The Disciplining Discourse of Unity in Burmese Politics

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Abstract

A concern with unity has been a consistent theme in modern Burmese politics. This article examines a particularly problematic conception of unity that I argue draws strength from its resonance with Buddhist moral notions of the self and overcoming self-centeredness. As a moral concept, this narrative of unity is idealized in devotion to a common purpose and loyalty to a group or community; it requires subsuming one's own interests for the benefit of the whole, something that encapsulates the Buddhist practice of rejecting *atta* (ego). Disunity, then, is the result of a group of individuals committed only to their own benefit; it is evidence of moral failure. This discourse of unity has been an effectively anti-democratic disciplining tool (deployed by both governments and opposition groups) for suppressing internal dissent. Despite General Aung San's oft-quoted slogan of "unity in diversity," political movements in Myanmar have been more commonly characterized by hegemonic attempts at imposing a top-down unity that labels deviation from or criticism of dominant positions as disloyalty. This article examines the perpetuation of a rigid, unitary understanding of unity and argues that developing a more flexible and accommodating notion of unity will be a necessary step in the process of national reconciliation.

Introduction

Myanmar is reaching a point in its current political transition where people inside and outside of the country have begun to express fears about democratic reforms moving too quickly. These fears are often directed at demands for recognition (if not increased political autonomy) from various marginalized groups; most commonly in Myanmar these are the minority ethnic groups that have been seeking political redress of their disadvantaged position in Burmese society for decades. The common response from many (mostly Burman) political leaders (and more than a few foreign observers) is that expressing these types of grievances too loudly or insistently during this fragile transition could jeopardize the entire process by damaging national unity at a critical moment. Thus, these grievances should be deferred until a point where the country is more politically and economically stable.

Unity has been a regular concern in Myanmar's political sphere for at least the last century. During the colonial period, the leaders of successive waves of nationalism at the beginning of the twentieth century called for unity among the population in order to secure independence. After independence in 1948, the push for unity was a matter of national survival, with the government beset by ethnic, religious, and ideological rebellions on all sides. When the military took power permanently in 1962, its leaders maintained the appeal for unity, although they

employed increasingly brutal methods to enforce it among the population. The movements for democracy as well as ethnic and religious resistance movements have all employed the rhetoric of unity, urging the people of Myanmar to join in opposing a violent and repressive military regime.

Today, two of the government's Three National Causes pertain to unity: non-disintegration of the Union and non-disintegration of national solidarity. As demonstrated throughout this article, political figures have worried about maintaining unity no matter what type of government was in power. Even (perhaps especially) today the theme of unity remains central; the official song of the 2014 census was entitled "Spreading Unity Nationwide" and was a remake of a famous song espousing unity.[1] The latter example is particularly ironic, as the controversial census has proven to be one of the more divisive elements of Myanmar's recent transition. However, it also supports the argument developed in this article that this particular understanding and use of unity in Myanmar has actually served to further divide communities and restrict political participation.

Whereas independence hero General Aung San hoped for "unity in diversity," I argue that in Myanmar a persistent discourse of unity has been more akin to "unity through hegemony." This construction of unity gains power as a

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[1] A video of the song featuring famous Burmese singers, actors, and other public figures can be found at:
http://countryoffice.unfpa.org/myanmar/2014/03/13/9262/spreading_unity_nationwide_the_census_unity_song/ [Accessed 20 April, 2014].

disciplining tool because of its moral implications in a Burmese Buddhist context. As anthropologist Gustaaf Houtman has suggested, "Burmese ideas of national unity are based on the Buddhist concept of harmony as a product of mental culture [moral practice]" (1999, 64). This conception of unity also functions as an anti-democratic impulse that inhibits the incorporation of diverse voices and non-dominant perspectives into the Burmese political sphere and is an impediment to national reconciliation. Furthermore, it has not merely been a disciplining tool of former military governments; it has also been used effectively by members of opposition parties and groups supposedly committed to justice, equality, and democratic development to stifle dissent within their own communities.

I begin by locating the modern articulation of this moral conception of unity in the writing of U Hpo Hlaing, a royal advisor to the final two Burmese kings in the nineteenth century. I then consider two different contexts in which the concept is present, including the understanding of disunity as reflective of self-centeredness and the fear that a proliferation of political parties reflects disunity. This is followed by an examination of the ways in which government and military leaders as well as opposition figures have used this notion of unity as a disciplining tool. The article concludes by reiterating that this problematic narrative of unity is not inextricably linked to a particular interpretation of Buddhist ideas and that even those ideas could, when re-conceptualized, point to a more inclusive conception of unity.

