In Search of Stability

Electoral Legitimation under Authoritarianism in Myanmar

Lee Morgenbesser
Griffith University
l.morgenbesser@griffith.edu.au

Abstract

This article accounts for how authoritarian regimes use elections to achieve stability (and, thus, longevity). At the domestic level, elections are deployed to either feign conformity to established rules and/or shared beliefs about how political power should be maintained or mobilise citizens in a unanimous show of manufactured support for the ruling party. At the international level, elections are employed to simulate compliance to international democratic norms about the appropriate method of selecting political authority. It validates this theory using the case of Myanmar, where three different ruling cliques have sanctioned elections in the pursuit of this dividend. The institutionalisation of this function over time has in turn contributed to the stabilisation of autocratic rule, which has occurred through a combination of endogenous self-reinforcement, exogenous reinforcement and reciprocal reinforcement. This positive relationship offers further opportunities for within-case and cross-case comparisons to be made in the future.

Introduction

The optimism that once accompanied the third wave of democratisation has given way to the realisation that many authoritarian regimes have found the means to resist and counter democratisation.[1] This has led to a proliferation of

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1   Larry Diamond, 'Facing up to the democratic recession', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2015), pp. 141–155.

scholarship on the design, durability and dynamics of contemporary authoritarianism.[2] A key insight in this regard is Gerschewski's claim that authoritarian regimes owe their stability to a combination of legitimation, repression and co-optation. A persistent problem, however, is that legitimation remains neglected compared to the other dimensions. For a variety of normative, substantive and methodological reasons, Gerschewski laments that 'only anecdotal evidence is available as to why legitimation matters'.[3] This article addresses this deficit.

The focus is on how authoritarian regimes pursue legitimation using flawed elections. This speaks to not only the design of contemporary authoritarianism, which involves the use of nominally democratic institutions, but the very dynamics of control. For dictators, elections offer a mechanism to demonstrate their authority to a wider audience and create an image of invincibility. The ultimate aim is to discourage the emergence of potential challengers from all sides. For political elites, elections help preserve the status quo. This means reaping the rewards of office, which may include advancing a career, building a cadre of supporters, influencing policy, receiving monetary payments or securing business contracts. Overall, the main contribution of this article is that it aids the reincorporation of legitimacy into the study of authoritarian stability.

The argument put forth is that authoritarian regimes claim electoral legitimation in two ways. At the domestic level, elections allow them to either feign conformity to established rules and/or shared beliefs about how political power should be maintained or mobilise citizens in a unanimous show of manufactured support for the ruling party. These contrasting modes are termed autonomous and mass legitimation, respectively. At the international

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2   The design of authoritarian regimes is detailed by Lisa Blaydes, *Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak's Egypt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, 'Authoritarian institutions and the survival of autocrats', *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 11 (2007), pp. 1279–301; Jennifer Gandhi, *Political Institutions Under Dictatorship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Their durability is analysed by Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in the Age of Democratization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Beatriz Magaloni, 'Credible power-sharing and the longevity of authoritarian rule', *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 4–5 (2008), pp. 715–741. Finally, their internal dynamics are covered by Carles Boix and Milan Svolik, 'The foundations of limited authoritarian government: institutions, commitment, and power-sharing in dictatorships', *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (2013), pp. 300–316; Erica Frantz and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, 'A dictator's toolkit: understanding how co-optation affects repression in autocracies', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (2014), pp. 332–346.

3   Johannes Gerschewski, 'The three pillars of stability: legitimation, repression, and co-optation in autocratic regimes', *Democratization*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2013), p. 19.

TABLE 1   *Characteristics of authoritarian rule in Myanmar*

Regime subtype		Institutional arrangement	
Closed	1962–1974; 1990–2010	Military	1962
Hegemonic	1974–1990	Personalist	1962–1988
Competitive	1990; 2010–	Single-party	2010–

level, elections allow them simulate compliance to international democratic norms about the appropriate method of selecting political authority. This is based on the premise that democracy is the most normatively acceptable form of governance today. Such a framework is both capable of accounting for the complexity of individual regimes and parsimonious enough to be applicable to different types of them.

This argument will be validated using the case of Myanmar. Since 1962, when the military acquired power in a coup, successive ruling cliques have pursued electoral legitimation. Such longevity therefore provides the foundation required to test Gerschewski's claim that autocratic stability is produced over time. The value of Myanmar as a case study is further denoted by the fact it has exhibited the complete range of subtypes and institutional arrangements that characterise modern authoritarian regimes (see Table 1).[4] This means there is an opportunity to examine how electoral legitimation can be operationalised against not only different amalgamations of contestation and participation, but different configurations of decision-making authority. Given the aforementioned attributes, the key contribution of a case study on Myanmar is that it will allow new causal mechanisms and causal paths to be identified on the relationship between authoritarianism and legitimation.

This article begins by developing a theory to explain how authoritarian regimes pursue legitimation via flawed elections. The focus is squarely on the domestic (i.e. autonomous and mass modes) and international realms of this endeavour. Afterwards, the second section applies this framework to Myanmar. Accordingly, electoral legitimation is analysed within the context of the

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4   Axel Hadenius and Jan Teorell, 'Pathways from authoritarianism', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2007), pp. 143–157; Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright and Erica Frantz, 'Autocratic breakdown and regime transitions: a new data set', *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2014), pp. 313–331.

Burma Socialist Programme Party, State Law and Order Restoration Council as well as State Peace and Development Council eras. Using Gerschewski's theory, the third section establishes how electoral legitimation was institutionalised via the causal mechanisms of endogenous self-reinforcement, exogenous reinforcement and reciprocal reinforcement. The goal here is to understand its contribution to regime stability. To conclude, this article describes how legitimation was deployed in conjunction with repression and co-optation—the remaining pillars of stability—in Myanmar. The implications of this analysis are then considered against the backdrop of the 2015 election.

Authoritarian Elections and Legitimation

Authoritarian elections have been held in countries as different and widespread as Egypt, Libya and Tunisia following World War II; Kenya, Tanzania and Zambia in the 1960s; Argentina, Bolivia and Peru during the 1970s; East Germany, Hungary and Yugoslavia throughout the 1980s; Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan in the 1990s; and Laos, Malaysia and Vietnam more recently. Despite this rich history, there has been a distinct lack of theory development on how flawed elections contribute to the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes, especially when compared to the other purported functions of this institution.[5] The following section takes up this task.

