

## Civil Society Endorsement on Democratization: A Lesson from Myanmar

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**Abstract.** Democracy and democratization are a spectrum of universal values that describe a condition regarding community involvement in a country's government and political systems. One of the pillars that can be used as a measure of democracy and the democratization process is the presence of the role of civil society because one of its functions is to represent the involvement of the community in participating and criticizing government policies. One interesting topic to discuss regarding the role of civil society is its efforts to restore the democratic system when the authoritarian regime rises to power. This study aims to examine the process of empowering civil society under authoritarian leadership by taking a case study in Myanmar. By using qualitative methods, this research uses secondary data by elaborating the study of literature, documents, and other sources related to the role of civil society in Myanmar. The results of this study indicate that the contribution of the civil society under the authoritarian regime of Myanmar faces enormous challenges. However, it still has the potential to support the democratization process by underpinning civil society with three processes: decreasing multiethnicity segregation, gaining support from INGOs, and strengthening backup from the young generation.

**Keywords:** Civil Society; Democracy; Democratization; Authoritarianism; Myanmar.

**Abstrak.** Demokrasi dan demokratisasi merupakan sebuah spektrum atas nilai universal yang menggambarkan suatu kondisi menyangkut keterlibatan masyarakat dalam sistem pemerintahan maupun politik suatu negara. Salah satu pilar yang dapat digunakan sebagai pengukur demokrasi maupun proses demokratisasi adalah hadirnya peran *civil society*, karena salah satu fungsinya yang dapat merepresentasikan keterlibatan lapisan masyarakat dalam berpartisipasi dan mengkritisi kebijakan pemerintah. Salah satu topik mengenai peran *civil society* yang menarik untuk dibahas adalah upayanya dalam mengembalikan sistem demokrasi ketika rezim otoriter mulai berkuasa. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menelaah proses pemberdayaan *civil society* di bawah kepemimpinan otoritarianisme dengan mengambil studi kasus di Myanmar. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif, penelitian ini menggunakan data sekunder dengan mengelaborasi studi literatur, dokumen, serta sumber lainnya yang berkaitan dengan peran *civil society* di Myanmar. Hasil dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa kontribusi *civil society* di bawah rezim otoriter Myanmar menghadapi tantangan yang besar namun masih memiliki potensi dalam mendukung proses demokratisasi melalui penguatan peran *civil society* melalui tiga proses yaitu meminimalisir isu perbedaan etnis, meningkatkan dukungan dari

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## INTRODUCTION

Democracy and democratization have become a global issue widely discussed since the end of the cold war, marked by the collapse of the Soviet Union's communist system in 1991. This phenomenon has become a contemporary study highlighting how developing countries worldwide have begun to transition from an authoritarian system of government to a more open one by providing broad opportunities for its people to participate in the government process. Many previous studies have discussed how countries must struggle to minimize obstacles in implementing democratization. Such studies are (Shivji, 2013; Laflamme, 2015; Harkness, 2016), which focused on studies of the African region, (Liñán & Mainwaring, 2013; Estévez, 2014) examined the study of the Latin American region, and (Slater, 2012; Cheesman, 2014) which discussed conditions in Southeast Asia.

One of the pillar elements of democracy is the emergence of the role of civil society, indicated by the active and dynamic involvement of the community in criticizing political life and acting independently without government intervention. Civil society's role can be represented by realizing non-governmental institutions in society that include various elements of groups such as social organizations, social groups, Non-Governmental Organizations, interest groups, religious organizations, or other community associations.

One of the critical roles of civil society is to limit and control government power (Diamond, 2004). This function then makes the role of civil society a barometer of the success of creating a democratic government system. Ultimately, the international community encourages various countries to carry out the democratization process by supporting the transition from non-democratic to democratic regimes. In this transition process, which is not entirely smooth, the struggles and pressures of the incumbent regime still in power become a significant obstacle to the development of civil society.

