

The Study of Myanmar Egress: Civil Society in Partnership with the State

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Received: 5 November 2023

Revised: 28 May 2024

Accepted: 29 May 2024

Abstract

The previous studies of so-called political transition in Myanmar after 2010 widely spotlights the significant role of civil society groups. Myanmar Egress is inevitable in any study related to civil society in Myanmar and widely recognised as a group willing to work with the military regime for country change. However, the role of Myanmar Egress for the transition was unclear whether it should be understood as a civil society group or a regime's advocate. This has created confusion about relation between civil society and the State. The present article uses the lens of Simone Chambers and Jeffrey Kopstein on the relation of Civil Society to the State to examine the role of Myanmar Egress in the particular period, pre and post 2010, and the contemporary context following the 2021 military coup. Through a qualitative research method consisting of in-depth interviews, and secondary data from published articles, this study observes the relation between a civic group like Myanmar Egress and the State toward the transition to military-sponsored democracy. The case study demonstrates that Myanmar Egress was the main actor which paved the way for political transition in 2010. Although Egress put enormous effort into regime change but as it turns out, such changes were part and parcel of military-sponsored democracy. The study examines Myanmar Egress's relation to the state in two types: civil society in dialogue with the state; and civil society in partnership with the state.

Keywords Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar Egress, National League for Democracy, Third Force, Myanmar's Political Transition

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1. Introduction

History reveals that Myanmar ruling military generals used the constitution as a tool to steer political system. General Ne Win drafted 1974 constitution to create one party rule system under the title of Burmese Way to Socialism. Senior General Than Shwe's ultimate goal to create the 2008 constitution was to place the Tatmadaw² in the leading role in national politics (Aung Shin, 2016, p. 84). One of the basic principles in the 2008 constitution is "enabling the Defence Services to participate in the National political leadership role of the State" (2008 Constitution, 2008, p. 3).

The military regime viewed the NLD³ and other prodemocracy forces including exiled opposition groups, political parties and the 88 generation student groups as troublemakers. So they tried to find a way to work with ethnic nationality forces. Since Than Shwe became chairman of the SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) in 1992, he prepared to organize a national convention to draft the constitution. The first phase of National Convention was held between 1993 to 1996. The regime invited not only political parties and the 1990 elected MPs but also ethnic representatives, peasants, workers, intellectuals and academics, government employees and other invited persons while Aung San Suu Kyi and key political activists were being detained. When Aung San Suu Kyi was released from the first house arrest in 1995, she criticised National Convention as undemocratic and soon the NLD delegates boycotted the convention.

While the NLD and political activists denied the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council)⁴ as a legitimate government, the junta tried to legitimize itself by consolidating the ceasefire agreements with the ethnic insurgency groups. 17 different large armed groups and a number of smaller organisations entered into ceasefire agreements in the 1990s. Because of ceasefire agreements with the ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), the SPDC was able to build "negative peace" (Galtung & Fischer, 2013, p. 173), the absence of violence and war in the area controlled by ethnic insurgents by sharing "nominal internal governmental autonomy" (Taylor, 2009, pp. 375-476). The SPDC set Myanmar's roadmap to

² The Tatmadaw is the official Burmese name of the state's armed forces composed of the army, the navy and the air force operated under the Ministry of Defense.

³ The National League for Democracy (NLD) party was founded in September 1988. Aung San Suu Kyi is one of the founding members of the NLD, one of the most influential political parties in pro-democracy movement in Myanmar.

⁴ From 1988 to 1997, the SPDC was known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council. In 1997, SLORC was abolished and reconstituted as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

democracy which include different phases including holding National Convention, drafting a new constitution, holding a national referendum to endorse the draft constitution, then holding free and fair election and finally transferring power to the elected government. In the second phase of National Convention between 2004-2007, 8 years after the NLD boycotted the convention, the SPDC included ceasefire groups as delegates in the convention. The SPDC played two cards, opposition groups including the NLD and alliances and EAOs, very well in its political game.

Later the SPDC concluded the convention in September 2007 and ratified the new constitution in 2008. However the SPDC could not make the political oppositions and EAOs happy with the draft constitution. The NLD and allied political parties called for a ‘No’ vote for the referendum. Ceasefire groups and ethnic nationality forces, responded various ways to amend the draft constitution and the referendum but their demands received little attention from SPDC (Taylor, 2009, pp. 375-476).

While the regime was preparing to ratify the new constitution with a national referendum in 2008, a civil society group formed by Myanmar scholars and oligarchs advocated the concept of “unlinking political changes with Aung San Suu Kyi” (Hlaing, 2014, p. 32). Kyaw Yin Hlaing explained the logic behind this. “Western sanctions on Myanmar were not achieving their desired effects, and that if NLD and the junta could not find a way to work together, Myanmar people should think about unlinking political changes with Aung San Suu Kyi” (Hlaing, 2014, p. 32). Kyaw Yin Hlaing was one of the founding members of Myanmar Egress.

The concept was introduced at a Myanmar Studies Conference in Singapore in 2006. The founders of Myanmar Egress (ME) attended the conference and introduced the idea of forming a civil society group willing to work with the military regime for country change. ME was widely known as the Third Force among local and international communities for its advocacy for regime change. ME can be called the pioneer of Myanmar civil society as it created a space for civil society in Myanmar before 2010. In any study related to civil society in Myanmar, Egress is inevitable.