The legitimacy of any political order depends on how those with power justify why their authority should be obeyed by those without power. 'The

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5   For comparative accounts, see Guy Hermet, Richard Rose and Alain Rouquie (eds) *Elections without Choice* (London: Macmillan, 1978); Lee Morgenbesser, *Behind the Façade: Elections under Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia* (Albany: SUNY Press, forthcoming). On the 'information' function, see Beatriz Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Edmund Malesky and Paul Schuler, 'The single-party dictator's dilemma: information in elections without opposition', *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (2011), pp. 491–530; Michael Miller, 'Elections, information, and policy responsiveness in autocratic regimes', *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 6 (2015), pp. 691–727. On the 'elite management' function, see Milan Svolik, 'Power sharing and leadership dynamics in authoritarian regimes', *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (2009), pp. 477–494; Milan Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Brownlee, *Authoritarianism*. On the 'neopatrimonialism' function, see Kevin Koehler, 'Authoritarian elections in Egypt: formal institutions and informal mechanisms of rule', *Democratization*, Vol. 15, No. 5 (2008), pp. 974–990; Ellen Lust-Okar, 'Elections under authoritarianism: preliminary lessons from Jordan', *Democratization*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2006), pp. 456–471.

strongest man is never strong enough to be always master,' Jean-Jacques Rousseau declared, 'unless he transforms his force into right, and obedience into duty.'[6] The most important influence on the failure or success of such a pursuit is the basis of the claim. How does a dominant political actor have legitimacy conferred upon them by a subordinate actor? Traditionally, authoritarian regimes have claimed a right to rule by appealing to a dictator's personal charisma, fostering socio-economic development, identifying with a particular ethno-religious cleavage, undertaking social revolution or providing national security. The problem is that none of these claims, which are still made today, fulfil the essential preconditions of legitimacy. Following David Beetham, political power can be said to be legitimate to the extent that it conforms to established rules, the rules can be justified by reference to beliefs shared by both dominant and subordinate, and there is evidence of consent by the subordinate to the particular power relation.[7] Such criteria capture the need for legitimacy to be derived not only from the beliefs of citizens, but from actions expressive of those beliefs. According to this interpretation, legitimacy is best understood as both a normative and symbolic force.[8] This is what makes popular elections so universally appealing.

Since authoritarian regimes insufficiently anchor their authority to consent, elections are used to contrive legitimacy. The aim is to have citizens understand, without question, that those in power are entitled to rule them. The most crucial and obvious source of legitimacy targeted by authoritarian regimes is citizens. There are two ways elections assist dictators and political elites in this regard. The first is termed autonomous legitimation. Derived from the American and French tradition, it denotes how elections provide a space to feign conformity to established rules and/or shared beliefs about the maintenance of political power.[9] This means adhering to the word of the constitution and/or the principle that citizens are the most valid source of authority. Even though these two standards are rarely emphasised in equal measure, if citizens see those in power 'conforming to their own moral principles and own sense of

6   Jean Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, edited by George Cole (London: Dent, 1913 [1761]), p. 8.

7   David Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power* (New York: Palgrave, 1991).

8   Seymour Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (New York: Anchor Books, 1963); Rodney Barker, *Political Legitimacy and the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Muthiah Alagappa, *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia: The Quest for Moral Authority* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

9   This tradition is analysed in detail by Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

what is right and proper', then they will 'obey the authorities and abide by the requirements of the regime'.[10] This explains why 'democracy' and the 'will of the people' are so frequently invoked in the aftermath of authoritarian elections. In the wake of Zimbabwe's 2013 presidential election, for example, Robert Mugabe declared that 'We are delivering democracy on a platter. We say take it or leave it, but the people have delivered democracy.'[11] Similar rhetoric was on display after Bangladesh's 2014 parliamentary election. Despite a boycott of the poll by the opposition and a historically low turnout, Sheikh Hasina insisted there would not be a 'question of legitimacy' surrounding the government. Instead, she stated how 'We are the running country, we continue our democratic process, time has come so we have completed election, people participated in the election, now we will form the government, and all our economic activities we will continue.'[12]

What makes elections essential to autonomous legitimation? Provided there is an underlying sequential logic, the value of this institution is its capacity to privately 'bind in' participating citizens. This is because act of voting—regardless of the motives behind it—is shamelessly interpreted by authoritarian regimes to be an expression of consent.[13] This occurs irrespective of overall turnout and support (hence the use of the term 'autonomous'). By introducing a moral component into their relationship with citizens, dictators and political elites effectively aim to gain a normative commitment from them. This comes in the form of an obligation to obey their authority.

The inverse value of elections is that they also allow authoritarian regimes to pursue autonomous legitimation in the event this normative commitment is broken. The most obvious sign this has occurred is the sudden expansion of participation in the form of popular protests. While this sort of event has elsewhere been claimed to show how authoritarian regimes actually use elections as 'release valves' on political discontent, it is subsumed under autonomous

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10   David Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1965), p. 278.

11   Lloyd Gumbo, 'Go hang, President tells Tsvangirai', *The Herald* (13 August 2013), p. 1.

12   In David Bergman, 'Hasina's press conference to international media', *Bangladesh Politico* (6 January 2014).

13   See Maria Markus, 'Overt and covert modes of legitimation in East European societies', in Harry Rigby and Ferenc Feher (eds) *Political Legitimation in Communist States* (London: Macmillan, 1982); Giuseppe Palma, 'Legitimation from the top to civil society: politico-cultural change in Eastern Europe', *World Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (1991), pp. 49–80; Rodney Barker, *Legitimating Identities: The Self-Presentations of Rulers and Subjects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

legitimation here.[14] The rationale for doing so is that such a sequence of events is better conceptualised as a legitimacy crisis, which occurs when a 'political system fails to maintain the requisite level of mass loyalty'.[15] This normative inadequacy arises when those in power lack one or more preconditions of legitimacy: conformity to rules, justifiability of those rules and evidence of consent. The resulting loss of authority not only encourages disobedience, but has the potential to prompt a seizure of power by a rebellious group of political elites. In this environment, the sequential logic and function of elections is to restore legitimacy by feigning conformity to established rules (however circumscribed) and/or the shared beliefs of citizens (now articulated as demands).

The second way authoritarian regimes use elections to target citizens at the domestic level is through mass legitimation. Derived from the plebiscitarian acclamations that first occurred under Napoleon, it denotes how elections offer an occasion to mobilise citizens (expressed as more than 90 per cent turnout and 90 per cent support). This extraordinary emphasis on unanimous participation, which was later popularised by Mussolini and Hitler, explains some of the more outlandish election victories claimed by dictators and ruling parties around the world. Following Kazakhstan's 2015 election, for example, Nursultan Nazarbayev stated that he wanted to 'apologize if these numbers [of 95 per cent turnout and 97 per cent support] are unacceptable for the superdemocratic countries, but there was nothing I could do. If I had interfered, it would have been undemocratic.'[16] Putting aside the inherent artificiality of such endorsements, they are nevertheless illustrative of a legitimacy claim. In the same way as autonomous legitimation, the use of elections for mass legitimation initially requires dictators and ruling parties to feign conformity to established rules and/or shared beliefs about the maintenance of political power. The difference here is that the appearance of legal continuity is to a constitution that embraces popular sovereignty, while also permitting untenured executive rule and single-party hegemony. The latter position is usually occupied by a leading party that has institutionalised a monopolistic belief system capable of defining the collective goal of society and acting as a source of authority for the dictator and political elites. The sequential logic and succeeding value of elections in this system is that they represent a publicly symbolic act. They are a civic ritual

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14   Jason Brownlee, 'Executive elections in the Arab world: when and how do they matter?', *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 7 (2011), pp. 807–828.

