

³⁴ See Lall (2016) as well as a map of monastic schools with the associated data in Jolliffe and Speers Mears (2016).

³⁵ Field notes, 2012-2013, and personal correspondence with Nicolas Salem, and U Nay Lin Tun, a journalist covering education at the *7 Days* newspaper.

At the higher education level, the State is, with the half a million students discussed above, by far the largest provider, but it increasingly faces competition from private institutions and training courses organized by civil society that award diplomas that are in some sectors more valued than State approved diplomas (Matelski, 2016; Salem, 2013). There is also an ever growing number of young Burmese studying abroad.

When they enter the job market, students could be ranked in order of value on the job market as follows:

1. Students who have graduated from a higher education institution abroad³⁶
2. Students who have graduated from post-university civil society training courses³⁷
3. Students who have graduated from a Myanmar university
4. Students who have graduated from high school
5. Students who have dropped out of school

Generally speaking, education in private schools is valued more than education provided by civil society, which in turn is valued more than education provided by the State, which in turn is in many cases valued more than education provided by EBEPs and monastic schools.

This clearly shows that the present education system in Myanmar only reinforces the very strong existing social inequalities.

³⁶ A number of whom have gone through pre-collegiate or other similar programs before studying abroad.

³⁷ Many institutions, such as the Parami Institute for Liberal Arts and Sciences or Myanmar Egress, demand a university diploma as one selection criteria.

As a middle-aged Burmese colleague told me³⁸. “when I was young, we used to all go to the same schools. Today, the children of the rich don’t go to school with the children of the middle classes, or the children of the poor”. He could have added that the children of the middle classes less and less often go to school with the children of the poor either.

This is the source for heart-breaking dilemmas. Another Burmese colleague who values public education and cares strongly about its future in Myanmar told me³⁹. “I want to send my children to public schools, but on the other hand, I cannot sacrifice them. What chance do they have of receiving a world class education if I send them to public schools in Yangon?”

As I recently wrote⁴⁰.

“In 2012, a Burmese expert with a deep understanding of Myanmar’s economy and access to some of the best existing data told me that he thought the equivalent of the “1%” so much discussed in the West was made up, in Myanmar, of a total of more or less three hundred thousand people. A second layer, the middle class, is probably made up of between one and two million people. This leaves over 45 million Burmese in a category that can only be described as poor. And many of them are very poor indeed. This, of course, says a lot

³⁸ Interview, December 2016.

³⁹ Interview, July 2016.

⁴⁰ See footnote 33.

about the economic, and therefore, political change under way in Myanmar.”

Based on empirical evidence, it can be said that the various categories established above to describe young people’s value on the job market almost perfectly mirror the social classes of their families. In other words, tell me what diploma you received and from which institution, and I’ll tell you what social class your family belongs to (and many instances, where they live as well). This, of course, is far from being a specificity of Myanmar only. But it would be hard to find a country where this phenomenon takes a more stereotypical form.

A system made of three main layers has taken shape in Myanmar in recent years (although it is far from being completely new): the children of the rich graduate from foreign universities; children of the urban middle-classes graduate from local (and indeed dysfunctional) universities but may have a chance to receive complementary training courses offered by civil society organizations; and children of the masses, which truly means the children of the poor, get a minimal education if they don’t drop out of school too early to even qualify as having received basic education. Among the last group, a significant opportunity gap must be noted between those who graduate from high school and those who do not and who nonetheless make up a majority of Myanmar’s youth.

One important caveat is that the exiled civil society movement has produced hundreds of well trained activists and professionals and a number of opportunities, notably in terms of scholarships, were available along the Thai-Burma border throughout the last 15 years.

Last but not least, the age-old question of whether gender or class matters most can actually be answered in a rather straight

forward manner. Despite equality between the sexes in terms of rights and salaries being enshrined in article 350 of the constitution, women suffer from a lower status which is largely explained by cultural prejudice⁴¹. Yet women in each social class do enjoy a much higher status than men in lower classes. In that sense, men among the elite enjoy a higher status than women among the elite, who themselves enjoy a higher status than men among the upper middle-class⁴², etc., all the way down the social Stupa.

The socio-political reality described above has considerable consequences on the three issues discussed in the introduction to this article, peace, the rule of law, and economic development.