Unity as a Moral Concept

While there are different articulations of unity within the Burmese political tradition, the word itself appears to contain strong religious and moral connotations. The Burmese word for "unity" is *nyi nyut ye* (or, in another variation, *nyi nyut chin*).[2] Gustaaf Houtman traces the concept to the code of conduct for the *sangha* (Bur. *thanga,* monkhood), where the word implied that "the majority decision should be respected" (1999, 60). The *vinaya* (Bur. *wini,* rules for monks) considered causing a split in the *sangha* to be one of the most egregious offenses a monk could commit and monks were expected to gather together to make consensus decisions on matters of importance to the community. In fact, the word *sangha* has a general meaning of "coming together" and the Buddha insisted that the monks who followed his teachings maintain themselves as a united body (Bagshawe 2004, 138). General Aung San reinforced the historical and religious connections of a moral conception of unity to the *sangha* in the closing of his 1947 speech to the AFPFL Party Convention. Speaking in Pāli (the language of the Buddhist scriptures) and echoing the Buddha's dying words to his monks, Aung San told listeners: "Unity is the foundation. Let this fact be engraved in your memory, ye who hearken to me, and go ye to your appointed tasks with diligence" (quoted in Silverstein 1993, 161).

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[2] Bur. ညီညွတ်ရေး / ညီညွတ်ခြင်း

A strong articulation of this moral notion of unity in a modern political context can be found in the work of U Hpo Hlaing (1830-83), a writer and minister to the last two kings of the Konbaung Dynasty, Mindon and Thibaw. U Hpo Hlaing wrote the *Rajadhammasangaha* ("Rules of Kingship") in 1878 as a manual of advice for the last Burmese King Thibaw. In it, he proposed an assembly in which the king would hold discussions with his officials in order to arrive at the best decisions for the country, but he also had specific expectations for how this assembly would conduct its business, based on the rule of *sannipata* (unity). In his opinion, the most important criterion was that the members of the assembly reach agreement in accordance with the rule of *samagga* (harmony) (Maung Htin 2002, 151).[3] If a country organizes its politics according to the rules of unity and harmony, "the people as a whole will be one in wealth with the king and ministers and will partake in the general prosperity. Each one therefore will desire the success of each other, and the whole country, including the poor, will be at one in prosperity, forming a single consensus in *sannipata* [unity] through *samagga* [harmony], and the law of *aparihaniya* [prosperity] will be reinforced. This will ensure a very strong country which no foreign ruler will be able to shake" (quoted in Bagshawe 2004, 153-4). U Hpo Hlaing claimed that Western

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[3] References to U Hpo Hlaing's work are drawn from the Burmese version (edited and annotated by Maung Htin and republished in 2002) and Bagshawe's 2004 English translation.

countries enjoyed a dominant position in the world because of their political

institutions that promoted unity and harmony (Maung Htin 2002, 154-6).

Later in the *Rajadhammasangaha* he warned his reader about the four

agatis (biases/prejudices/preferences), negative states that, according to the

Buddha's teachings, arise fundamentally from wrong views about the nature of

existence. These four *agatis* are desire, anger, fear, and ignorance. The failure of a

political body to act in a unified way would indicate that some or all of its

members were under the influence of these factors and, as a result, acting

according to their own narrow interests. A unified assembly, on the other hand,

had overcome divisions precisely because its members had developed their moral

practice to overcome the *agatis* and act according to the principle of *anattā* (Bur.

anatta, no control/no self).

As a moral concept then, unity represents devotion to a common purpose

and loyalty to a group or community; it requires subsuming one's own interests

for the benefit of the whole, something that encapsulates the Buddhist practice of

rejecting *atta* (Bur. *atta,* ego). In citing the Buddha's famous advice to the

Licchavi princes on how to maintain unity among the Vajjians that they ruled, U

Hpo Hlaing noted that, in an effort to achieve unanimity on an important matter,

the discussion must leave out individual preferences (Bagshawe 2004, 88).

Correct moral practice on the Buddhist path begins with the recognition that

dukkha (Bur. *doukkha,* dissatisfactoriness) originates from ignorance of the

fundamental characteristic of *anattā* and develops into desire focused on fulfilling one's own misguided cravings. Disunity is the result of a group of individuals committed only to their own benefit; it is a result of moral failure.

Aurore Candier (2007, 35-6) has demonstrated how this conception of unity and harmony developed through the Konbaung era until, by the 1870s, a conception of "consensus" had emerged, that blended *a-wirawdhana* (non-opposition, one of the Ten Duties of a Ruler) and *samagga* (harmony). U Hpo Hlaing argued that the ruler should strive for consensus but also pointed out the need for ministers and advisors to follow the rules of unity and harmony. He compared them to the limbs of a body, noting that, if each limb functions only according to its own interest, the body will suffer, just as the country will suffer if its leaders do not act selflessly (Bagshawe 2004, 150). Unity thus depends on individual moral development and the ability to move beyond self-interest in making political decisions.