Myanmar Egress (ME) was created in 2006 at the initiative of seven founding members (Nay Win Maung, Sonny Nyunt Thein, Hla Maung Shwe, Tin Maung Thann, Ye Myat Thu, Kyaw Ni Khin & Kyaw Yin Hlaing) who put together their network across the divides of Myanmar social, political and economic scene. It is stated that Myanmar Egress is “committed to state building through positive change in a progressive yet constructive collaboration and

working relationship with the government and all interest groups, both local and foreign.”⁵

ME provided various trainings for civic education across the country. It was one of the most powerful organizations run by businessmen who had a close connection with families of military elites. It is not unexpected that Egress could build a good relationship with the military elite because the regime wanted to share political space with their trusted alliances rather than the political oppositions and the EAOs. ME played several roles including capacity building of military elite and local CSOs, shaping public opinion through its own media, being a Think Tank organization to feed related policy inputs to the governing body, and the like.

The author Kyaw Yin Hlaing notes, “...because Myanmar Egress (ME) was the most organized and engaging group, it gradually became synonymous with the Third Force” (Hlaing, 2014, p. 35). International community highly recognized Myanmar's reform process as political progress. Former general Thein Sein was appointed as President after 2010 elections. Thousands of political prisoners, including opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, were released, the media censorship system was abolished and press freedom increased during the term of President Thein Sein. Later Myanmar peace process was initiated by the Thein Sein government's chief negotiators together with special advisors from ME and the leaders of the Ethnic Armed Organization (EAO) (Myat, 2023)⁶.

In 2015, the leading opposition party, the NLD, won a landslide⁷ in the elections, and became the first elected civilian government in 53 years. The party leader Aung San Suu Kyi led the government with a newly formed state's position, “State Counselor.” However, the military generals did not collaborate with the Aung San Suu Kyi government. The democratic reform process under the Aung San Suu Kyi government was slowed down due to the military's unwillingness to take part in the reform process. In the 2020 elections, the NLD won a landslide victory again but the military staged another coup and overthrew the ruling NLD government.

This paper explores the political deadlock before 2010 and identifies the role of Myanmar Egress in the political pathway. The analytical sections examine

⁵ Egress's profile can be found in the evaluation report on Egress's civic education project released in 28 November 2013 (UNDEF, 2013)

⁶ This article is an advanced version of the previous article included as a chapter in the book, Myanmar's Changing Political Landscape: Old and New Struggles. This article has a particular focus on the role of Myanmar Egress in Myanmar political changes, and Civil Society-State relations in the 2010 transition.

⁷ The NLD party won landslide victory in 1990 general elections but the military regime ignored the result and didn't handover power to the NLD.

the role of Myanmar Egress before and after 2010, its relation to the state and the NLD Government and Civil Society. This inquiry is guided by two questions: 1) what is the role of Myanmar Egress before and after 2010 political transition? and 2) what is Myanmar Egress's relation to the State? This study argues that the role of Myanmar Egress was beyond a civil society group and in line with the Tatmadaw's idea of nation-building. Through the lens of Chambers and Kopstein, the relations of Egress and military regime can be found in two types: civil society in dialogue with the state; and civil society in partnership with the state.

2. Research Methodology

For this paper, I have taken qualitative research method consisting of interviews, and secondary data from published articles with a particular focus on the case study of Myanmar. The article uses civil society-state relations as theoretical framework. I have applied the lens of Simone Chambers and Jeffrey Kopstein to examine the relations of civil society and the state in Myanmar in the particular period, pre and post 2010, and the contemporary context following the 2021 military coup. Through the relationship between a civil society organization such as Myanmar Egress and the state as a case study, this article explains what type of civil society-state relations exists in Myanmar. To gain an insightful analysis for the paper, I have conducted interviews with ten individuals including two Egress alumni, one Egress' coworker, a former member of parliament, a former minister of Chin State, three members of civil society groups, one journalist and one political analyst. Most interviews were conducted via email, telephone and Signal application due to stay-home restrictions for covid-19 pandemic and political unrests across the country. A few face-to-face interviews were conducted too. I received answers from my respondents in both Burmese and English language. Telephone interviews were recorded. Most interviews were conducted with the consents. Some of them have given permission to use their identity but some want to remain anonymous. For them, I use only interview code numbers to put their insights. There were obstacles in communication for interviews because some of my respondents are staying in liberated area and outside of Myanmar due to security concern as the country is in political turmoil.

3. Conceptual Framework

Max Weber defines the state as “the monopoly over the legitimated use of coercive Gewalt/power”. Weber views the state as inherent to the conduct of human affairs in complex societies—and implies the use of legitimated violence as rulers effectively exercise dominion over the people and territory they rule

(Weber, Waters, & Waters, 2015, p. 11). Consistent with Weber's classical philosophy, Post and Rosenblum define government is the agency responsible for controlling private armies and private oppression. It sets limits to the authority of associations over their members and outsiders, and protects against at least the worst oppression by private authorities (Rosenblum & Post, 2002, p. 8).