15   Jurgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (London: Heinemann, 1976), pp. 46–48.

16   Andrew Roth, 'Kazakhstan: president wins new term, shrugging off "superdemocratic" critics', *The New York Times* (28 April 2015), A13.

intended to gain an express acknowledgement on the part of subordinate citizens to the superior position of those in power.[17] The social and organisational pressure of these elections is designed to socialise citizens to a point where voting becomes a willing expression of civic duty. In the view of dictators and ruling parties, such action is tantamount to an expression of consent and a sign of their legitimacy.

Besides targeting citizens domestically, authoritarian regimes also use elections to pursue legitimacy internationally. The impetus here is the normative status of liberal democracy as the most acceptable form of government in the contemporary era.[18] Since the downfall of the Soviet Union, dictators and the political elites surrounding them have had to demonstrate their commitment to the principle of popular sovereignty by institutionalising regular elections.[19] This is illustrative of how authoritarian regimes are compelled to simulate compliance to a standard of appropriate behaviour within the international community in order to reap legitimacy and avoid punishment. Such 'mock compliance', Walter explains, 'combines the rhetoric and outward appearance of compliance with international standards together with relatively hidden behavioural divergence from such standards'.[20] The basic goal for dictators and ruling parties is to signal formal compliance without enacting substantive compliance. In the same way as the domestic legitimation function, however, international legitimation requires the presence of a sequential logic. This means those in power must have a practical reason or set of reasons for prioritising elections above other potential stimuli in the search for legitimacy: a selectiveness that is the sum of past and present inputs to their claim.

The fact that authoritarian regimes hold elections as part of a norm-driven ploy naturally raises questions about the identity of this international 'community' and the standard being applied. This article identifies two compet-

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17   Alex Pravda, 'Elections in Communist Party states', in Guy Hermet, Richard Rose and Alain Rouquie (eds) *Elections without Choice* (London: Macmillan, 1978); Christel Lane, 'Legitimacy and power in the Soviet Union through Socialist ritual', *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (1984), pp. 207–217.

18   Marc Plattner, 'The democratic moment', in Larry Diamond and Marc Plattner (eds) *The Global Resurgence of Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Amartya Sen, 'Democracy as a universal value', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (1999), pp. 3–17.

19   Susan Hyde, *The Pseudo-Democrat's Dilemma: Why Election Observation Became an International Norm* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

20   Andrew Walter, *Governing Finance: East Asia's Adoption of International Standards* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), p. 5.

ing stakeholders. The first group includes liberal powers such as the United Nations, the United States and regional intergovernmental organisations that seek to uphold international democratic norms. Despite a mixed record of enforcement, they typically respond to the use of manipulation and misconduct through a combination of incentives, pressure and suasion.[21] This means international legitimation is tied to the freedom and fairness of elections above all else. The second group includes illiberal regional powers such as China, Russia, Saudi Arabia and regional intergovernmental organisations, all of whom seek to diminish the threat democracy promotion poses to their survival or geostrategic interests.[22] A key tactic in this regard is the deployment of 'zombie election monitors' to praise flawed elections and trump the more established organisations representative of the liberal powers.[23] This means international legitimation is dependent upon the occurrence of elections, rather than the quality of them. Ultimately, the norm competition that exists between these two groups is consistently played out around the world. It speaks to the dividend available to authoritarian regimes pursuing international legitimacy via elections.

Having outlined why contemporary authoritarian regimes hold elections, the next section analyses how successive ruling cliques in Myanmar have pursued electoral legitimation. This is not to suggest other functions have not simultaneously been employed. Instead, the focus on legitimacy is owing to a lack of empirical knowledge about how it contributes to autocratic stability. What needs to be conveyed, however, is that the focus is always on the basis of the claim. In other words, this article remains agonistic about whether authoritarian regimes actually acquire legitimacy and instead examines only their attempt to do so.

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21   Daniela Donno, *Defending Democratic Norms: International Actors and the Politics of Electoral Misconduct* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

22   Thomas Risse and Nelli Babayan, 'Democracy promotion and the challenges of illiberal regional powers', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2015), pp. 381–399.

23   Rick Fawn, 'Battle over the box: international election observation missions, political competition and retrenchment in the post-Soviet space', *International Affairs*, Vol. 82, No. 6 (2006), pp. 1133–1153; Michaela Mattes and Mariana Rodriguez, 'Autocracies and international cooperation', *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 3 (2014), pp. 527–538.

Electoral Legitimation in Myanmar

On 2 March 1962, Ne Win retook power via a coup that marked the beginning of authoritarian rule in Myanmar (Burma). The following day, the Revolutionary Council, a ruling body comprised of 17 high-ranking military officers, abolished the constitution and, with it, elections. After a long period of closed authoritarianism, elections were eventually reinstitutionalised and held periodically from 1974, but this time under a new constitution that established the military's Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) as the sole political party. Hegemonic authoritarianism persisted until March 1988, when popular protests and demands for multi-party democracy undermined the authority of the ruling party. After several protracted attempts to appease the protestors failed, including the promise to hold a multi-party election, the military once again returned to the political arena. On 18 September, General Saw Maung led a coup that crushed the protests, suspended the constitution, removed the BSPP from power and established a ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). Intent on avoiding further protests, the new junta nevertheless upheld the existing commitment to hold an election, later scheduling it for May 1990. When it took place, the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, won in a stunning landslide. Unwilling to relinquish power, the ruling junta prevented the government-elect from ever taking office and, once again, closed authoritarianism became the norm. In 2010, after the introduction of a new constitution, an election was again held and the ruling junta's Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) emerged victorious. In addition to marking the institutionalisation of competitive authoritarianism, this election reaffirmed the military's transformation from a one-time custodian of free and fair elections to sponsor of flawed elections (see Table 2).[24]

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24 Despite arguably being the ruling junta's preferred party, the loss of the National Unity Party (NUP) adds ambiguity to how much support it actually received. On these election results, see BSPP, *Regular Party Congress* (Rangoon: Burma Socialist Programme Party, 1981), p. 5; *Guardian*, 'Elections Commission report' (10 November 1981), p. 4; *Working People's Daily*, 'Elections Commission report presented' (6 November 1985), p. 5; Tilman Frasch, 'Myanmar (Burma)', in Deiter Nohlen, Florian Grotz and Christof Hartmann (eds) *Elections in Asia and the Pacfic (A Data Handbook): Volume 1, Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 603; IFES, 'Election guide: Myanmar', www.electionguide.org/index.php.