This moral conception of unity as overcoming one's self-interest to work for the benefit of the group has been invoked since the colonial period in Burma to idealize individual and collective political actions. In the 1950s, Prime Minister U Nu praised Aung San's ability to unify the country as a result of his goodwill or good intentions (Pāli *cetanā*, Bur. *sedana*) and concentration (Pāli *samādhi*, Bur. *thamadi*)), both qualities that a Buddhist would develop on the path to liberation (Houtman 1999, 62). While *cetanā* is commonly understood to mean "intention,"

Houtman explains that it also means "a union or accordance of mind with an object or purpose" which would presume that "for a government to work, all people must share the same deep intentions, and the same object and purpose" (1999, 162).

Similarly, in an article in an underground journal circulated in Myanmar in the months prior to the 2007 "Saffron Revolution," the author connects national unity to correct moral practice and control of one's actions.[4] "In a united people we can see that the conduct of their body and mind is honest, their moral conduct is good, and the strength of their mental qualities is great" (Shin Nan Gaung 2007, 16).[5] He goes on to state that, "unity needs control/restraint through proper moral conduct and an even mind," reminding readers that unity in politics begins with correct understanding and practice of the Buddha's teachings (16).[6]

There is thus a particular discourse on unity in Myanmar that has moral dimensions that strengthen its utility as a disciplining tool. The next two sections consider different contexts within which those moral dimensions emerge: the

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[4] Both before and after the 2007 protests, a group of monks and lay people published and distributed underground pamphlets and journals that contained poems and articles on topics including human rights, the role of the *sangha* in Burmese society, and democracy. The articles were written by a number of different monks using several pseudonyms.

[5] Bur. ညီညွတ်သူတို့မှာ ကိုယ်၊ စိတ်အမူအရာတို့ ရိုးဖြောင့်မှုရှိခြင်း၊ ကိုယ်ကျင့်သီလတရားကောင်းခြင်း၊ ပညာဂုဏ်ကြီးမားခြင်းတို့ ပြည့်စုံနေသည်ကို တွေ့ရမည်ဖြစ်သည်။

[6] Bur. ညီညွတ်ခြင်းသည် မျှတသော အသိဉာဏ်၊ ကိုယ်ကျင့်တရားတို့ဖြင့် ထိန်းချုပ်ခြင်းတို့ လိုအပ်မည်။

claim that disunity arises from self-centeredness and a fear that the proliferation of parties signifies disunity.

The Dangers of the Ego

The first aspect of the moral conception of unity to consider is the way in which it is often configured as the antithesis of the individualistic or ego-centric position. The early twentieth century political figure and scholar U Ba Khaing, one of the founders of the Fabian Party in Burma, often expressed a concern for the effects of individualism in Burmese politics in his *Political History of Myanmar*, the third volume published by the *Nagani* Book Club in 1937 (Zöllner 2006a).[7] His account focused mostly on the machinations of parties and individuals during the first few decades of the twentieth century.

U Ba Khaing was critical of most of the political figures of his time, believing their primary concern was to enrich or empower themselves but he was also dismissive of the efforts of the rest of the public to participate in politics constructively. U Ba Khaing called his fellow citizens "individualistic" and claimed that they had "no mutual regard or trust" (Zöllner 2006a, 131). He referred condescendingly to what he saw as the dominant pattern in Burmese

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[7] The *Nagani* (Red Dragon) Book Club was founded in 1937 by U Tun Aye and U Nu. The group published some of the first translations of Marxist works in Burmese as well as some of the most influential political texts of the time written by Burmese authors. For more information on the *Nagani* Book Club, see the Myanmar Literature Project's Working Paper No. 10:1 (Zöllner 2006b). The Myanmar Literature Project has also published a number of working papers translating and analyzing the publications of the *Nagani* Book Club. References to U Ba Khaing's work are drawn from a Myanmar Literature Project partial translation and analysis (Zöllner 2006a).

society: "Looking at Burmese history, we notice that there never had been a national success due to collective effort. We find that we used to reach the peak due to the leadership of an individual" (ibid., 27). Tellingly, he had nothing but disdain for the current generation of individual leaders.

U Ba Khaing's expectations of his fellow citizens are difficult to sort through. On one level, his text appears to be a call for a different model of citizen engagement with politics, one that was not dependent on the charisma or power of individual leaders. But the work is also rife with criticism of Burmese attempts at collective political action, from the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) to the rural *wunthanu* (nationalist) associations (he calls them "destructive"). For U Ba Khaing, politics in Burma had reached its lowest level (mere decades after it had begun!), a condition evidenced by the fact that the population was already dependent on a corrupt and ineffective elected body and unwilling or unable to act for itself. Depressingly, he concluded that "The grandeur of independence is out of sight; the people are tangled in the vicious cycle of thirty one realms of existence" (Zöllner 2006a, 134).