Civil society is defined as "a source of legitimacy and stability for government and a source of resistance against arbitrary, oppressive, and overweening government" (Rosenblum & Post, 2002, p. 1). The core argument of Post and Rosenblum on civil society-state relation explains "Every form of civil society recognizes that groups and associations are not coterminous with the state. Groups and associations need not be sovereign to flourish" (Rosenblum & Post, 2002, pp. 1-7).

Post and Rosenblum conceptualize the boundary between government and civil society but they emphasize on the democratic government but not the authoritarian regime like Myanmar military which control absolute power for more than six decades. "Push the boundary too far in the direction of government, and civil society can wither away. Push the boundary too far in the direction of civil society, and government can collapse into anarchic disorder. Yet civil society requires government to survive, and government, at least democratic government, draws deeply from the strengths of civil society" (Rosenblum & Post, 2002, p. 11). In this context, civil society and state are interlinked although both should be independence without regard to their interests.

Simone Chambers and Jeffrey Kopstein observe, for both classical and contemporary theorists, civil society is understood as a sphere distinct from, yet in a particular relationship with, the state. To examine relation of Myanmar Egress and the state in this study, I will apply Chambers and Kopstein's analysis on relations of civil society to the state. The authors define six types of relations:

- 1) civil society apart from the state;
- 2) civil society against the state;
- 3) civil society in dialogue with the state;
- 4) civil society in support of the state;
- 5) civil society in partnership with the state;
- 6) civil society beyond the state.

Chambers and Kopstein observe three characteristic of civil society in type 1: the voluntary nature of participation; the plural quality of activities, and the negative character of civil society's boundaries (Chambers & Kopstein, 2006, p. 365). Regards to civil society's boundaries, they discuss, "for civil society to be apart from the state in a strong sense, the state must be bound by a rule of law that

limits its interference in a meaningful way. This meaning of “apart” has clear liberal roots (Chambers & Kopstein, 2006, p. 366).

For type 2, the authors discuss the model of resistance of civil society in Eastern Europe under the communist government. Using the literature of (Konrad 1984) and (Havel 1985) on the 1989 revolution in Eastern Europe, Chambers and Kopstein discuss “a totalitarian state dependent for its stability on a depoliticized citizenry. State interests lay in actively discouraging the formation of civil society organizations even of seemingly innocuous sorts. Thus, to the extent that regimes remained stable, there was little or no civil society” (Chambers & Kopstein, 2006, p. 367). Type 2 model reflects the struggle of opposition groups under military rule in Myanmar after 1988 democracy uprising. The authors raise significant questions for type 2:

Could it be that civil society was strong enough to overthrow Communism but not strong enough to survive democracy? A further and even more interesting question is whether the kind of civil society-against-the-state dynamics that existed in late Communism is good for democracy? Street demonstrations helped bring down Communist governments in 1989. But the question remains: Is what is good for bringing down dictatorships also good for sustaining a democracy? (Chambers & Kopstein, 2006, p. 368)

Type 3 describes civil society in a creative and critical dialogue with the state. “This dialogue is characterized by a type of accountability in which the state must defend, justify, and generally give an account of its actions in answer to the multiple and plural voices raised in civil society” (Chambers & Kopstein, 2006, p. 369).

“A love/hate dynamic of the relationship between civil society and the state” can be found in type 4. Chambers and Kopstein discuss “Civil society performs a function of underpinning and supporting the state. On the other hand, there is also a certain amount of hostility towards the state. For many people writing within this tradition, the state is one of the forces contributing to the decline of civil society as a place for civic renewal” (Chambers & Kopstein, 2006, p. 372).

For type 5, civil society in partnership with the state, Chambers and Kopstein argue that the role of civil society as a check on the state is compromised if civil society supplants or even exists in partnership with the state:

Ultimately this may point to a trade-off: as we have moved from the strong spatial conception of civil society as a sphere that stands clearly apart from the state, through conceptions of civil society as opponent, then critic, then supporter, and now substitute for or partner with the state, we have seen a growing

rapprochement between civil society and state. Perhaps the pluralism of a healthy civil society can contain all these different roles for associational life. But it is unlikely to do so without conflict or tension (Chambers & Kopstein, 2006, p. 375).

For Type 6 model, Chambers and Kopstein view civil society as a global phenomenon and many associations and non-governmental organizations cross state boundaries. They argue if civil society in the West arose as a sphere separate from and often in opposition to the state, global civil society can be said to have arisen in anticipation of rather than in response to (and certainly without the protection of) a global liberal constitutional state (Chambers & Kopstein, 2006, p. 376).

Chambers and Kopstein's six types of relations between civil society and the state provide conceptual framework for ongoing debates on what the role of civil society should be. The sections below will examine what role Myanmar Egress (ME) played in relation with the state, and what type of relations established between ME and the state whether it was a civil society group apart from, against, in dialogue with, in support of or in partnership with the state.

4. Literature Review

With the 15 years of field research, the author Mael Raynaud, an independent analyst on civil society in Myanmar, argues that civil society is not the State, nor the private actor, nor the media (a specific set of institutions at the crossroad of the political, the economic and the efforts to be one voice for civil society), nor the citizenry, nor the population. It is any action and initiative taken by one or several citizens outside the personal sphere, the State, the private actor, or the media (Raynaud, 2019). Raynaud observes "the so-called transition (in Myanmar) cannot be understood without acknowledging that the role of civil society was one of the defining traits of the process (Raynaud, 2016, p. 47).