TABLE 2   *Elections in Myanmar*

Year	De facto party	Popular vote (%)	Seats won	Voter turnout (%)
1974	BSPP	85.0	451/451	94.6
1978	BSPP	93.7	464/464	93.5
1981	BSPP	100.0	475/475	94.6
1985	BSPP	100.0	489/489	99.6
1990	NUP	21.2	10/492	72.6
2010	USDP	78.7	388/493	77.2

The Burma Socialist Programme Party Era

After taking power, the military moved quickly to dismantle parliamentary democracy in Myanmar. The immediate aim was to build a political system modelled on the Soviet Union and its 1936 constitution, which formalised the vanguard role of the party in a socialist society. Ne Win claimed,

> It is best to speak ill neither of the Eastern bloc nor of the Western bloc. If they have any fine features let us pick them out, discuss the matter thoroughly among ourselves and if we find them acceptable to the majority they should be adopted.[25]

Ultimately, the record shows that the Revolutionary Council chose to introduce an official ideology, build a single-party system and create mass organisations. The argument advanced here is that the collective implementation of these strategies was instrumental to the eventual introduction of elections for mass legitimation. On the whole, there was nothing extraordinary about the replication of the Soviet political system, since the communist regimes of Eastern Europe had similarly done so (not always by choice). During this era, elections provided a space for mass organisations to mobilise citizens in a show of support for the socialist party—making it the source and embodiment of legitimacy.

A key justification for military rule in Myanmar was that parliamentary democracy had prevented the development of socialism. Since this ideal had popular validity in the years surrounding World War II, the ruling junta

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25   BSPP, *Party Seminar, 1965: Speeches of Chairman General Ne Win and Political Report of the Political Secretary* (Rangoon: Burma Socialist Programme Party, 1966), p. 15.

declared it would 'march unswervingly and arm-in-arm with the people of the Union of Burma towards the goal of socialism'.[26] This allowed it to reconstitute the political system so that socialism became the determinant for the content of policies and the structure of political power. In fact, it was symptomatic of how ideology was cast in the Soviet Union—a revolutionary doctrine capable of explaining human exploitation and promising to end it. Similarly, the Revolutionary Council believed liberation to be possible only when 'exploitation of man by man is brought to an end and a socialist economy based on justice is established'.[27] To achieve this goal, the Revolutionary Council manipulated certain categories of thought, such as the idea of class struggle, the theory of state and the nature of historical development, to bolster its power. The longstanding effect was that only it could decide what conformed to official doctrine; which included the use of elections to extract a wholesale commitment from citizens for the preservation of socialism.

Despite the importance attached to socialist ideology, it alone would be insufficient for revolutionary action. Since the working people lacked the expertise to lead, the Revolutionary Council decreed the establishment of the BSPP in July 1962. In time, it would transform from a cadre to a mass party that would count as members the entire citizenry, including 'the workers in the field or factory, the working intelligentsia, intellectuals and artists and those who work in the public service'.[28] This was in accordance with the proscription under Marxism–Leninism for a tightly knit body of dedicated professional revolutionaries, with respect for command and discipline, to lead the revolution.[29] Implicit within this understanding were two contradictory ideas. The first was

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26　Revolutionary Council, *The Burmese Way to Socialism: Policy Declaration of the Revolutionary Council* (Rangoon: Information Deptartment for the Council, 1962), p. i. On the role of ideology in Myanmar during this era, see Fred Mehden, 'The Burmese way to socialism', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1963), pp. 129–135; Josef Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977); David Steinberg, *Burma: A Socialist Nation of Southeast Asia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982); Jon Wiant, *Lanzin: Ideology and Organization in Revolutionary Burma* (Ithaca, Cornell University, 1982). On the role of ideology under Marxist-Leninism, see Philip Selznick, *The Organizational Weapon: A Study of Bolshevik Strategy and Tactics* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1960).

27　Revolutionary Council, *The Burmese Way*, p. 1.

28　BSPP, *The Specific Characteristics of the Burma Socialist Programme Party* (Rangoon: Central Organising Committee of the BSPP, 1964), p. 1.

29　On the role of the Party under Marxism–Leninism, see Abdurakhman Avtorkhanov, *The Communist Party Apparatus* (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1966); Lennart Lundquist, *The Party and the Masses: An Interorganizational Analysis of Lenin's Model for the Bolshevik Revolutionary Movement* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1982).

that the party was beyond reproach. Since it represented the most knowledge-able, progressive and conscious expression of the working class, only it could mobilise the masses to build socialism. The second was that the party needed to listen to the masses or it would risk becoming a 'nonentity'.[30] To reconcile these competing needs, the solution in Myanmar—and the Soviet Union—was to give citizens the periodic opportunity to approve of party leadership through plebiscite elections. Before doing so, however, a means to mobilise the masses was required.

As an adjunct to socialist ideology and a central party, the Revolutionary Council sought to utilise citizens by creating and managing 'such mass and class organisations as are suitable for the transitional period'.[31] The basic function of mass organisations is to help those in power augment control and implement policy. Under Marxism–Leninism, mass organisations represented the critical link between the party and the masses. For Lenin, the dictatorship of the proletariat could not be exercised by trade unions alone, since the workers were divided, degraded and corrupted. This necessitated the establishment of 'transmission belts running from the vanguard to the mass of the advanced class, and from the latter to the mass of the working people'.[32] The same view was shared by Stalin, who put a greater emphasis on the subordination of mass organisations to party leadership. Once established, they transformed what was a diffuse citizenry into a mobilised source of power. This is why many single-party regimes patterned their mass organisations on the Soviet model.[33] For the Revolutionary Council, the key task was to 'set up a socialist state by mobilising … workers, peasants, cultural workers and professionals, and other middle class people on the basis of their occupations'.[34] Upon doing so, the mass organisations could be used not only to agitate and organise citizens into appreciating and accepting the BSPP's decisions and policies, but also to involve them in national projects. This was particularly the case for elections.

After drafting and adopting a new constitution, the ruling junta next moved to institutionalise hegemonic authoritarianism. Despite being touted for its popular input, Myanmar's 1974 constitution was essentially a copy of the Soviet

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30   Joseph Stalin, *Mastering Bolshevism* (New York: Workers Library, 1937), p. 57.

31   Revolutionary Council, *The Burmese Way*, p. 4.

32   Neil Harding, *Lenin's Political Thought. Volume 2, Theory and Practice in the Socialist Revolution* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 260.

33   Those in China, Cuba, Egypt, North Korea and Vietnam all followed the Soviet Union. See Gregory Kasza, *The Conscription Society: Administered Mass Organizations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

34   BSPP, *Party Seminar, 1965*, p. 165.

Union's 1936 constitution.[35] Since competition was conflated with division, elections would instead be a show of unanimity and, by extension, a mode of legitimation for the BSPP. This followed the example of the Soviet Union, whereby turnout and support averaged 99.6 per cent and 99.5 per cent, respectively, from 1936 onwards.[36] 'The broad legitimizing function of elections,' Friedgut claims, 'lies in the fact that the regime can point to overwhelming public approval of both personnel and policy.'[37] It was a similar story in Myanmar.[38] Using its system of mass organisations as an instrument to mobilise citizens, the BSPP was able to claim that unanimous turnout and support were indicative of legitimacy vis-à-vis its policies (socialism) and its leadership (as the vanguard of society). This was predicated on a constitution that enshrined the principle of popular sovereignty, but also permitted untenured executive rule and single-party hegemony. In fact, it was indicative of the social and organisational pressure of elections during this era, which were designed to socialise citizens to a point where voting becomes a willing expression of civic duty and an express acknowledgement of the superior position of those in power. Ultimately, the legitimation function was institutionalised across four elections, until widespread demands for multi-party democracy eroded the authority of the BSPP.