This research focuses on the concept and context of the role of civil society under the pressure of authoritarian regimes, especially in Southeast Asia, by taking the case of Myanmar as an example since Myanmar has struggled with the authoritarian system under military regimes for decades. Freedom and the peace

process become a crucial agenda for Myanmar's people; therefore, creating a robust civil society will be a potential vehicle to oppose the government and propose liberty of human rights in this country.

Previous studies about civil society in Myanmar revealed that the movement is still limited by ethnic segregation (Petrie & South, 2014). Civil society also plays a crucial role as an agent to promote political education, especially in the young generation (Lidauer, 2012), but even though civil society does subsist, the role in condemning government policies is limited (Turnell, 2011). This research tends to fill the gap from previous findings and aims to reveal how to empower civil society under an authoritarian system and find the possible strategy for civil society to succeeding the democratization process in Myanmar. The qualitative method is an analytical tool to explore the role of civil society in Myanmar by using literature studies from various sources and documents related to these problems. This research will eventually refer to how ideally, civil society can be strengthened to support the creation of a democratization process even though it is under pressure from an authoritarian government.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Role of Civil Society in Myanmar

Civil society in Myanmar is ingrained in cultural norms, social aspects, and religious practices. However, in its development, the Civil Society in Myanmar grew because it was influenced by political liberalization and the democratic movement. Although the term "Civil Society" became prevalent during the democratic transition in 2011, community-based and faith-based organizations had already operated in Myanmar for decades earlier. These various organizations emerged based on the initiation and were managed by the youth community and religious leaders. Since the colonial era, these elements have actively participated in social activities and community development (Zin, 2016).

Civil society has been widely discussed since Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in 2008. The Myanmar community defines civil society as a collection of communities or organizations that work and drive to fight for the community's interests and operate

outside the state and government sectors. The civil society classification includes trade unions, non-profit organizations, foundations, churches, and various institutions that provide social services such as education, health, and food (Lewis, 2014). In addition, other researchers describe the civil society in Myanmar as a group that seeks to make social decisions outside the direct control of the state and has no tendency to take sides or support the state (Freeman, 2012). Therefore, civil society has a vital role in democracy and democratization in Myanmar. Ideally, the role of civil society in Myanmar should be able to perform the following functions (Diamond, 2004):

1. Limiting and controlling the policies issued by the state
2. Exposing corrupt practices carried out by state officials and campaigning for the implementation of good-governance reforms
3. Promoting the implementation of political participation
4. Developing other values of democratic life such as tolerance, compromise, respect for differences of opinion, and respect for different perceptions
5. Developing various activities and programs related to democratic community education in schools.
6. Facilitating and providing an arena to express different interests and appeals
7. Supporting the creation of a negotiation and lobbying process for different needs related to the interests of particular communities such as women, students, farmers, environmentalists, trade association associations, lawyers, doctors, et cetera.
8. Providing various forms of cross-interest and solidarity concepts that previously collided with the old concept of differences in ethnicity, language, religion, and other related identities.
9. Providing opportunities as a training arena for future political leaders
10. Providing information to the public regarding important issues concerning the general public
11. Having a significant role as a mediator and helping to resolve various conflicts that arise in all aspects

12. Holding a vital function in following and carrying out the evaluation process and analysis of the implementation of the general election

The structure of civil society in Myanmar can traditionally be found at the local level from religious associations initiated by Buddhist and Christian religious communities who actively campaign issues related to social welfare and focus on issues of poverty, health, and constraints in meeting daily needs by specific communities. However, in areas that are difficult to reach for supervision by the central government and where military conflicts often occur, civil society plays a critical role in carrying out the service functions that the government should carry out (Transnational Institute and Burma Center Netherlands, 2011).