Prasse-Freeman defines civil society in Myanmar as groups composed of business leaders, academics, and former political activists weary of deadlock who are able to tap alternative sources of influence (Prasse-Freeman, 2012, p. 392). The author Mullen highlights the approach of civil society groups who find a new space to work with Myanmar military junta as "engaging the junta or creating opportunities where the state was failing." Mullen observes the ME's approach: "Reconstructive politics was a pathway of the Third Force....It aimed to transform conditions via the creation of new space, opportunities and relationships" (Mullen, 2016, p. 9).

Marie Lall observes Myanmar Egress (ME) as the most significant civil society organisation to emerge in 2006 to support the change process and it has been pivotal in the country's reforms (Lall, 2021, p. 17).

The idea of an institution that would serve as a training institute, a think tank, a liaison office for reform-minded military government officials and as a catalyst for change can be credited to Dr Nay Win Maung, a medical doctor who had left medicine first for business, and then left business for journalism (Lall, 2016).

Van Lal Thuam Lian argues the leading founder Nay Win Maung accepted the 2008 constitution and the military-led process of democratic transition because Egress focused on a peaceful transition to democracy in Myanmar (Lian, 2023, p. 179).

Matelski sees ME as “resembling Western-style mid-scale NGOs”:

With their professionally looking office and their English proficiency, they stood out from most Myanmar organizations as resembling Western-style mid-scale NGOs. The organization's leaders, however, were publicly associated with prominent persons in the military government (through business and sometimes also family relations), and the organization was criticized for lending public support to the military's ‘Roadmap to Democracy’, including the contentious 2008 constitution (Matelski, 2024, p. 71).

Roger Huang observes ME's role as a non-state actor. “Non-state actors, through their years of working within the authoritarian framework of the junta, have demonstrated that the existence of associational life does not automatically led to a civil society that challenges the power of the authoritarian state” (Huang, 2020).

Ashley South was not sure whether it (ME) could “really be described as a part of civil society, given their cozy business and government connections” (South, 2016). The author Bann Seng Tan questioned the impartiality of ME due to “its’ extraordinary ties with the regime” (Tan, 2021, p. 113). Tan argues the Burmese reforms in 2010 as controlled, elite-led, and top-down.

Although ME's role in the 2010 transition was widely recognised and controversial, its relation to the state was not clearly stated in the previous literature. This study aims to fill the gap of those studies. This paper applies the concept of civil society-state relations as theoretical framework and analyses Myanmar Egress, and its role as a political path to military-sponsored democracy in Myanmar.

5. The Role of Myanmar Egress Before 2010

The late political scientist, Maung Sue San, recognised Myanmar military as a caretaker government in 2010 and a referee in the Myanmar political landscape (Sue San, 2009, p. 8). Maung Sue San observed two guardian roles of the military in the 2008 constitution that guaranteed such a result: Guardian of the State and Guardian of Democracy (Sue San, 2009, p. 18). Dr. Nay Win Maung, the ME founder, explained that the constitution promulgated that year contained several elements that could help put Myanmar on the road to change (Raynaud, 2016, p. 43).

Hlaing observed the military government had no will to make any compromise with the NLD and other opposition groups (Hlaing, 2014, p. 35). On the other hand, the personal relationship between the Egress founders and the military elite were evident. Former president Thein Sein was a student of Dr. Nay Win Maung's mother who had served for many years as a lecturer at the Defense Services Academy, and many senior military officers. Ye Htut observes, ME initiated "unofficial communication between some ministers who were also senior of the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA)⁸ leaders and Egress" (Htut, 2019, p. 78). This study indicates Myanmar Egress' involvement in three particular advocacy works for the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC): policy advocacy, election advocacy, and international advocacy before 2010.

5.1 Egress's Policy Advocacy

Egress's office received frequent visits from former military generals and the SPDC ministers, the Minister of Railways Aung Min and former Navy Chief and the Minister for Industry 2 Soe Thane, who later became ministers of President Office under Thein Sein's administration. They were in touch with the Egress key founders (Alumni One, personal communication, December 16, 2021).

Nevertheless, Egress became a leader in strengthening community-based organizations in Myanmar before the 2010 elections. In the eyes of international donors, including UN organizations and diplomats, Egress performed very well as a leading civil society group. For one civic education project from January 1, 2011, to December 31, 2012, Egress received a total grant of USD 250,000 from the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF). Various donors funded ME's education projects, including the Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung (FNS) German foundation, SIDA from the Swedish government and other international donors (UNDEF, 2013, p. 9).

⁸ Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) is a proxy military association.