Although U Ba Khaing did not usually express his criticisms regarding disunity in the explicit moral language of U Hpo Hlaing, I argue that his position on individualism in politics accords with the logic of the morally disciplining narrative of unity. He appeared to accept the negative Buddhist account of human nature, which is skeptical of the ability of the average individual to overcome

ignorance, craving, and ego-centrism in order to work towards enlightenment or, at the very least, the betterment of the entire community. The "vicious cycle" he referred to was *samsāra* (Bur. *thanthara*), the unending round of rebirths caused by the inherent human condition of ignorance and enslavement to desire. Ignorance prevented people from effectively working together for political development, while the compelling nature of craving ensured that leaders would use politics for their own gain.

The moral underpinnings of the discourse that questions citizens' capacity as political agents and ability to overcome self-centered predilections has occasionally been more explicit in the rhetoric of military leaders. In a speech on Armed Forces Day on March 27, 2005, Senior General Than Shwe warned of the dangers of a return to the disorder and chaos that characterized the parliamentary period, using language that underlined the implication of moral failure in conditions of disunity. Drawing on the four *agatis* (biases) that U Hpo Hlaing used to argue for collective decision-making Than Shwe stated that "Genuine democracy can flourish only when each and every citizen possesses reasoning power and is able to vote for delegates without [the] four forms of partiality" (Burma 2005, 24).

Here Than Shwe reinforced the reasoning behind the former military government's plan for a transition to "disciplined democracy": because of inherent human moral weaknesses, democracy is a potentially dangerous political

system, allowing people to participate in politics under the influence of moral defilements (Pāli *kilesa,* Bur. *kiletha*). Accordingly, the military government instituted "disciplined democracy" as a form of moral and political guardianship, providing a justification that is rooted in Burmese Buddhist views of human nature. This concern with partiality has extended to the present period; in a 2013 speech to military cadets, Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing advised, "It should be noted that you will commit mistakes if you prioritize your desires" (Mizzima News 2013).

Similarly, a 2008 editorial from the government-run *New Light of Myanmar* warned readers of the dangers of not practicing democracy "correctly." The failures of the parliamentary period, the author stated, were "not because of democracy, but because of those who implemented democracy, and those who were desperate to come to power with egotism, attachment to the party concerned, and selfishness, and those who bore jealousy and disturbed others" (Kyaw Min Lu 2008b).[8] Furthermore, the discipline required to "correctly" practice democracy could only come through the guidance from the allegedly non-political *tatmadaw* (military).

Within the (slightly) more participatory framework of democracy that has emerged since the establishment of a quasi-civilian, partially elected government

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[8] In many cases the names of authors in publications such as *The New Light of Myanmar* are pseudonyms but given the strict government control of the paper, we can assume that the articles reflected the military government's position.

in 2011, the government's insistence on the need for "disciplined" participation implies that most citizens were not and are still not morally equipped to take part in the correct manner without continued guidance. President Thein Sein reinforced this notion in a March 2014 speech to Parliament, where, speaking of the military's role in politics, he said that, "Reducing the army's role gradually depends on internal peace and development as well as the maturity of the democracy" (Kyaw Phyo Tha 2014).

Historically, the strongest indicator of this moral immaturity from the military's perspective was continued political opposition to the state.[9] Currently, opposition to development projects that harm both the natural environment and human communities and skepticism of the government-led ceasefire process are also portrayed as counter to the presumed national goals of development and progress. This discourse, that paints critical groups as "spoilers" also draws on the moral implications of unity, suggesting that groups do not question the ceasefire process for legitimate reasons (such as the Kachin concern that the military never followed through on promises to conduct political negotiations during its fourteen-year ceasefire) but for their own selfish interests. However, the spoiler narrative is dangerous not only because it de-legitimizes important critical perspectives, but because it reinforces a rushed, top-down decision-making

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[9] While the military government labeled any opposition as opposition to "the state," much of the democratic opposition as well as many of the ethnic resistance movements would probably clarify that their opposition is to a *military-controlled* state.

process where legitimate concerns are sacrificed to the expediencies of the political process (Walton 2014b).