The State Law and Order Restoration Council Era

The most tumultuous period of Myanmar's political history began at the Sanda Win tea shop in Yangon on 12 March 1988, when a fight between students and locals soon escalated into popular protests. In what amounted to a legitimacy crisis, the BSPP was forced to excise the very ideology and institutions on which it had long claimed the right to rule. The argument advanced here is

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35　This is admitted by its main author in Robert Taylor, *Dr Maung Maung: Gentleman, Scholar, Patriot* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), p. 480.

36　Georg Brumner, 'Elections in the Soviet Union', in Robert Furtak (ed.) *Elections in Socialist States* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), p. 37.

37　Theodore Friedgut, *Political Participation in the USSR* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 139. On electoral legitimation in the Soviet Union, see also Merle Fainsod, *How Russia is Ruled* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970); Pravda, 'Elections in Communist Party states'; Victor Zaslavsky and Robert Brym, 'The functions of elections in the USSR', *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (1978), pp. 362–371.

38　See *Working People's Daily*, 'Elections to Phithu Hluttaw and People's Councils begin', (2 January 1978), p. 1; *Working People's Daily*, 'Tatmadawmen and working people hail elections' (4 October 1981), p. 1; *Working People's Daily*, 'Mobile troupes entertain working People' (6 October 1985), p. 1.

that, by sanctioning the 1990 election, the ruling junta made a strategic shift from mass to autonomous legitimation. This entailed feigning conformity to the shared beliefs protesters had about how power should be legally acquired within a multi-party democracy. In order to understand this transformation, it is necessary to consider prior events.

The BSPP initially confronted the political crisis by convening an Extraordinary Party Congress in July 1988. The main tasks were to determine whether Myanmar should have a single- or multi-party system and whether Ne Win should be allowed to resign on account of his age and health. In a demonstration of insularity, it was decided that single-party rule would continue and Sein Lwin (popularly known as 'The Butcher') would succeed Ne Win. This only served to galvanise the protest movement, which carried out a nationwide strike and larger demonstrations. In response, the BSPP initiated a crackdown against the 'massive force of violent lawlessness [that] erupted to topple the government'.[39] When this effort failed, Sein Lwin was forced to resign. He was replaced by Maung Maung, who announced that the BSPP would meet again to address the validity of Myanmar's single-party system. This only further angered the protestors, however, since they considered the demonstrations to be proof that they favoured multi-party democracy. It was at this time that Aung San Suu Kyi entered the political arena. Her leadership put added pressure on the BSPP, which finally and reluctantly pledged to hold a multi-party election.[40] The immediate problem was that most people were so distrustful of it that the main opposition parties demanded a neutral, interim government be installed to resolve the crisis and oversee the election. When this proposal was rejected, the protests escalated to the point that the Ministry of National Defence building was almost overrun and defections from the police and military increased. With the crisis out of control, the stage was set for further upheaval.

On 18 September, the military initiated a coup and removed the BSPP from power. It justified this action on account of the deteriorating conditions nationwide and the interests of the people. The new SLORC stated its four immediate

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39   Tatmadaw, *A Concise History of Myanmar and the Tatmadaw's Role, 1948–1988* (Rangoon: Ministry of Information, 1991), pp. 108, 109.

40   In line with the preconditions of legitimacy, Maung Maung stated on 10 September 1988 that "Regarding democracy, it must be polite. The independent thought and wish of each citizen must be respected. His/her independent secret vote must be respected too. These facts are included in the basic rules of the Lanzin Party as well as in the State Constitution. There were weaknesses in abiding by these rules in practice. As these weaknesses were not pointed out and the people failed to utilise their votes for various reasons, there appeared such a situation". See Taylor, *Dr Maung Maung*, p. 557.

tasks as being to restore the rule of law, secure and facilitate communications, ameliorate economic suffering and hold a multi-party election.[41] In the following days, after it initiated another crackdown on the protestors, the ruling junta made moves which suggested it was committed to the last task. (The contradiction between the use of legitimation and repression during this period is starkly illustrative of the SLORC's lack of strategic direction.) Not only was the Elections Commission one of the few state organs preserved, but the Law Protecting National Solidarity (1964) was abrogated. This cleared the way for the registration of political parties, including Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD and the National Unity Party (NUP), which was the successor to the BSPP. In light of these events, the question that emerges is why the SLORC upheld the BSPP commitment to hold an election.

The answer is that it had no other basis for legitimacy that resonated with citizens. Having denied the establishment of an interim government and crushed the pro-democracy movement, the military could not rely exclusively on its traditional role as defender of the Union.[42] Added to this was the threat of an open-ended nationwide strike, a growing opposition movement and the possibility of further defections from the security forces. Under such uncertain conditions, an election provided a space to restore legitimacy. In accordance with the essential criteria of political legitimacy, it would allow the SLORC to reconcile the shared beliefs of citizens (as protestors) using an action expressive of those beliefs. In fact, since the opposition parties were themselves requesting additional time to organise, the delay would benefit the SLORC. In contrast to past elections, however, legitimation would be judged not on how successfully citizens could be mobilised, but on whether the NUP (or another pro-military party) acquired power legally.

On the day of the election, the NLD won in a stunning landslide. How did this happen? The available evidence indicates there were a range of explanatory factors. By placing Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest for several months, the ruling junta inadvertently made her a national symbol for democracy. This error was compounded by the fact that voting conditions were mostly free of misconduct. Since citizens were inexplicably allowed to express their preferences, the NLD benefited substantially. Yet perhaps the most significant error was that the ruling junta failed to manipulate the outcome of the poll (as is the

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41 For an in-depth account of events, see Bertil Lintner, *Outrage: Burma's Struggle for Democracy* (London: White Lotus Press, 1990).

42 David Steinberg, *Turmoil in Burma: Contested Legitimacies in Myanmar* (Norwalk: East-Bridge, 2006).

norm in authoritarian regimes). During the campaign, it used a range of tactics designed to handicap the opposition. In the end, however, the Elections Commission proved its independence by counting, tabulating and reporting the result accurately. All of these errors were due to the fact that the SLORC needed to ensure the election was not only conducted freely and fairly, but in accordance with the shared beliefs (now articulated as demands) of citizens. Only then could it claim autonomous legitimacy. In the final analysis, the mistakes made were indicative of a ruling junta utterly incapable of comprehending the animosity towards it and the widespread desire for multi-party democracy.

After the election, the SLORC failed to transfer power by claiming a new constitution had to be first drafted and then approved in a referendum. This would effectively preserve the praetorian status of the military within a new regime. For the NLD, this was completely unacceptable. The process of drafting a new constitution would not only take years, but be dominated by the military. When the NLD subsequently rejected the SLORC's attempt to convene a People's Assembly to 'help' the drafting process, the consequence was a political impasse that persisted for two decades.