Education and Peace

The relation between education and peace, in Myanmar, a country at war with itself for seven decades (Lintner, 1999; Smith, 1991), has been well documented in recent years, both in terms of

⁴¹ In recent months, a number of op-eds have been published, written by young women for whom this reality was no longer acceptable. See in particular: <https://teacircleoxford.com/2016/08/10/dreams-for-our-daughters-and-sons/aswell> as <http://frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-exasperation-of-a-modern-myanmar-woman>

⁴² In a country where social status matters more than the law, one easy way to measure this is by looking at what happens when there's a car accident. When a man from the middle-class hits a car driven by a woman from the elite, he often behaves as the socially lower character in this social confrontation. This also applies to relations at the work-place, with consequences on the choices women make in terms of careers and education in that, as a coping strategy, they tend to avoid careers where they know they will have to face men who imagine themselves as superior, and favor careers where they will have to deal with other women and men of lower social status. As in most of the rest of the world, young women tend to be less encouraged to seek a career in scientific fields and other careers seen as preferably reserved to men.

researching the role of ethnic education providers and the issue of mother tongue-based multi lingual education (MTB-MLE) (Lall and South, 2016.a and 2016.b; Jolliffe and Speers Mears, 2016; Salem-Gervais and Metro, 2012).

The constitution itself, in article 354 (d), affirms the right of all citizens to “develop their language, literature, culture they cherish”.

Jolliffe and Speers Mears (2016, p. 2-4) explain how the work of ethnic education providers should be seen as complementary to that of the Ministry of Education and its network of schools, especially in areas where the Ministry of Education does not already run schools.

“While the MoE is - and will remain - the main provider of education throughout the country, it is not - and need not be - the only one. Achieving quality education for all in Myanmar, by reaching even the most remote and marginalized populations and by implementing MTB-MLE, will not be possible by just expanding and improving MoE’s own initiatives and programs. Given the diversity that already exists within the education sector, much can also be achieved through government reforms that enable, facilitate, and allow space for the contributions of other education actors to a common process based on common aims.”

As I wrote in an article dedicated to the so-called Panglong of the 21st century conference in August 2016⁴³.

“As local democracy develops in Myanmar, as it very likely will, local forms of democracy implemented by various ethnic nationalities, often based on historical ways they organised politically, could be very useful in smoothing the transition from absolute local control being fully part of the Union of Myanmar. These different layers of local administration will need to interact in order to deal with a number of issues, from healthcare to education to security. Here too, federalism will be an answer to many of these issues, in the sense that it will build on existing networks beyond simply the Myanmar State. Dozens of organisations work in each of these fields, many of them associated with ethnic networks and often even with ethnic armed groups. Giving them the opportunity to continue to exist while providing a level of coordination is the best way the Myanmar State can promote unity and peace.”

This, in short, is what Lall and South (2016.b, p.6) call “building federalism from the bottom up”, or “federalism from below”, including “concrete examples, or living images, of what

⁴³ See: <https://teacircleoxford.com/2016/08/16/panglong-spirit-under-the2008-constitution-part-ii/>

federal political and administrative arrangements for a future Myanmar might look like and how they might function”.

One issue standing in the way of such a positive cooperation and ultimate, slow mutual incorporation between the Myanmar State and local organizations is schedule two of the constitution, which so far excludes education from the list of issues on which local parliaments can enact laws, according to article 188. This, I will argue, could be one area where the constitution could be amended, although a “federalization” of education is not necessarily always a perfect answer either⁴⁴.

In this context, the teaching of history will be a key in building a new and peaceful Myanmar (Salem-Gervais and Metro, 2012)⁴⁵. This is because not only does a modern nation need educated individuals with a good knowledge of their past, but if people of different backgrounds and institutions they represent are to work together, they would also need to understand each other better so that a Myanmar “nation”, which is made up of people who feel that they share a common destiny, can emerge. In order for this to happen, the very different visions of history harbored by various groups of people in different parts of the country need to not be seen as contradictory to one another, but rather as a starting point of conversations that need to take place in order to heal wounds and find a common ground on which to build a better future.

As we get to the next sections of this article that focuses on the rule of law, the justice system, and economic development, it will

⁴⁴ See also Rosalie Metro, “Decentralization – then what?”, footnote

⁴⁵ Rosalie Metro has authored a Burmese history textbook for Mote Oo, an NGO. This is also the topic of the following article: <http://frontiermyanmar.net/en/ignoring-the-past-in-the-classroom>

be important for young members of ethnic nationalities to be trained in all fields, not just those associated with the struggle for equality, justice, and peace of the last decades. Karen engineers, Kachin doctors, or Chin lawyers will be critical to building a peaceful and successful Myanmar and to ensuring that ethnic nationalities can participate as equals in the development of the country, as opposed being dependent on the majority Bamar in various economic and professional fields and continuing to feel like second class citizens in their own country.