Political Parties

While some observers expressed skepticism regarding the moral and intellectual capacity of individual citizens to participate in politics, there has been similar concern for the collective political action of the party system. In some cases this was connected to the tendency towards individualism noted above. So for U Ba Khaing, the high degree of personalism not only led to factions and splits (indications of disunity) but also prevented the institutionalization of the party system. He caustically noted that, "A pathetic state of Burmese politics is that political parties do not have [a] definite ideology…As the parties are named after persons there can be no definite -ism; only activities that follow the will of the leaders prevail. This is the greatest defect in Burmese politics; it is the duty of the people to correct it" (Zöllner 2006a, 113). As U Ba Khaing saw it, the problem was the persistence of the "big man" model of politics[10] and over-reliance on individuals who, because of their inherent susceptibility to craving,

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[10] Oliver Wolters, a historian of Southeast Asia, noted the persistent pattern across the region of the organization of political and social groupings around what he termed "big men" (1982). According to Wolters' comparative study, these "men of prowess" ascended to their positions because they possessed an abnormal amount of what he called "soul stuff." This explanation not only justified the position of "big men" through reference to their moral achievement and capacity, it put the majority of the population in an inferior position with regard to their ability to participate in political decision-making.

would lead their unthinking followers possibly to glory but eventually and inevitably to ruin.

The proliferation of political parties was also evidence of disunity. Much of the political analysis of the 1958 split in the AFPFL (Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League), the ruling party throughout the parliamentary period, considered it to be evidence of the moral deterioration of the government (Sein Win 1989). A September 1958 editorial in the *New Times of Burma* that mocked the proliferation of parties, candidates, and all manner of charlatans in politics, sarcastically described the formation of a schoolboys' party in order to poke fun at special interests. In a series of examples meant to expose the hypocrisy of candidates, their view of politics was very apparent: "…the voter should be ready to hear the principles of Panca-Silas [the five moral precepts] from a group of candidates whose firm belief in the Silas should [have made] them forsake the dirty game of politics long ago" (September 20, 1958, 2).

Suspicion of political parties as evidence of factionalism and disunity continued throughout the period of military rule. General Ne Win initially instituted a one party system in 1962, with the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) as the only venue for political participation. Eventually, the government acquiesced to multi-party elections in 1990 but in its subsequent narrative of that period, it painted the explosion of parties as evidence of the political immaturity of the Burmese people (Kyaw Min Lu 2008a). Similarly, the official view was

that political parties should ideally be bound by the moral expectations of unity. A December 3, 1998 article in the *New Light of Myanmar* stated, "As to freedom of organizational activity and expression, it can be a big danger, as long as there are political parties that still cannot renounce the way of confrontation, defiance of authority and anarchy, so there will be only such freedom within the bounds of rules and regulations" (Burma 1999, 8).

Almost a decade later, the author of another *New Light of Myanmar* editorial entitled "Let's nurture the sapling of democracy" criticized members of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) for their assumption of a mandate from the 1990 elections. He stated, "In the run-up to the 1990 election, political parties were mushrooming. The number of political parties stood at 235, and that implied that the people were not mature enough in the party politics without any political experiences" (Kyaw Min Lu 2008a). Here, the military government was asserting its claim that, while democracy might be the right of the people, it could lead to divisions and chaos when misunderstood and practiced incorrectly based on self-centered premises. Party-based democracy could only be a beneficial system when the people were mature enough to work within its boundaries, that is, when the citizens were already unified in purpose and goals.

Contemporary democratic opposition parties have not been immune to seeing splits as evidence of disunity and moral failure. In mid-2010, the then-military government dissolved the NLD during the lead-up to the 2010 elections

because it had failed to register as a political party. NLD leaders were taking a principled stance, both because they believed the elections would be neither free nor fair and because registering would have required expelling political prisoners from their ranks, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. While many NLD members and leaders seemed to agree with this boycott decision, several prominent figures dissented and broke away in May 2010 to form a new party, the National Democratic Force (NDF).

There was a brief public spat over the formation of the new party. An NLD statement claimed that NDF members had "defied democratic procedures by ignoring the unanimous decision and forming the National Democratic Force" (Democratic Voice of Burma 2010). The leader of the NDF, U Khin Maung Swe, gave a different account of the decision, saying that dissenting members chose not to speak out due to "esteem for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi," but disputing the NLD conclusion that the decision not to contest the election was unanimous (ibid.). The leaders of the two groups traded accusations in the press for a brief period but a pointed statement by NLD spokesperson U Nyan Win made clear the context in which NLD leaders viewed the actions of the NDF. He stated, "They should morally abide by [the NLD] position" (Voice of America 2010). He also relayed the somewhat perplexing opinion of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, telling reporters that it was her view that "The minority going against the decision unanimously reached by the majority is against democratic practice" (Buncombe 2010).