### Classification of Civil Society in Myanmar

Myanmar has had a long history under military dictatorships, which slowly opened up to partial democracy. Despite being under a dictatorship government, civil society's existence has never yielded and has even grown over time. In 2019, more than 10,000 civil society organizations were still actively participating in Myanmar (SwissPeace, 2019). In general, civil society in Myanmar is divided into three groups based on size, origin, and scope of activity, i.e., Community-Based Organizations, Local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and International NGOs (Maung, 2019):

#### A. Community-Based Organization (CBO)

CBOs are informal and voluntary organizations usually formed at the village level and are engaged in social issues and religious functions. In addition, CBOs also often raise issues of poverty alleviation, improvement of health quality, improvement of educational systems and facilities, and social services. CBOs are mostly religious organizations and provide funeral or emergency relief services to families and communities. Due to its voluntary basis, CBOs usually do not provide compensation to their staff. The government or statistical agencies release no accurate data regarding the number of CBOs in Myanmar though it was estimated that in 2014, around 214,000 CBOs were operating in Myanmar (ADB, 2014).

In general, it can be said that CBO is a philanthropic organization based at the community level and based on social and cultural norms. Most of its performance focuses on social and religious functions. Buddhist religious organizations are the most common form of CBO and are the oldest CBOs formed in Myanmar. This organization has a considerable influence on the people of Myanmar. This organization has traditionally grown and developed from donations from the local community, though it is also possible to receive donations from international donors. This condition aligns with the opinion that religious organizations can be categorized as civil society following the western definition. In addition, it can be observed that the majority of Civil Society in Myanmar also has the initiative to raise funds from the international community who have the same religious background and international religious organizations. This applies to the majority of Buddhists and communities of other religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. In addition, the characteristics of the Civil Society organization in Myanmar are more targeted at more specific ethnic groups. This condition occurs in the internal structure of organizations operating in areas with a certain ethnic majority and in several organizations operating in urban areas and central cities of Myanmar (Matelski, 2013).

## **B. Local NGOs**

Local NGOs grow and develop in urban areas, provincial capitals, and population centers. This form of Civil Society emphasizes its efforts to maintain good relations with the community. Local NGOs are usually not officially documented by the government, often have staff who are regularly paid and have special skills, are connected to regional and national NGO networks, and do not rule out international NGOs. In particular ethnic areas, many local NGOs have connections with military groups. In addition, several large NGOs with links to the ministries under the central government often synergize with the government and other development-related entities to implement various projects in various sectors such as improving health services, regional development, improving the quality of education, and also improvement of infrastructure facilities that support the agricultural sector. In 2014, the Asian Development Bank estimated that around 270 local NGOs actively operating in Myanmar (ADB, 2014). This number was expected to continue to grow

in line with the era of media openness and the growth of various interests related to the non-governmental sector in Myanmar.

### **C. International NGOs**

International NGOs grow and develop in Myanmar by accommodating various responses to problems related to humanity and long-term development in various sectors such as environmental development, health, education, welfare, law, advocacy, and capacity development of Civil Society. In the 1990s, the number of International NGOs was particularly small. However, its growth began to appear in two waves, i.e., when Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in 2008 and since Myanmar began to impose a new form of government in early 2011.

The presence of international NGOs in Myanmar also encourages domestic civil societies to improve their connections with other international institutions to develop their organizations further and get better financial support. However, the presence of international NGOs also brings challenges for local NGOs. When international NGOs begin to expand in Myanmar, and local NGOs want collaboration, foreign stakeholders will need quality local partners, staff with qualified expertise, regular training, and practical input that is oriented towards the field. What transpired afterward, for example, the problem in Yangon, the civil society community there would spend more time coordinating, holding meetings, conducting training, and discussing than going to the field to implement their work plans. The positive impact of this phenomenon is that coordination among all levels of civil society is remarkable. This can be manifested when several NGOs collaborate to work on a project, the cooperation network is increased, and a better transfer of information. In 2007 there were around 110 International NGOs in Myanmar (MIMU, 2021).