In the evaluation report on ME's Civic Education project with the United Nation Democracy Fund, three main pillars of ME is cited such as Training program: implemented through CDC (Capacity Development Center), which is the training arm of the organization; Policy Advocacy through the management of ME and Political Engagement: Key members of ME are part of the peace talks with a major armed fraction (the Kachin independence Army or KIA). Egress training courses include comparative constitutions, critical thinking for leadership, political economy of the state, state institutions and public policy, civil society and gender, leadership and negotiation, communication and advocacy, globalisation development and environmental and township level policy advocacy (UNDEF, 2013, pp. 5-12). ME's organizational capacity, training activities and the courses offered indicate its significant involvement in policy advocacy and political engagement in the changing political arena. Especially ME's political engagement with the Kachin Independence Army cannot be done without the consent of the high ranking military officials.

Table 1: Egress Policy Advocacy Training Project (2011-2012)

Phase I: Initial/Inception Training	Phase II: Intermediate Training	Phase III: Advanced Training
Civil Empowerment in Remote Areas (CERA)	Civil Society Leadership training	Advocacy Unit Formation
Funded by UNDEF under UDF-MYA-09-327	Various donors for various training PCM: Pyoe Pin MC and CEAL/CEPA: SIDA: E-002 PPT: FES	Funded by the EU and managed by FNS
48 trainings in 14 states/regions over 2 years 48 Township Meetings in 14 states/regions	Project Cycle Management (PCM) Mass Communication (MC) Civic Education and Applied Leadership (CEAL) and Civic Education and Policy Advocacy (CEPA)	State Market and Civil Societies for Good Governance and Development
4 Core Leader Meetings	E-002 Public Policy Training (PPT)	
Myanmar Policy Wiki website		

Source: UNDEF (2013, p. 9)

Other opposition groups inside Myanmar were never given any chance like ME. Nevertheless, not many local CSOs were treated the same as ME. For example, before 2010, ME was the only organization the junta gave a go to conduct nationwide civic education projects, including good governance, policy advocacy, and core leadership skills. Egress provided training for various subjects and trained 40,000 alumni (UNDEF, 2013, p. 16).

Two Egress alumni interviewed in this study took part in many of those activities. The Yangon-based Alumni One joined Egress training, E002 (Political and Social Science) and MC (Mass Communication) in 2008 and later worked with ME until 2012. Alumni One gathered local and international news and prepared a news package for the military elites. This is what ME called “feeding related policy inputs to the governing body.” Alumni One explains: The whole agenda of Egress is to pave the way for military-sponsored democracy because the agenda of the military generals was to take off uniform and contest in the 2010 elections as plain cloths candidates in order to take part in the government body. In fact, the idea of Egress founders was to make an all-inclusive political transition (Alumni One, personal communication, December 16, 2021).

Alumni One was responsible for feeding information to the military elites. “Most of them are the generals. They often visited the Egress office. Not only the generals but also the members of the opposition parties joined some of our trainings” (Alumni One, personal communication, December 16, 2021). Egress’ vice chairman Hla Maung Shwe explains how Egress initiated policy advocacy for the 2008 constitution:

When the 2008 Constitution was approved, we thought that there could be a gradual change in the country; that there could be a new political landscape. We tried to explain this to people; we started training people, preparing people with very different political and ethnic backgrounds within the state structures and out of them for this possible change. We tried to train and support them so that they could participate in this transition moment as agents of change. We thought a strong opposition was needed (Bilbatúa, 2015, p. 30).

Egress’ founder and secretary general Nay Win Maung wrote articles and opinion pieces related to the new constitution in his weekly journal, the Voice Weekly since the constitution drafting process was underway in 2006. With one of his pen names, Aung Htut, He wrote, “Ruling without the constitution is a game without the Rule of the Game” (‘On‘ Tvaṭ‘ & Ne Vañ‘” Moñ‘, 2010, p. 4). Maung claimed that all he is doing is capacity building and teaching the theories of nation building (‘On‘ Tvaṭ‘ & Ne Vañ‘” Moñ‘, 2010, p. 113).

A close friend of Nay Win Maung urged him to take a break from writing editorials and instead focus on advising the Generals. Maung published the email of his friend in one of his article. It writes, “You have shot yourself in the foot repeatedly, writing UNNECESSARILY PRO-GOVERNMENT sounding editorials and articles..... plus your writing is VERY ELITIST and ARROGANT - treating the public as if it were stupid and uneducated (‘On‘ Tvat‘ & Ne Vañ‘” Moñ‘, 2010, p. 273).

5.2 *Egress’ Election Advocacy*

Egress played an integral role in the 2010 elections, regularly publishing opinion pieces of popular writers and political activists. Nay Win Maung was chief editor of the Voice Weekly journal. The late Maung Sue San was one of the opinion writers who regularly contributed to the Voice Weekly. Through the Voice Weekly, he advocated a military-sponsored democracy with two controls: check and balance of conventional democracy and counterweight or check and balance between the military and civilian (Sue San, 2009, pp. 52-53).

Egress also provided training for military officers who planned to retire and run in the 2010 elections. Egress even funded several political parties, including the NLD’s breakaway party - National Democratic Force (NDF), and Shan, Karen, Chin and Arakan ethnic parties to participate in the 2010 elections (Wai Moe, 2010). Totally 22 NDF candidates, including Khin Maung Swe and Thein Nyunt, founders of the NDF, were elected in the 2010 elections (IDE-JETRO, 2011). They became MPs in the parliament during the Thein Sein Government but were not given cabinet posts.