In October 2012, another high profile mass resignation of NLD party members occurred because of alleged "cronyism" in selecting candidates to organize the party's national convention. One of those who resigned, Dr Than Htike, said, "If the leading members continue to only do what their aides say, there will be dissension and disunity in the party, which will cause it to split" (Democratic Voice of Burma 2012). The charge of disunity has continued to be a political weapon, in this case not only making reference to the dangers of a party split, but also implying that leaders are working in their own selfish interests, rather than the interests of the party or the country. The following sections consider in more detail the disciplining uses of the unity discourse by the military and current government leaders as well as different groups within the democratic and ethnic opposition.

The Military's Uses of Unity

When the military took power through the caretaker government in 1958, its leaders used the opportunity to focus on combating insurgency, attempting to bypass the infighting that had divided the parliament. After returning power to U Nu's civilian government in 1960, the military usurped it forcefully in 1962, citing fears of secession by non-Burman ethnic groups. Military leaders consistently emphasized discipline and order as prerequisites for political participation, argued for the need for a central power to maintain that order, and insisted on unity as a necessary achievement for political progress and

development. All of these positions are consistent with the logic of unity as a
moral concept and its deployment as a disciplining tool. These notions have also
continued to shape the conceptions of democracy that originated within the
former military government and now anchor Myanmar's quasi-civilian political
transition.

The rhetoric of the former military government, expressed in editorials
and speeches, frequently contrasted the dangerous, divisive elements of "Western-
style" democracy with "discipline-flourishing democracy," a system that was not
only culturally appropriate for the Burmese context, but would guard against the
disruptions and excesses of the parliamentary period and allow for a stable,
gradual transition. In the months leading up to the vote to ratify the constitution in
2008, state-run news media printed daily messages urging citizens to do their
patriotic duty and vote "yes" on the constitution, an indication that the population
was unified in support of the military's transition plan. The current transition,
which has unarguably included elements of democratic governance, has
essentially been a political process with the trappings of democracy, yet strong
guidance by the military.[11] Military leaders' claims regarding the legitimacy of
their guardian role have referred to the purity of their intentions (non-

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[11] The similarity to the "guided democracy" of Sukarno's Indonesia (Lev 1966) or of what some
scholars have more recently called "managed democracy" in places like Russia (Lipman and
McFaul 2001) is striking.

disintegration of the Union, as opposed to personal gain) and used reasoning consistent with the moral conception of national unity.

Many of the editorials written in the state-controlled media contain references to the disorder and conflicts that plagued the parliamentary government after independence in 1948. The government's narrative tells of the "evil consequences" and "instability" caused by both internal armed conflicts and disputes between political parties (New Light of Myanmar 2008). According to its own rendering of history, the military government had to take control to ensure stability and prevent disintegration. Even if most Burmese are skeptical of the military's version of this narrative, it resonates with a critical relationship that anchored the traditional Burmese Buddhist conception of politics: a strong political authority is a necessary component of a thriving *sāsana* (Bur. *thathana,* Buddhist religion).

The military conception of disciplined democracy arises from the fear of political disorder, which emerged during the parliamentary period (1948-58 and 1960-62) and provided members of the military with their view of themselves as the only institution capable of holding the country together (Callahan 2003). While they appear to recognize the need for a transition from authoritarian rule, they also believe that the potential divisiveness of democracy must be mediated by a group capable of transcending potential disunity (themselves, in their view) that can also impose discipline on the citizenry.

The military's narrative of how to develop a lasting democracy is also consistent with a Burmese Buddhist perspective on popular political participation that is skeptical of the ability of the average person (Pāli *puthujjana*, Bur. *pu htu zin*, a word that denotes a human being with all of his moral imperfections and self-centeredness) to participate in politics and wary of the results when it occurs (Walton 2012, Chapter 4). The rhetoric of the military government drew on the common claim from "Asian values" proponents that citizens of their countries were not yet ready for full democratic rights. That is, citizens did not yet have the moral grounding to move beyond their own selfish interests and participate in a potentially divisive democratic process in a unified way that would benefit the country as a whole.

Members of the current government have also drawn on variations of the unity discourse to bolster their own reputations, to undermine political opponents, and to reinforce the view that only a non-biased standpoint can protect national unity. In July 2013, Speaker of the Lower House of Parliament Thura Shwe Mann, responding to claims that a fellow member of parliament (MP) was acting according to his own personal business interests rather than the interests of the people, said, "Although it is said that the people's voice is the parliament's voice and the people's desire is the parliament's desire, it's possible that the voices of some MPs are not the desires of the people. [I] may not say exactly whether this is true. [But who are they?] It'd be excellent if the MPs who only expressed their

voices and desires at the parliament can be identified" (Eleven News 2013b; brackets in original). A few months later he boasted of his own impartiality, declaring that, "I handle all motions moved by MPs in the interests of the country and the people and without any bias based on party membership, race or geographical origin" (Aung Ko Oo 2013).