As an international NGO, the UN has been present in Myanmar as a mediator to resolve the civil war and provided humanitarian assistance during the military dictatorship period. The UN worked directly in coordination with the community under the restricted mandate from 1993 to 2012. Based on the UN Myanmar report as an agenda of the United Nations General Assembly since 1993, several UN agencies



with particular objectives (as listed below) operate with specific missions. This specialized agency of the United Nations is directly responsible to the United Nations. Coordination, development, and humanitarian activities are under the direct supervision of the United Nations. These institutions are also authorized to collaborate and cooperate with the local Civil Society in Myanmar. These institutions also received a mandate from the UN Assemble/Security Council to report on the actions of government actors in Myanmar (Nwalie, 2020).

**Table 1. Various UN agencies in Myanmar**

No.	Name of Agencies	Role
1	UN RC/HC (United Nations Resident / Humanitarian Coordinator	Coordinating development programs and humanitarian activities initiated by the United Nations and other partner institutions, as well as improving the effectiveness and efficiency of other operational activities
2	UNOCHA (United Nations Office for Coordination of Human Affairs)	Mobilizing and coordinating effective humanitarian action by pursuing cooperation between national and international actors. This collaboration's main objectives are to relieve the suffering of natural disaster victims and those who are in critical condition, provide advocacy assistance for those who need it but cannot afford it, provide direction to the community to always be vigilant, and prevent various things that can lead to humanitarian disasters.



3	UNIC (United Nations Information Center)	Ensuring the availability of reliable sources of information regarding the United Nations, providing information for all levels of society, including journalists, students, educators, researchers, and government representatives
4	MIMU (Myanmar Information Management Unit)	Providing up-to-date information exchange services for the humanitarian and development communities by enhancing the coordination, processing, collection, analysis, and dissemination of information
5	UNDSS (United Nations Department of Safety and Security)	Providing input regarding security issues to related government elements, Myanmar security management team, UN agencies, programs and funding, INGOs, and other UN Cooperation partners

Source: UNMyanmar Report 2020

### Challenges and Obstacles of Civil Society in Myanmar

The development of the civil society in Myanmar experienced ups and downs and faced various challenging obstacles. The domination of the military regime and the authoritarian system of government is the most formidable obstacle for civil society to carry out its functions optimally in pursuing the democratization process. In understanding the various challenges faced by civil society in Myanmar, the following will present the conditions of civil society in several post-independence periods of Myanmar related to the influence of political conditions during certain periods:

1) Burma under democratic rule (1948-1962)

This period is the post-independence period in Burma, where civil society began to grow in various urban areas. During the reigns of presidents Sao Shwe Thaik (1948-1952) and Win Maung (1957-1962), as well as Prime Minister U Nu (1948-1962), the freedom of civil society activities, especially in urban areas, was well maintained. However, paramilitary organizations and local political figures became obstacles when they tried to suppress the emergence of differences of opinion and interests promoted by civil society and independent organizations in rural areas.

2) General Ne Win's Military Coup (1962)

The military coup in 1962 was based on General Ne Win's idea that the democratic system was unsuitable to be implemented in Myanmar. This coup eventually drove Ne Win to become the Prime Minister of Myanmar. Ne Win's policy was to freeze the constitution and dissolve the legislature. As a result of this policy, various forms of civil society had to be dissolved, and only organizations under the control of the government were allowed to operate as voices of the government's interest. Therefore, during the years 1962-1988, Myanmar fell under the authoritarian rule of the military regime.

3) During the pro-democracy demonstrations (1988)

Massive demonstrations took place in Myanmar in 1988, led by student movements from various universities. These demonstrations happened in almost all cities in Myanmar and were known as the 8888 Rebellion. The primary purpose of these student protests was to overthrow the Ni We regime, which since 1962 has implemented a totalitarian system with one-party principles and carried out economic isolation in Myanmar. During this period, Myanmar's iconic figure Aung San Su Kyi, emerged and founded the National League for Democracy (NLD) party and forced the military junta to hold general elections in 1990. The civil society movement re-emerged with the massive growth of student organizations, political parties, politics, and independent media during this period.