The State Peace and Development Council Era

By crushing the pro-democracy movement, the SLORC had compromised its claim to be the only actor capable of protecting and defending Myanmar. The fact that it was nevertheless able to maintain power during this period (and thereafter) was illustrative of how repression and co-optation can contribute to stability in the absence of legitimacy. In any case, the need for legitimation precipitated the events that followed. Domestically, the SLORC established a National Convention to draft a new constitution that would guarantee the pre-eminent role of the military in political affairs. Internationally, the Myanmar joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This entailed appropriating ASEAN's planned 'Roadmap to Democracy' for Myanmar in order to gradually improve its reputation within the organisation and accrue a range of economic and political benefits as a result. The culmination of this dual strategy was the 2010 election, which the ruling junta's de facto Union Solidarity and Development Party won in a landslide. In this instance, the election was used to feign conformity to the established rules of the constitution and simulate compliance to democratic norms.

What requires immediate clarification is the slow pace of this legitimation strategy. Given the potential dividend, why did the ruling junta take two decades to hold another election? The most obvious reason was that Than Shwe and the political elites surrounding him had initially determined that

the 'credibility' of the National Convention required the participation of the NLD. This meant its expulsion delayed the drafting process by several years. In addition, there were a wide range of other intervening factors.[43] Internally, these included the need to resolve factionalist struggles within the upper echelons of the military, expand and modernise the size of the armed forces, undertake institution building and relocate the capital from Yangon to Naypyitaw. Externally, these included the need to gain more effective control over civil society and opposition parties, sign and implement ceasefire agreements with various ethnic groups engaged in civil war, forge bilateral and multilateral relationships with key international actors, and secure some guarantee that Western sanctions would be lifted once political reform was underway. Altogether, addressing these issues required the devotion of considerable energy, resources and time from the ruling junta. This implies the resulting election and transition were a matter of patience more than anything else.

The goal of legitimating military rule via a new constitution—and, by extension, an election—began in earnest with the promotion of Than Shwe to SLORC chairman in April 1992. The model this time around was Suharto's New Order Indonesia. In December 1993, SLORC officials visited Jakarta in order to learn how the dual defence and political function of the armed forces was accommodated in the constitution.[44] The same primacy for military rule was then established in not only the 'fundamental principles' of Myanmar's National Convention, but in a law stipulating that officers would comprise 25 per cent of the legislature.[45] This effectively provided the military with a veto against future changes to the constitution. The inclusion of such laws also showed that the Convention would not produce a document befitting a democracy. Indeed, delegates were prohibited from criticising the government, lobbying

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43   On this point, see Aurel Croissant and Jil Kamerling, 'Why do military regimes institutionalize? Constitution-making and elections as political survival strategy in Myanmar', *Asian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2013), pp. 105–125; Marco Bünte, 'Burma's transition to quasi-military rule: from rulers to guardians?', *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (2014), pp. 742–764; Lee Jones, 'Explaining Myanmar's regime transition: the periphery is central', *Democratization*, Vol. 21, No. 5 (2014), pp. 780–802; Nicholas Farrelly, 'Beyond electoral authoritarianism in transitional Myanmar', *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2015), pp. 15–31.

44   Ulf Sundhaussen, 'Indonesia's New Order: a model for Myanmar', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 35, No. 8 (1995), pp. 768–780.

45   *New Light of Myanmar*, 'National Convention lays down state fundamental principles', (17 September 1993), p. 1.

other members, distributing papers and debating items outside the 'official' agenda.[46] This put added pressure on the NLD, which came to a head in November 1995, when its delegates were expelled for boycotting the meeting. The regime eventually suspended the Convention altogether on the grounds that the opposition was colluding with foreign elements to undermine state stability.[47]

The pursuit of domestic legitimation was nevertheless accompanied by parallel focus on international legitimation. Beginning in the early 1990s, the SLORC ratified numerous international human rights conventions, joined several regional groupings and invited human rights organisations into the country on a permanent basis.[48] This was followed by the first public expression of Myanmar's interest to join ASEAN in March 1995. In addition to an array of economic benefits, the most attractive drawcard for the regime was the Association's policy of non-interference in the domestic affairs of member states, usually ensured by informal interaction, non-binding agreements and consensus-based decision-making. For its part, ASEAN allegedly wanted Myanmar to join in order to prevent China from extending its military and political reach into Southeast Asia.[49] This led to Myanmar being accepted as a member in July 1997. The problem that soon emerged for the SLORC—now known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)—was an unforeseen challenge to ASEAN's policy of non-interference. In July 1998, the Thai Foreign Minister, Surin Pitsuwan, responded to ongoing criticism of Myanmar's admission by stating that members should be prepared to undertake 'constructive intervention' in the domestic affairs of others, especially when a matter threatened regional stability or ASEAN's credibility. Despite later softening his position, Pitsuwan's proposal attracted strong internal criticism. While member states did allow for a formula that affirmed their freedom to pursue 'enhanced interaction', they

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46   Janelle Diller, *The National Convention in Burma* (*Myanmar*): *An Impediment to the Restoration of Democracy* (New York: International League for Human Rights, 1996).

47   *New Light of Myanmar*, 'The law protecting the peaceful and systematic transfer of state responsibility and the successful performance of the functions of the National Convention against disturbances and oppositions' (8 June 1996), p. 1.

48   Morten Pedersen, *Promoting Human Rights in Burma: A Critique of Western Sanctions Policy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

49   See Mya Than and Tin Than, 'Implications of joining ASEAN for Myanmar', in Tai Wong and Mohan Singh (eds) *Development and Challenge: Southeast Asia in the New Millennium* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1999); Jurgen Haacke, 'China's role in the pursuit of security by Myanmar's State Peace and Development Council: boon *and* bane?', *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2010), pp. 113–137.

were staunchly opposed to any official change in the non-interference principle.[50] For the time being, then, the 'ASEAN Way' would remain in place.

Having staked its international credibility on being able to foster political change in Myanmar, ASEAN's initial approach failed to yield results. Nothing exemplified this more than the attack on Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters at Depayin in May 2003. This incident drew the most strident criticism to date from member states and liberal powers.[51] The fact the SPDC defied this demand underscored the widespread failure of what the Association now termed its 'constructive engagement' policy. (Myanmar was also due to take over the chairmanship of ASEAN in 2006, which would have further undermined the organisation's international credibility.) In a statement indicative of ASEAN's changing discourse towards Myanmar, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad lamented that 'We have done our very best to get them to change their minds ... what one state does embarrasses us, causes a problem for us ... it has affected us, our credibility.'[52] Following threats from the European Union and the United States to impose political and trade boycotts on ASEAN, the Thai foreign minister proposed the idea of a 'roadmap' to bring about national reconciliation and democratic reform in Myanmar.[53] Despite initially resisting the proposal, which included reconvening the National Convention and holding an election, the SPDC soon proposed its own roadmap for building a 'disciplined democracy'. On the whole, the plan had very little in common with the one put forward by the Thai foreign minister and endorsed by ASEAN.[54] What prompted this rapprochement? The cost of inaction became clear when ASEAN members began discussing the possibility of Myanmar's

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50   Jurgen Haacke, 'The concept of flexible engagement and the practice of enhanced inter-
      action: intramural challenges to the "ASEAN way"', *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (1999),
      pp. 581–611; Jurgen Haacke, "Enhanced interaction' with Myanmar and the project of a
      security community: is ASEAN refining or breaking with its diplomatic and security cul-
      ture?', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2005), pp. 188–216.