Here Thura Shwe Mann's insistence on his own impartiality is the corollary of skepticism regarding the moral ability of (most) individuals to participate in democratic politics in the "correct" manner; his proclaimed selflessness represents the ideal of disciplined democracy. This suggests that government leaders conceive of democratic participation as a privilege, something that can only be safely practiced *after* a population has achieved unity, after they have moved beyond their individual preferences; this claim is supported by the closely managed transition process. From the government perspective, disciplined democratic conduct requires (or maybe permits?) participation, but participation guided by a devotion to unity above all else. In this way, proper disciplined democratic participation establishes standards that are not simply based on compliance with procedures and outcomes, but also on the ideal moral conduct of citizens, understood in this case as acquiescence to the dominant, hegemonic notion of unity.

The Opposition's Uses of Unity

It is not only the government and military that have used this conception of unity as a disciplining tool. Despite the common perception of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as a liberal democrat, she has regularly cited unity (*nyi nyut chin*) and discipline (*si kan*) as two of the most important components of democracy. She mentioned unity over a dozen times in her first speech at Shwedagon Pagoda in 1988 and discipline almost as often, reminding listeners that her father also stressed the need for the people to be disciplined (1991, 203). She asserted that in order "to achieve democracy the people should be united…If the people are disunited, no ideology or form of government can bring much benefit to the country" (200). Similarly, "if there is no discipline, no system can succeed" (ibid.).

Of course, unity and discipline were necessary for the opposition movement. It faced a well-organized (not to mention well-armed) military government. Yet, at times, the opposition leader has appeared to value expediency in decision-making over an inclusive, participatory process. During a September 2013 meeting with ethnic leaders about the process of constitutional reform, she acknowledged the importance of seeking input from different groups. Yet she immediately seemed to contradict herself by suggesting that "different opinions will weaken our effort to establish a true democracy with a federal system" (Eleven News 2013a). The very nature of this discourse of unity helps to explain the apparent contradiction, since the desire for a single viewpoint on any matter

will always be in tension with the inclination for inclusivity that is essential to a more participatory democratic process.

Another dimension of this narrative of unity relates to understandings of loyalty to a group, in this case the NLD. Talking to a group of supporters several years ago, Aung San Suu Kyi strongly denounced disloyalty (Blum et al 2010, 102). She acknowledged that according to democracy, each citizen could exercise particular rights, including voting and the right to free speech. However, she quickly qualified this statement, claiming that if one were to act disloyally in exercising those rights, he should be considered a "traitor," a "renegade," and "faithless." One intention of this speech was undoubtedly to reassure those who had stood alongside the NLD through over a decade of political repression and to cajole and warn those who might be thinking of abandoning the party. But her language also suggested that she saw a moral underpinning to basic democratic practices and a morally "correct" way to engage in activities such as voting, forming and supporting parties, and publicly expressing opinions. In this case, disloyalty functioned—like disunity—as an indicator of moral deficiency.

Since the beginning of her political career Aung San Suu Kyi has spoken out strongly against what she calls the "twin myths of [Burmese] unfitness for political responsibility and the unsuitability of democracy for their society" (1991, 167). But both she and other democratic opposition actors have also reinforced (possibly unintentionally) the logic underpinning the argument that most people

are not morally equipped to participate in politics. In October 2012, she gave a talk to a local NLD branch in which she addressed complaints of disunity in the local chapter. "We cannot misuse the privilege of having the right to do what we want. Nor can we say whatever we want, even if we have the right to say it," she said. "We must think before we speak about whether or not our speech is right" (Mizzima News 2012).

Lost is the question of what the "disunity" resulted from and whether it might have represented a legitimate difference of opinion on policy or strategy. Instead, the leader of the democratic opposition chose to publicly shame those involved in the perceived breach of unity. In an accusation consistent with the logic of unity as a moral concept, she also chastised people that would "misuse free speech for their own interests" (ibid.). Here the accusation of disunity was used to suppress differing perspectives and the question of who decides which opinions or which speech is "right" was left uninterrogated.

Min Ko Naing, one of the leaders of the opposition 88 Generation Students group, was a political prisoner for many years; he was imprisoned during the 88 uprising, released briefly in 2007, then swiftly re-arrested again after publicly criticizing the military government. When he was released on January 13, 2012, his first public statement appeared to undermine the universality of the very democratic rights he had fought for. "It is very important to have discipline and unity," he said. "We have to show that we deserve democracy" (The Voice

2012). Admittedly, it is not likely that he was suggesting that the Burmese people did not, in fact, deserve democracy. However, his rhetoric reinforced the reasoning of this discourse of unity (echoed by both the military and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi): democracy requires a disciplined and unified citizenry. The challenge, in the context of a gradually democratizing Myanmar, is that this reasoning has been regularly used by actors on all sides to suppress dissent and compel acquiescence to a singular, dominant perspective.