Egress expanded its network through election advocacy training in the ethnic areas. Alumni Two is from an ethnic area. He attended basic journalism training, federalism and constitution courses provided by Egress and later worked as a journalist for the Voice journal. Alumni Two observed Egress also provided resources to form new political parties in ethnic areas and trained some party members who are going to contest in the elections. “I noticed that ethnic party members were very proud to be Egress alumni at that time” (Alumni Two, personal communication, January 7, 2022).

Egress also provided electoral politics training for the military officers who planned to retire and contest in the 2010 elections. While working for the Voice Weekly, Alumni Two interviewed a number of military officers who were ready to contest in the 2010 election. From various interviews, he noticed that military brainwashed its soldiers with the nation’s savior mentality and xenophobia. Alumni Two explains, “They always think they are sacrificing for the country more than anyone else. Because of xenophobia, they hate Muslim;

they hate foreigners; and they hate Aung San Suu Kyi (for marrying a foreigner) too” (Alumni Two, personal communication, January 7, 2022).

To legitimize the 2010 elections, the regime had to create its own opposition. ME helped found nine ethnic parties (Lall, 2016, pp. 47-48). Tan (2021) views the origin of these ethnic minority parties as problematic (Tan, 2021, p. 113). Although Egress made friends with various ethnic parties, it wasn’t able to convince the main opposition, the NLD, to take part in the elections. Their attempt only established the NLD breakaway party. ME’s idea for all-inclusive political transition was failed because ME wasn’t able to build trust with the main opposition party NLD, the imprisoned NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi and other political opposition groups. As a result, Aung San Suu Kyi led NLD party boycotted the elections. While NLD youth organised “No vote” campaigns, Egress-trained youth conducted pro-election campaigns. Alumni One was a member of the campaign team (Alumni One, personal communication, December 16, 2021). Egress’ attempt not only divided the NLD into two but further divided between Egress youth and NLD youth, and Ethnic parties and the Bamar-dominated NLD. Intentionally or not, Egress made a huge crack in the surface of Myanmar politics.

5.3 Egress’ International Advocacy

When there was Cyclone Nargis Catastrophe on May 2, 2008, the military regime was unprepared. The Myanmar junta was under mounting international pressure. Western governments, including the US, UK and French, sent navy vessels but needed permission from the regime to deliver Humanitarian Aid. As they received no response, they called for action from the UN Security Council under the new doctrine of a “responsibility to protect” (Thant Myint-U, 2020, p. 92).

Myanmar Egress helped the SPDC in a very difficult time. ME was credited as the main civil society group (more like the Myanmar government’s local partner or a GONGO⁹) working with the Tripartite Core Group composed of the Government of the Union of Myanmar, ASEAN and the United Nations. ME made the impression that local civil society groups participating in emergency response supported the SPDC government. ME established the important role of CSOs. ME had a good relationship with the international community and played a significant role before and after the 2010 election in helping the Thein Sein government gain international legitimacy.

⁹ Government-organized non-governmental organizations

One of the ME founders, Tin Maung Thann rejects criticisms which see ME as an apologist for the regime. “Our politics is so polarized. We asked both sides to come closer from their two ends. If we can find a common ground; from that common ground, we will have something to work together to have a change.” (Bilbatúa, 2015, p. 31).

Bann Seng Tan discusses three issues which “hinder democratic consolidation without proposing a resolution of them” and are worth considering for future study. The first issue Tan highlights are the “golden parachutes”,¹⁰ and the second issue is the autonomy of the Tatmadaw. The 2008 Constitution enshrined the Tatmadaw as the guardian of the country. The third issue concerns the remaining ethnic conflict (Tan, 2021, pp. 115-116). Tan sees the resultant crony capitalism as part of a deal whereby the old guard in the Tatmadaw retires in exchange for economic benefits (Tan, 2021, pp. 115-116). Did Egress take part in politics with a business approach? Tin Maung Thann stated:

My work experience as a development expert has been helpful. U Hla Maung Shwe has a business background, but his interest is politics within a given space, like business associations. Dr Nay Win Maung was the publisher of The Voice. Different networks and backgrounds combined. We (Nay Win Maung, Hla Maung Shwe and Tin Maung Thann) became the interlocutors of the forces that came to work together (Bilbatúa, 2015, p. 32).

Egress’s advocacy works went significantly well, reaching from military elite, political groups, and ethnic communities to progressive youth. ME’s international advocacy was successful especially in the aftermath of Nargis. Without the ME’s assistance, it wouldn’t be possible for the SPDC authority to handle humanitarian relief.

6. ME’s Role after 2010

Former general Thein Sein was appointed as President after 2010 elections. President Thein Sein met Egress leaders including Nay Win Maung, Tin Maung Thann, Kyaw Yin Hlaing and Hla Maung Shwe several times and worked out a transition plan together (Raynaud’s interview with Nay Win Maung in May 2011) (Raynaud, 2019, p. 371). Later Thein Sein formed a presidential advisory board that included Egress members, academics, experts and former military officers. Thant Myint-U was officially appointed as part of a new National Economic and Social Advisory Council. He wrote, “They wanted me to be

¹⁰ “Golden parachutes” refer to economic bribes and political guarantees granted to the leadership of autocracy in order to persuade them to give up power (Tan, 2021, pp. 115-116)

involved and give them ideas on how best to engage with the West” (Thant Myint-U, 2020, p. 141). Thein Sein’s government made milestones in political and economic reform, press freedom, media development, and peace initiatives. Two ministers, Aung Min and Soe Thane, were credited for these reforms. “Aung Min was responsible for all aspects of the peace process. Soe Thane was the economic czar.” Thant Myint-U observed, “Soe Thane was keen to bring the country as close to the West as possible” (Thant Myint-U, 2020, pp. 141-153).