51   On events during this period, see Jorn Dosch, 'ASEAN's reluctant liberal turn and the
      thorny road to democracy promotion', *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (2008), pp. 527–
      545; Lee Jones, 'ASEAN's albatross: ASEAN's Burma policy, from constructive engagement
      to critical disengagement', *Asian Security*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2008), pp. 271–293.

52   Mark Baker, 'Mahathir warns Burma over Suu Kyi', *The Age* (22 July 2003), p. 9.

53   Larry Jagan, 'Seeking a way out for Rangoon', *The Bangkok Post* (9 August 2003).

54   This endorsement is expressed in ASEAN, 'Press Statement by the Chairperson of the
      9th ASEAN Summit and the 7th ASEAN+3 Summit', www.asean.org/news/item/press
      -statement-by-the-chairperson-of-the-9th-asean-summit-and-the-7th-asean-3-summit
      -bali-indonesia-7-october-2003.

expulsion following the Depayin attack and the imprisonment of Aung San Suu Kyi. Despite the make-up of ASEAN, which includes many authoritarian regimes, this threat was credible because the superseding goal was to maintain the Association's credibility among Western states.[55] In addition, ASEAN lowered the cost of compliance by actually endorsing the Myanmar plan, meaning the SPDC would control the direction, pace and scope of reform. This allowed it to tie its quest for domestic legitimacy (via a new constitution) to its pursuit of international legitimacy (via ASEAN's 'Roadmap to Democracy').

Following the first step of its roadmap (and a distorted interpretation of ASEAN's third step), the SPDC restarted the National Convention in May 2004. Since it once again excluded key opponents and enforced highly restrictive rules on its members, the constitution was able to be quickly finalised. After the draft was approved in a highly flawed referendum, an election was scheduled for November 2010. To contest it, the ruling junta utilised the newly formed USDP. Despite putting a civilian veneer on military rule, the party was led by Myanmar's fourth highest ranking general, Thein Sein, and contained 'numerous recently retired generals, government ministers, deputy ministers, and businessmen' with ties to the ruling junta.[56] This no doubt aided the USDP's subsequent victory in the election. Amid a boycott by key opposition parties and claims of widespread manipulation and misconduct, it garnered 78.4 per cent support (from 77.2 per cent turnout).

Immediately prior to the election, the SPDC paid homage to the essential criteria of political legitimacy. It did so by underscoring how it would take place in accordance with established rules: 'Time has come to build new democratic nation. The Constitution has been approved in accord with the democratisation process. The multi-party democracy general election will be held on 7 November 2010 in line with the Constitution.'[57] On election day, the SPDC went even further by emphasising how the election would also occur in accordance with the shared beliefs of citizens. This was especially the case for the principle of popular sovereignty:

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55   Stephen McCarthy, 'Burma and ASEAN: estranged bedfellows', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 48, No. 6 (2008), pp. 911–935; Matthew Davies, 'The perils of incoherence: ASEAN, Myanmar and the avoidable failures of human rights socialization', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (2012), pp. 1–22.

56   Morten Pedersen, 'The politics of Burma's "democratic" transition: prospects for change and options for democrats', *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (2011), p. 55.

57   *New Light of Myanmar*, 'Unveil new era by casting votes' (5 November 2010), p. 2.

> Voting is a basic right of a citizen. Anyone cannot bar not suppress that right. Any Myanmar citizen has the full right to vote freely. All the national people have to cast their votes in the multi-party democracy general election with a sense of duty.[58]

Against this background, the election represented a normative and symbolic act used by the ruling junta to introduce a moral component into their relationship with citizens. Despite aiming to secure a normative commitment from them (as is customary for authoritarian regimes), Thein Sein and the USDP would nevertheless settle for any benchmark ranging between apathy and instrumental acceptance. This is because fostering an obligation to obey their authority still offers a tangible incentive to hold an election.

The 2010 election also marked the endpoint of the SPDC's quest for international legitimacy. While foreign observers and the international media were generally banned from monitoring the election, diplomats of foreign missions stationed in Myanmar were permitted to observe the process. The sheer volume of media coverage, detailing where and how these representatives monitored the election, demonstrates a concerted simulation of compliance to democratic norms. Accordingly, diplomats representing Russia and Thailand viewed a 'free and happy casting vote of local people, systematic counting of ballots and putting on records with the use of designated forms at the polling stations'. Similarly, diplomats from Cambodia and Pakistan 'observed casting of votes at the polling stations and counting of ballots in Hpa-an Township'.[59] The ruling junta also put added emphasis on ASEAN's approval of the election, by publicising its endorsement across various state media outlets. The Association heralded the event as a 'significant step forward in the implementation of the seven-step Roadmap for Democracy'.[60] Ultimately, such false acclamation was illustrative of ASEAN's status as an illiberal power seeking to diminish the threat that (Western) democracy promotion posed to its geostrategic interests. In this sense, the standard of appropriate normative behaviour to be enforced was simply the occurrence of an election. It was a requirement deliberately divorced from any more substantial demand to ensure the selection of political authority was carried out freely and fairly. This was to the benefit of the ruling junta.

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58   *New Light of Myanmar*, 'Unveil new era', p. 2.
59   *New Light of Myanmar*, 'Unveil new era', pp. 9, 10.
60   *New Light of Myanmar*, 'Unveil new era', p. 1.

Electoral Legitimation and Authoritarian Stability

The task now is to analyse how electoral legitimation contributed to the stability of authoritarian rule in Myanmar. This is particularly important because of its capacity to offer insights into a broader phenomenon. The focus here is Gerschewski's claim that stabilisation occurs via three causal mechanisms: endogenous self-reinforcement, exogenous reinforcement and reciprocal reinforcement. These operate in ways that lead to the institutionalisation of legitimation and the internalisation of its norm over time. The case of Myanmar ultimately delivers strong empirical support for this theory.

During the BSPP era, the institutionalisation of electoral legitimation occurred via exogenous reinforcement. This means it was dependent upon the available power and material resources of the regime, which came in the form of a vanguard party, national ideology and mass organisations. Without these 'external drivers' to mobilise citizens, Gerschewski warns, the institutionalisation process would come to a halt. This is precisely what happened in 1988, when nationwide protests brought about the collapse of socialist ideology and the mass organisations system. In addition to paving the way for a military coup that ousted the BSPP, the protests illustrated the weakness of exogenous legitimation. Since this method of stabilisation requires 'constant' reinforcement, holding elections every four years is inherently problematic. In order to achieve stability, in fact, any shortfall of legitimacy must ostensibly be replaced by the use of repression and/or co-optation.