The unity discourse has also been used by religious figures to discipline and publicly shame. In these cases, the moral implications are even stronger because of the messenger and because the context usually includes explicit references to the Buddhist moral logic that equates disunity with moral failure. In a 2011 sermon to a group of political parties, the prominent and influential monk Sitagu Sayadaw denounced the lack of unity in Myanmar and claimed that it had led to the deterioration of the country and its reputation. He also told the audience that pollution of the Irrawaddy River was the result of a lack of unity and harmony in the country (The Voice 2011).

While I would argue that the Burman-dominated discourse on national unity presents the greatest impediment to national reconciliation, a concern with unity has stifled difference and generated conflict within non-Burman and other minority groups in the country as well. For example, even though Christians are not the majority among Karens, Christians have dominated the leadership of the

KNU and Karen ethnic oppositional identity is broadly conceived as Christian. In the past, this has resulted in discrimination against Buddhists and lack of recognition of Buddhist Karen within the movement. The split between the DKBA and the KNU is an example of the destructive effects that an over-riding and homogenizing concern for unity can have on a diverse political community (Gravers 1999). Recognizing these tendencies will be even more critical as Myanmar potentially begins to move towards a long-delayed and uncertain process of political dialogue for national reconciliation, one that has already been beset by splits, accusations of disunity, and regularly shifting "united" fronts (Nant Bwa Bwa Phan et al 2014).

Conclusion

The moral discourse of unity in Myanmar's politics that I describe in this article has served to reinforce dominant groups and positions, from the beginning of the independence movement at the start of the twentieth century to the present. The military has consistently seen itself as the only group capable of transcending individual bias to work for the benefit of the nation, although many would question the validity of this argument. Members of the democratic opposition have also been prone to using the call for unity as a disciplining tool, treating opposition to their policies as evidence of disunity and asserting that those espousing dissenting opinions are guided by self-interest rather than the benefit of the group.

The power dynamic that legitimizes certain discourses and delegitimizes others enforces a rigid notion of unity. What appears to be unity from the perspective of a member of a dominant group often looks like imposed hegemony from a position of marginalization. Similarly, agitation on behalf of, for example, a particular ethnic or religious group might appear to be the airing of legitimate political grievances from the perspective of that group, but a person seeking a less contentious democratic process (or seeking to prioritize his or her own interests) might perceive it to be dangerous and counter-productive political disruption.

The purpose of this critical analysis is not to claim that unity itself is damaging or an impediment to political development in Myanmar. Instead, my interest is in looking at a specific discourse of unity that has been deployed by groups across the political spectrum to reveal the ways in which an insistence on unity at all costs actually inhibits democratic culture. There may well be moments in the political process when groups or individuals are willing to subsume their own interests or concerns on behalf of a larger or different cause. However, these moments should be accompanied by careful attention to situational power dynamics to consider whether marginalized perspectives are being silenced in favor of a hegemonic unity according to the interests of the more powerful group. By demonstrating that political elites across the spectrum have utilized the call for unity to close off and demonize opposition, I hope to show that even when a

group is not dominant in every context, it can still act in a dominating, undemocratic manner.

Additionally, although I argue that this conception of unity draws strength from its resonance with Buddhist moral ideas regarding the self and overcoming self-interest, neither the connections between the two nor their interpretations are fixed. As just one example, it is possible to extend an implied argument in U Hpo Hlaing's writings to argue that, while a focus on one's own narrow interests could impede political unity in a given community, the democratic process itself could be envisioned as an institutionalized method of compelling individuals to engage with perspectives other than their own, thus contextualizing their own limited experience and helping them to develop a more inclusive view of community interests (Walton 2014a). This interpretation would highlight a process of gradually establishing unity through the recognition of difference, rather than its suppression. Although it retains the moral connotations, it would emphasize the collective practice of overcoming self-centeredness through the articulation of many individual perspectives; indeed, this is one way of envisioning democratic practice itself.

An overarching concern with unity at the expense of all else is dangerous in a country with as many political, economic, religious, and cultural fault lines as Myanmar. Every political grouping—from the current government down to the smallest civic organization—will need to honestly engage with the realization that

unity must be actively and inclusively fostered and cannot be presumed or created by force. Those dedicated to democratic values and practices in Myanmar will need to cultivate a different understanding of unity, one that more effectively recognizes and celebrates the pluralism of General Aung San's hope for "unity in diversity."

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