Aung Min led peace talks with ethnic insurgent groups and used the Egress team and its alliances and former ABSDF¹¹ members to arrange meetings with ethnic armed groups. Myanmar Peace Center was established in 2012, and Egress members became key players.

Thant Myint-U observes:

“By early 2012, it was clear that Aung Min couldn’t just rely on the ad hoc support of Egress and various hangers-on. There needed to be a new institution to support continuing peace talks. After Nay Win Maung’s death, two men - Tin Maung Thann (the fish expert) and Hla Maung Shwe (the shrimp exporter) — had taken over as the heads of Egress. They were now Aung Min’s key lieutenants in the peace process” (Thant Myint-U, 2020, p. 167).

After Nay Win Maung passed away, Myanmar Egress became a group with no governing body because other key founders including Tin Maung Thann and Hla Maung Shwe were appointed as special advisors to the Myanmar Peace Center. Within ten years, it had dissolved, and its advocacy team had broken up (although the Voice Journal continued publishing until 2021). ME was no longer a civil society group after all.

6.1 Failure of unlinking political changes with Aung San Suu Kyi

When Thein Sein became president after the 2010 elections, Egress members got an opportunity to meet with the president. Hla Maung Shwe took credit that Egress suggested President Thein Sein to meet Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. (Bilbatúa, 2015, p. 35). The Thein Sein government used Aung San Suu Kyi to open the doors of the Western countries as they were aware that lifting Western sanctions wouldn’t be possible without the consent of Aung San Suu Kyi and the political opposition. The Thein Sein government liberalized restrictions on the NLD party and recognized the 1990 election results. As a consequence, Aung San Suu Kyi involved in Thein Sein’s reform process by taking part in the 2012 by-elections.

¹¹ All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF) is an armed organization formed with 1988 generation students in exile.

In short, there was a *quid pro quo*. As Fiori and Passeri (2015, p. 695) observe:

“Burmese officials knew that a process of growth could be brought about only through the lifting of American sanctions; on the other side, the USA was able to persuade Thein Sein that sanctions could be revoked only after having ignited a mature process of democratic reforms and national reconciliation with the political opposition. . . . This ‘offer’ may probably be considered highly advantageous for both actors: Myanmar can thus find a way out of the backwardness and break the chain of dependency from Beijing; the USA is playing this game to bring Myanmar again on the proscenium of the international community, grabbing it from the hands of China” (Tan, 2021, p. 110).

ME’s concept, “unlinking political changes with Aung San Suu Kyi” seemed to work only before the 2012 by-election. Since Aung San Suu Kyi became an elected MP, neither Thein Sein’s government nor its partner, ME, could stop Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD party’s participation in Myanmar’s political changes.

6.2 *Failure of Myanmar Egress’ concepts*

Dr Kyaw Yin Hlaing explained two particular concepts of Myanmar Egress. The first concept was: Only by playing the political game with the military elites within their given rules could we break the political deadlock. The second concept was “Unlinking political changes with Aung San Suu Kyi”, an idea which seemingly emerged from the conversation between businessmen and the ruling generals who disliked Aung San Suu Kyi.

Unlinking political changes with Aung San Suu Kyi failed after the 2012 by-elections. It failed mainly because it was short-sighted as Prasse-Freeman observed:

“Promulgating a different mechanism for change, the Third Force subtly asserts that the entire oppositional political project should be abandoned and that a broad civil society sector (composed of grassroots and elite groups) should fill the void, collaborating with the state. This is short-sighted. The size and rapacity of the regime will likely continue to stifle economic activities led by entrepreneurs, the state’s regressive policies (from military spending to monetary expansion) undermining grassroots civil society gains” (Prasse-Freeman, 2012, p. 393).

Chambers and Kopstein argue “not the state, but members of civil society bear the responsibility of sustaining an effective democratic public sphere. Only when actors consciously try to enhance, expand, and transform the public sphere

as they participate in it can the public sphere thrive” (Chambers & Kopstein, 2006, p. 370).

If we look at ME’s relation to the regime before and after 2010, it reflects the relation of business elite to military elite rather than civil society to the state. ME wasn’t able to create an effective democratic public sphere but they created a sphere for elite community in support of the state.

After 2021 coup, Military Chief Min Aung Hlaing formed alliances with anti-NLD politicians, such as Khin Maung Swe, Thein Nyunt, and Thet Thet Khine from two NLD’s breakaway parties, NDF (National Democratic Force) and PPP (People’s Pioneer Party) and appointed them as members of State Administration Council (SAC) after the 2021 military coup. This reflects the same attitude of the SPDC and Egress in the 2010 transition — unlinking political changes with Aung San Suu Kyi.