#### 4) 1990 General Election

In 1990, a multi-party election was held in Myanmar for the first time involving 93 political parties. The NLD party under Aung San Su Kyi won this election by winning 392 seats out of a total of 492 seats contested. However, the military junta did not accept the results of these elections and continued to rule until 2011. The military junta later declared that many political parties were illegal. This prompted new pressure for the civil society movement after it was discovered in 1988 that they had the opportunity to develop. Under the NLD and the government of Aung San Suu Kyi, and several ethnic minor political parties, civil society has consistently worked to restore democracy in Myanmar.

#### 5) 1990-2011 (State Peace and Development Council/SPDC)

Since the military junta rejected the results of the 1990 elections, the military regime has again put restrictions on the development of civil society. The military junta formed the State Peace and Development Council/SPDC, which was a renewal of the name of the previous military government regime, the State Law and Order Restoration Council/SLORC. At this time, all general regulations were under the influence of the authorities; therefore, it was impossible to implement changes to the rules, reforms, or amendments. Public complaints regarding the weakening economy in Myanmar were still being accommodated, but the public was strictly prohibited from criticizing the military government. This encouraged the community to make the NLD one of the organizations to channel their aspirations.

#### 6) February 1, 2021 (Tatmadaw Coup) - Now

The democratization movement continues to be echoed by Aung San Su Kyi through her NLD party. In the 2015 and 2020 general elections, the NLD won a majority vote again. The role of civil society has re-emerged in voicing openness and justice in politics. However, on February 1, 2021, the Tatmadaw military junta political party carried out a coup to annul the results of the 2020 general election.

The military junta immediately exercised tight control over media coverage and restricted public access to communication technologies such as cellular telephone networks and the internet. The military junta government did this to prevent the

emergence of anti-government movements. International NGOs and several local organizations have initiated small-scale projects to overcome this problem though they must remain free from political elements.

After the military coup, the deteriorating conditions in Myanmar made many highly educated people opt to leave Myanmar instead of surviving various military pressures. The role of the civil society was increasingly limited and weak, many of which later surrendered due to enormous military pressure. The NLD also experienced this, which is increasingly losing its bargaining position in the Myanmar political scene.

During this coup period, the Tatmadaw implemented various legal barriers to limit the role and influence of civil society in fighting for equality, justice, and prosperity in Myanmar (Maung, 2019), such as:

1) Barriers to entry

The issued draft of international NGO law aims to regulate the functioning of international aid organizations. Based on the draft, the regulation concerning the ICNL (International Center for Not-for-profit Law) indicates that this law will unlawfully restrict INGOs through invasive monitoring, purpose limitation, activity scope, and location. This regulation serves as a basis for suspension or termination of INGO activities and the lack of appropriate protections provided by customary international law.

2) Barriers of Operation

The Speaker of the Lower House, Win Myint, issued a restrictive order to all levels of society, including members of parliament who must seek formal approval before participating in events organized by NGOs and CSOs. This endorsement is a significant barrier to organizing events that promote social accountability and civic engagement in community and policy advocacy work. In addition, local government restrictions on meetings and other activities organized by civil society groups, community-based organizations, and informal networks have increased.

### 3) Barriers to speech and advocacy

Several laws, including the Anti-Defamation Act, Official Secrets Act, Electronic Transactions Act, and Telecommunications Act, have been used to control freedom of expression and speech in Myanmar. The law has also become an instrument in prosecuting freedom of expression cases. Ordinary citizens are the most prominent group facing prosecution for practicing self-expression on social media or writing about public complaints to the relevant authorities.

### 4) Barriers to gathering

The Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Act provide freedom and space for Civil Society to gather and carry out an activity to attract public attention. However, every civil society organization must apply for a permit and obtain government approval before holding a meeting activity. Otherwise, the activity will be claimed as a violation. If the violation continues, the government will not hesitate to arrest and imprison the organizers and all parties who protest.