Education and the Rule of Law

The second issue discussed in Myanmar politics, and indeed it has been an issue much discussed by the pro-democracy movement, and by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi herself, is the so-called rule of law.

I will consider the rule of law as being related to education in four different ways: the training of civil servants; the training of political personnel including members of political parties and elected representatives; the training of those working within the justice system; and, probably more controversially, the training of the members of the military and the police.

As we have seen earlier in this article, building the State as an institution, and, chiefly, building the capacity of its employees, is an absolute priority in Myanmar. Creating, renovating, and improving schools of public administration and hiring well trained economists and managers for all agencies and institutions of the State, must be made possible by making such jobs attractive. This not only means providing adequate salaries, which in itself would help in fighting corruption, but also creating a general environment where young civil servants feel like they can serve their country and participate to its development

throughout their careers. As I will argue in the conclusion, while the youth of Myanmar are highly motivated to work towards such an objective, as all observers of the country have noticed, it often feels like hurdles are put in the way of realizing its potential.

In terms of training political personnel, many opportunities are now offered by civil society organizations⁴⁶, and by the international community. By nature, because the political personnel tend to not be youngsters still in their formative years, this is an activity that should remain, in the foreseeable future, in the domain of civil society organizations working on political issues, as opposed to traditional educational institutions. But in the longer term, it is clear that more lawyers, political scientists, and economists will need to be able to be given more responsibilities in various political parties and as advisors to elected representatives, if not as elected representatives themselves.

This sheds light on one of the main shortcomings of existing political parties, including the NLD and the USDP⁴⁷: their near absence of an actual, clearly defined, and publicly available, political platform. As I have argued in 2014, a year ahead of the 2015 elections⁴⁸. “As a close observer of Myanmar politics for over a decade, I cannot honestly say that I have any idea what the main

⁴⁶ To name only a few, the Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation (EMReF), the Euro-Burma Office (EBO), and The Asia Foundation do provide such trainings, as did Myanmar Egress.

⁴⁷ The Union Solidarity and Development Party, which was in power from 2011 to early 2016, and which is very likely to remain one of the two major political organizations in Myanmar alongside the NLD, at least within the horizon of the next general elections which should take place in 2020.

⁴⁸ See Mael Raynaud : “Negotiating the Future of Myanmar”, the Myanmar Times, November 10, 2014 : <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/indepth/12195-negotiating-the-future-of-myanmar.html>

political parties want to do after 2015 if they are elected. Beyond promoting democracy, rule of law and development (very vague notions indeed), I don't think the people of Myanmar who get to vote next year have any idea either.”

The third, and key, aspect of the rule of law considered in this article is the justice system. To the extent that it is actually used by those who need a legal recourse - which, as argued by Cheesman (2015), Mark (2016) and Prasse-Freeman (2015), is rarely the case⁴⁹- the legal system can be at best described as being in limbo, at the service of the old order rather than the developing democratic system, and completely dysfunctional. In order to rebuild the justice system, and also in order for the private sector to be able to rely on well trained and competent lawyers and legal experts⁵⁰, law schools in Myanmar need deep reforms and more lawyers need to be trained abroad as well.

And finally, the actual training of members of the military and police, and particularly its leadership, is a controversial issue. Several western countries, not to mention China or Russia, have shown interest in providing training courses and indeed delivered a number of them to members and cadres of both the police and the military⁵¹.

Why a modern, democratic nation should need a well trained police force is clear enough. But the issue of training the military and those destined to join its highest ranks is, I will argue, not well understood by many observers of Myanmar.

⁴⁹ I would like to thank SiuSue Mark for an enlightening interview in July 2016 following the publication of the article mentioned here, when we discussed the way farmers relate to the legal system as they struggle for their land rights.

⁵⁰ Which, according to interviews I did in Yangon in 2012-2013, was far from being the case just a few years ago.

⁵¹ Field notes, 2012-2014.

I have insisted, in this article and in the past, on ways I thought the 2008 constitution should be put to its best possible use while acknowledging its many shortcomings, starting with the fact that it is, in many respects, not the constitution of a democratic country. At best, it is the constitution of a country with what I have described as a hybrid system.