7. The NLD Government and Civil Society

The author Raynaud observes the NLD and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi views the Third Force as a political opponent. His various interviews with civil society activists, journalists, diplomats and scholars explained “Daw Aung San Suu Kyi had no intention to keep on working with President U Thein Sein’s advisors” (Raynaud, 2019, p. 372).

Only a few Egress members continued working with the NLD government after the NLD government transferred power from Thein Sein government. Although the Egress members and their partners worked closely with Myanmar Peace Center under the Thein Sein government, they became outsiders under the NLD government. Various think tank groups emerged after 2015.

Civil society-State relations under the NLD government reflect Chambers and Kopstein’s definition of type 1 and type 2, civil society apart from the state and against the state. Type 1 define the meaning of “apart” has liberal roots.

Civil society, to the extent that it survives, exists not by design but by default and on state sufferance. For civil society to be apart from the state in a strong sense, the state must be bound by a rule of law that limits its interference in a meaningful way. This meaning of “apart” has clear liberal roots (Chambers & Kopstein, 2006, p. 366).

8. Discussion and Conclusion

Various findings prove that ME’s role was beyond a civil society group and it was line with the Tatmadaw’s idea of nation-building. The relations of ME and military regime can be examined by Chambers and Kopstein’s civil society-

state relations theory, civil society in dialogue with the state; and civil society in partnership with the state.

8.1 Civil society in dialogue with the state

Chambers and Kopstein discuss the role of civil society as “a creative and critical dialogue partner with the state.” They suggest not the state, but members of civil society bear the responsibility of sustaining an effective democratic public sphere (Chambers & Kopstein, 2006, pp. 369-370).

However ME’s role had never been a critical dialogue partner with the State. Instead of raising voices from civil society, ME raised the voice of the state or appeared as the mouthpiece of the state. ME wasn’t able to keep its role impartial. Rather Egress played not only as a civil society group but played multiple roles such as a policy advocate, a media advocacy group, special advisers to Myanmar Peace Center and the regime’s advocate. ME’s confusing role killed its will for the regime change. ME paved the way for the smooth transition from military rule to quasi-civilian rule. Its engagement with the military elite benefited ME founders to be appointed as special advisers to the Myanmar Peace Center (MPC) initiated by Minster from President Thein Sein’s offices.

8.2 Civil society in partnership with the state

Soroko (2003) highlights the complicated boundaries between civil society and the state. The problem is not so much state intrusion; the problem is that in taking on state functions, civil society may begin to act and look like the state (Soroko, 2003). In Chambers and Kopstein’s model of civil society in partnership with the state, civil society is empowered by default where the state is absent or no longer ‘head’ (Chambers & Kopstein, 2006, pp. 374-375).

The role of ME, however, completely disappeared after the Thein Sein government was formed. According to Chambers and Kopstein, the role of civil society as a check on the state is compromised if civil society supplants or even exists in partnership with the state (Chambers & Kopstein, 2006, p. 375). ME’s role was swallowed by the Thein Sein government because its role is compromised in partnership with the state. Various evidences indicate two factors for vanishing ME. One is because the key founders of ME were offered positions as special advisers to the Myanmar Peace Center (MPC). In fact, ME had no position to provide “Golden parachutes” (Tan, 2021) to oust the military generals from power. Instead the second possible factor is that the regime offered business opportunities to ME founders to promote Military-sponsored democracy. Although it is hard to measure how the second factor is possible, it is not uncommon in the corrupted authoritarian country like Myanmar. Offering

business opportunities to make alliance with business tycoons or some EAOs was one of the regime's tactics we have seen in the past.

ME's partnership with the military did not turn out well. The recent military coup shows that playing the political game with military elites is not a real solution to Myanmar's political crisis. Military-sponsored democracy that ME promoted invites another political deadlock after ten years interval of quasi-civilian rule. The exclusion of Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD from political reform process is the original agenda of the military regime. The reason is crystal clear that the regime never wanted to share power with the winning NLD party in the elections in 1990, 2015 and 2020. So the regime used their trusted alliance ME as the Third Force to promote military-sponsored democracy. The military coup in 2021 proves that the military regime has no desire to recognize the ruling party NLD as a legitimate government.

International donors and funding agencies should review and reassess their support for the 2010 transition and Thein Sein's initiated peace process: has it strengthened civil society groups, grassroots community and pro-democracy forces, or has it strengthened promilitary forces and their business alliances? Partisans of military rule and business elite might be partially responsible for the failure of Myanmar's transition from 2010 to 2020 and the return of military rule in 2021. It would be beneficial to both local partner organisations and key international players if they revisit their policy in strengthening and supporting "independent" civil society organizations in Myanmar.

Strengthening and supporting civil societies is an integral part of Myanmar's transition to democracy. However, if resources and energies provided by international donors and partner organizations were misused for strengthening the power of the military elite but not for strengthening power of the ruled or the oppressed, the lives of millions of people would be suffered from the failure of political transition. The recent military coup and political deadlock are evidence of the failure of political transition. The case study of the Third Force - Myanmar Egress and its complicated role in Myanmar's political changes indicate that a sham 2010 transition had a large impact on the lives of 50 million people who are in danger as the country is gradually going toward a failed state made by the recent military coup.

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