The SLORC era heralded profound changes to the relationship between electoral legitimation and stability in Myanmar. The most notable was the use of endogenous self-reinforcement. This refers to a path-dependent process whereby legitimation reproduces itself because actors believe it is morally just or appropriate. Using the 1990 election, the ruling junta institutionalised legitimation by nurturing the normative beliefs citizens had about multi-party democracy. From an empirical standpoint, the diffusion of this legitimacy belief was connected to high 'start-up costs' (such as the end of single-party rule) and 'network effects' (such as the registration of new parties and voters).[61] Among many other initiatives, these served to reduce the SLORC's marginal persuasion costs. Yet two problems emerged. The first was the attempt to institutionalise a new legitimation mechanism quickly, rather than over time. The second was a conflict between endogenous self-enforcement and reciprocal reinforcement. The latter refers to the functional interdependence that

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61   On these concepts, see Gerschewski, 'The three pillars', p. 26.

exists between legitimation, repression and co-optation. Despite the possibility of complementarity, Gerschewski stresses that 'Repression comes with unintended consequences and can weaken the legitimation function'.[62] This was clearly evident in Myanmar. By repeatedly cracking down on protesters and keeping Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest, the SLORC unwittingly made the ensemble of legitimation and repression incompatible for stability. This helps explain the internal disdain for elections that subsequently emerged.

The institutionalisation mechanism for electoral legitimation reverted back to exogenous reinforcement under the SPDC. This is because the power and material resources possessed by it this time provided the means to externally drive stabilisation. Ahead of the 2010 election, it was able to craft a highly favourable constitution, cultivate the support of ASEAN, establish a national party, minimise the impact of the opposition and place loyalists in key positions of government. Indeed, nothing exemplified the SPDC's capacity to steer institutionalisation more than its implicit selection of the constitution and an international organisation as the ultimate arbiters of legitimacy (rather than citizens). Having now enshrined (de facto) military domination, exogenous reinforcement is likely to give way to endogenous self-reinforcement as the ruling party seeks 'higher returns' from the institutionalisation of electoral legitimation.[63]

Conclusion

This article analysed how authoritarian regimes use elections for legitimation and the contribution this action makes to stability. Seeking to elevate this function alongside existing explanations, two strategies were identified. Domestically, elections are used to feign conformity to established rules of the political system and/or shared beliefs of citizens. With varying emphasis on participation, the aim is to foster a normative commitment towards the incumbent dictator, military junta or ruling party. Internationally, elections are used to simulate compliance to democratic norms about the appropriate method of selecting political authority. The standard of appropriateness varies, however, depending on whether liberal or illiberal powers are enforcing this norm. This dual framework was then applied to the case of Myanmar. From 1962 onwards, the empirical evidence showed that elections have been employed to pursue

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62   Gerschewski, 'The three pillars', p. 28.
63   Gerschewski, 'The three pillars', p. 26.

both strategies. The approach alternated between mass legitimacy under the BSPP, autonomous legitimacy under the SLORC and then autonomous and international legitimacy (from ASEAN) under the SPDC. This manifested corresponding changes in the way electoral legitimation acted as a causal mechanism for authoritarian stability. In an example of the challenges and opportunities that exist for all authoritarian regimes, stabilisation occurred via a mix of endogenous self-reinforcement, exogenous reinforcement and reciprocal reinforcement. Notwithstanding this long-term success, one outstanding issue is how electoral legitimation combined with repression and co-optation to produce authoritarian stability in Myanmar.

The fact authoritarian rule has persisted for over five decades is testament to the strong complementarity that exists between the three pillars of stability. It affirms Gerschewski's claim that 'certain combinations of pillar specifications "go together"'.[64] In Myanmar, the exact configuration has been dynamic; adjusting to not only the specific institutional arrangement of the regime, but the broader political environment within which it operated. The one constant, however, has been co-optation.[65] Since 1962, successive dictators have proven adept at striking a balance between enforcing control and promoting co-operation within the upper echelons of the military-cum-party. This has occurred through the systematic collection of incriminating evidence against potential rivals, but also the granting of reserve domains of operation to them. Such an approach has been all the more necessary given the distinct lack of formal institutional arrangements for succession to the top positions and the factionalism that often accompanies praetorian politics. Beyond co-optation, there was also a lasting, but alternating, relationship between legitimation and repression. Under the BSPP, low-intensity coercion (e.g. intimidation, physical harassment and surveillance) was used to manufacture apparent unanimity across four separate elections. By comparison, high-intensity coercion (e.g. crackdown on demonstrations, imprisonment of opposition leaders) was problematically employed by the SLORC during the 1990 election. This changed for the 2010 election. Here the quest of domestic legitimation and pursuit of international legitimation was conditional upon the use of low-intensity coercion by the SPDC. The history of authoritarian elections in Myanmar is thus demonstrative of an enduring capacity to achieve authoritarian stability through a combination of legitimation, repression and co-optation.

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64   Gerschewski, 'The three pillars', p. 29.

65   Kyaw Hlaing, 'Setting the rules for survival: why the Burmese military regime survives in an age of democratization', in William Case (ed.) *Contemporary Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia: Structures, Institutions and Agency* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).

A further issue concerns the implications of the preceding analysis for Myanmar's 2015 election. This will invariably depend on the path the USDP (and the military) decide to take given the underlying popularity of the NLD under Aung San Suu Kyi. In line with past elections, the first and least likely option would be to steal the result through a combination of manipulation and misconduct. The problem is that doing so would not only jeopardise the substantial gains made since the start of the reform process, including the lifting of international sanctions, but make a mockery of the claim that Myanmar is transitioning to democracy. The second and more likely option is that the USDP will allow a relatively clean election to take place and acquiesce to an NLD victory. This would actually be in keeping with the Indonesian model adopted by the SLORC in the early 1990s and institutionalised thereafter via the 2008 constitution. Despite having to cede executive authority, the military would nevertheless retain a quarter of all seats in parliament (giving it an effective veto on constitutional changes), control the critically important Border Affairs, Defence and Home Affairs ministries; and oversee the entire structure of local governance through the General Administration Department. In sum, a USDP election loss would still allow the military to remain a key political actor in Myanmar for the foreseeable future. Against this backdrop, the 2015 election would provide a means to pursue stability via endogenous self-reinforcement, whereby the military would seek a higher return as a result of established political costs and existing learning effects.[66] This includes the way its alternative project of a civilian-front party may become too costly to maintain in the face of domestic and international pressure for democratisation. It also includes the knowledge acquired from the 1990 election, whereby the ruling junta was caught completely off guard by the NLD's victory and the probable consequences. By using the 2015 election to resolve these tensions, the military may be able to reap the legitimacy it requires to maintain a prominent (but not pre-eminent) position in Myanmar's national politics.

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66   Gerschewski, 'The three pillars', pp. 24–27.