While it is legitimate, and probably desirable, that the Burmese military would one day “get back to its barracks”, it is not a realistic scenario in the foreseeable future. I will argue that the 2020 elections will almost certainly be held under the terms of the 2008 constitution, and that the statistical probability that future elections in 2025, 2030, and 2035 will be held without any major constitutional changes having taken place in Myanmar, while declining the further one goes into the future, remains very high. The 2008 constitution is likely to be replaced at some point in time, but that point is probably more distant from the present day than most analysts and Myanmar citizens think and hope.

If this is true, then those being trained at the Defense Services Academy in Pyin Oo Lwin and in a dozen or so other military academies (EgretEAU, 2015, p. 357) will remain key players in Myanmar’s political scene and maybe in powerful positions in many of the ministries and government agencies.

Education and Economic Development

In many ways, this vision of an existing political frame designed by the military, but which could be used to its best potential with some level of imagination and with the condition of accepting the continuing role of the military corresponds to the strategy defined by civil society leaders a decade ago, a vision that played a key role in giving the present political process its specific shape.

Indeed, it is the ground on which the educational strategies of not only the Ministry of Education, but also of most other players in the education field, are built. One issue with this strategy, as noted by Matelski (2016, p.135), is that it tends to focus mostly on those promised to join the ranks of the higher layers of the social Stupa I have described.

In other words, much of the training courses and other educational opportunities target the upper middle-class and the elite. This, as noted by Salem (2013, p. 37), was also true of the choices made by the British colonial authorities in terms of educating specific sections of the Burmese populace.

To be sure, Myanmar needs an educated elite to lead the country, and, specifically, it needs, to name a few, engineers, doctors, economists, journalists, architects, bankers, scholars, lawyers, and business people⁵². As recently underlined by the World Bank (2016), institutional capacity “faces challenges” in its responses to an economic future less certain than sometimes assumed in Myanmar.

Yet, as I have argued above, well over 45 million people in Myanmar belong to social classes below this threshold and perform jobs that require very different kinds of education and skills. They must not be forgotten.

Farmers, still the vast majority of the population, and also industry, construction, or garment workers, employees of the tourism and hospitality industry, as well as the tens of thousands working

The quality of human resources, meaning the capacity of employees to perform difficult tasks, and perform them well, is,

⁵² Field notes, 2012-2013.

alongside the legal framework (notably labour laws and the private sector's ability to rely on the law) and the quality of infrastructure (roads, electricity, etc), one of the elements that will determine whether Myanmar is successful economically or not.

It will also determine what kind of development, what kind of industries, and what kind of economic model Myanmar is able to sustain. A country with a well trained work force is a country that builds a better future for itself.

In addition to training the work force of a new Myanmar, the government should therefore put a strong emphasis on developing the infrastructure and creating a better environment for businesses, from the cohorts working in the informal economy to the major corporations, and the myriads of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in-between.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the education needs are great in Myanmar, but so is the level of awareness on this issue among all local as well as international stakeholders. New generations of young Myanmar citizens, professionals, politicians, and activists will face a variety of challenges that are, unfortunately, not limited to those addressed in this article. Fortunately, and this is clear to anyone working with them, the youth of Myanmar show a truly impressive, and indeed inspiring, willingness to learn so as to be able to participate in making Myanmar a modern country. But in order for the youth to indeed play a role in changing Myanmar for the better, its elders need to give them the space to use the knowledge and skills that they will

learn not only at school, but all along their lives. This is true in any given country, which means that not only the education system, but the entire country, needs to change.

Furthermore, according to Dr Kyaw Moe Tun⁵³, it is not enough to work towards development. It is also very important to discuss what development means:

“As timely as it is to rejoice this exciting period of our country, it is also time for us to cultivate a strong sense of global and responsible citizenship. This is particularly important because there apparently seems to be a widespread sense of urgency to develop Myanmar as quickly as possible to catch up with the rest of the world. As an individual who cares much about sustainability, I always remind my students and those around me to take the pace of development rather cautiously. (...) This does not mean that we should not welcome changes, rather that we must welcome changes made with well-informed decisions.”

And indeed, for this to be possible, educating future generations of Burmese citizens and professionals from all economic, social, ethnic, gender, and political sections of Myanmar society will be fundamental.

⁵³ Message from Dr Kyaw Moe Tun, Executive Director, in the 2016 annual report of the Parami Institute for Liberal Arts and Sciences circulated in December 2016.

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