### 5) Barriers to Resources

Civil society organizations are not allowed to access various resources that come from international funding without approval from the government since 2011. The 2014 Association Registration Law also explains that registered organizations can receive assistance from foreign governments, international NGOs, or private donors. However, this condition can be a significant obstacle for unregistered civil society organizations. These organizations will find it challenging to obtain support from various international organizations outside Myanmar.

## The Opportunities of Civil Society Organizations in Myanmar

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) still play an essential role in turning Myanmar into a pluralist society in which power is decentralized, and differences are respected. Myanmar has abundant numbers of CSOs, but the multiethnicity problem has become a big issue in conducting a massive movement. A similar problem occurred in Africa when military coups and multiethnicity manipulation remained obstacles in the democratization process (Harkness, 2016). However, in this case, CSOs in

Myanmar are still better at proposing protests to the government. Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) against the post-coup military regime in Myanmar conducted by CSOs and a broad range of society still possibly happened several times. This fascinating condition can contribute to eliminating the multiethnicity problem and allow CSOs to work together more systematically and have consensus on specific issues and principles, and it will gain strength and influence. On the other hand, CSOs also can add valuable data and input to government decisions and policymaking through advocacy, collaboration, and dialogue.

Taking another example from some authoritarian countries in Latin America, such as Argentina, Peru, and Ecuador, the absence of institutional changes is another problem for the democratization process (Estévez, 2014). The condition in Myanmar is not different from those countries. The government designed many barrier policies to save their threat from institutional changes. Another opportunity for the CSOs to solve this problem is by expanding external support to promote civil society's role in Myanmar, including in the areas controlled by ethnic opposition groups. New entry points for such international support exist, especially in cooperation with Myanmar's Asian neighbors. International NGOs, such as some UN agencies, can also be used as an ultimate tool for increasing the role and improvement of CSOs in Myanmar.

Local CSOs also have an excellent opportunity to team up with international support, and there are some possible actions that CSOs should implement to gain the partnership:

1. Focus on the support of communities by elaborating prevalent programs with the INGOs
2. Expand the scope of Civil Society, for example, by empowering businessmen communities, faith-based communities
3. Developing the leadership aspect to improve the bargaining position of CSOs
4. Propose financial assistance to support the continuity of CSOs operation

Another opportunity for CSOs to empower the Civil Society role in Myanmar is by gaining massive support from the young generation, especially students and professionals. CSOs should promote political education and literacy by conducting seminars, discussions, or dialogue. Youth organizations, specifically - ethnic youth

organizations -, play a vital part in planning, encouraging, and reporting the continuous peace negotiations. Young activists and youth leaders have a strong idealism and motivation to herding the peace process in Myanmar.

## CONCLUSION

SPDC and the NLD both need to reassure their supporters to reach an agreement on future political structures. The SPDC will have to get the full backing of the military, which will be fearful that a deal could result in instability. The NLD will have to prepare its supporters for the compromise over the military's political involvement necessary for a deal. On the other hand, civil society organizations will be important in creating the backing for any solution and consolidating the democratization process once it begins but are not likely to be crucial players in achieving momentum for change. International NGOs play a crucial role in boosting the democratization process in Myanmar.

The contribution of the International Agencies as International NGOs under the supervision of the UN Security Council has been massive and productive in several dimensions. The agencies go beyond the conflicting area in exercising their respective mandate. Furthermore, the prospect of the rebellion is to be inclusive of the decision-making process of the Myanmar government, which is part of the UN agenda in peace management in Myanmar.

Yet, this research underscores three main arguments to empower Civil Society in Myanmar. First, by decreasing the multiethnicity segregation issue. CSOs should collaborate to harmonize the vision in increasing the people's support. The Civil Disobedience Movement opposing the government, which is severally held, can be a vital instrument for this collaboration process. Second, by gaining support from International NGOs. Local NGOs and community-based organizations need International NGOs to support echoing their problem into the global communities, and it helps them reach the aids from the international society. Finally, by strengthening the backup from the young generation by promoting political awareness and political education.



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