Uncivil society and democracy's fate in Southeast Asia: democratic breakdown in Thailand, increasing Illiberalism and ethnic cleansing in Myanmar

Bünte, Marco

Original Article

Uncivil Society and Democracy's Fate in Southeast Asia: Democratic Breakdown in Thailand, Increasing Illiberalism and Ethnic Cleansing in Myanmar

Marco Bünte

Abstract
Civil society scholarship has repeatedly warned of the dangers of uncivil society for young democracies. However, it remains unclear when and how uncivil society becomes an instrument of democratic backsliding. Using Thailand and Myanmar as its case studies, the article discusses the origins, ideology, and impact of several uncivil society groups, deepening our knowledge on the latter's role in democratic backsliding/breakdown. It argues that uncivil society can act as useful resource for conservative elites seeking to derail democratisation processes. Particularly in times of a perceived or manufactured national crisis, uncivil society successfully pursues illiberal agendas – often in tandem with established elites of the former regime. Also highlighted are the core mechanisms through which uncivil society leads to democratic backsliding/breakdown, as well as the long-term effects these movements have on the erosion of social trust and civility and the poisoning of inter-class or inter-religious relations.

Institute of Political Science, Friedrich-Alexander University (FAU) Erlangen Nürnberg, Erlangen, Germany

Corresponding Author:
Marco Bünte, Institute of Political Science, FAU Erlangen Nürnberg, Kochstraße 4, 91054 Erlangen, Germany.
Email: marco.buente@fau.de

Introduction

Laurence Whitehead (1997), Simone Chambers and Jeffrey Kopstein (2001), Kopecky and Mudde (2003), and Nancy Berman (1997) have all warned that "bad civil society" or "uncivil society" can have serious repercussions for liberal democracies. They have demonstrated that Putnam's idea that civil society is key for making democracy work (1993) is actually quite problematic, namely when illiberal, criminal, or nationalistic groups mobilise for political ends. While the concepts "uncivil society" or "bad civil society" remain highly contested, the fact that undemocratic or illiberal groups undermine or derail democratisation processes can be seen time and again. Uncivil society is supposedly a core agent of democratic backsliding, defined as the "deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance, within any regime" (Waldner and Lust, 2018: 95). At the same time, it is often unclear when and how uncivil society weakens or disrupts the democratic order. The article fills this lacuna by looking at various forms of anti-democratic activism and illiberal politics in Southeast Asia, using the case studies of Thailand and Myanmar.

For starters, neither is a liberal democracy. Both countries would experiment with some form of electoral politics in the past few decades (see Figure 1 for the country's trajectories in line with V-Dem scores). Democracy in Thailand broke down with the military coup of 2014. Thailand was a bearer of democratic hope in the 1990s, when an alliance of progressive and conservative forces enacted major reforms culminating in the 1997 "People's Constitution" – which was inscribed with significant input from
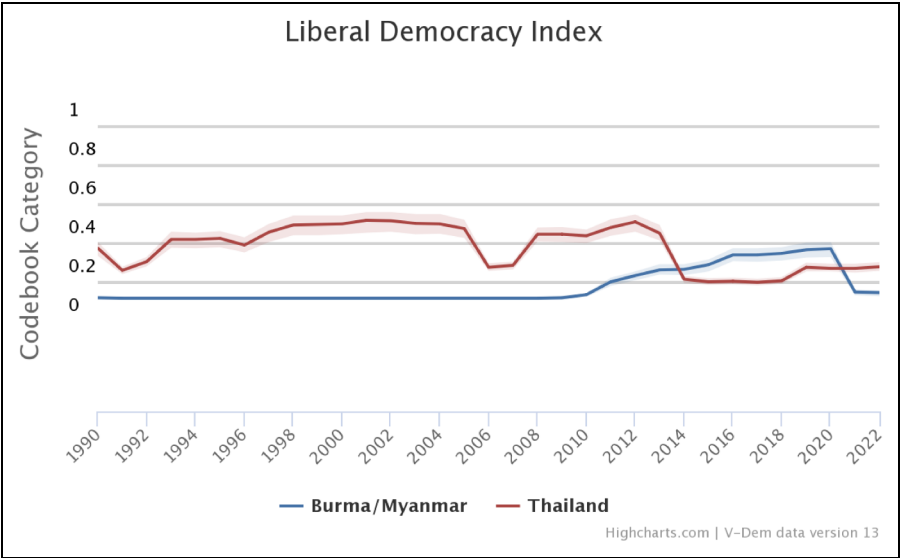

Figure 1. Democracy scores in Myanmar and Thailand.
Source: V-Dem Graphing Tools, V-Dem (2023).

civil society (Bünte, 2000; McCargo, 2002). Yet, Thailand's democracy did not survive. Though the military returned to democratic governance following the 2006 military coup against Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the decade after ended in several rounds of elections and repeated confrontations on the streets between Thaksin's supporters (the so-called Red Shirts)[1] and members of the conservative establishment (the Yellow Shirts). This prepared the ground for the 2014 coup, which saw a return to military rule.[2] The arch nationalist-royalist network of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) (2005), later re-organised as the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) (2013–2014), played a major role in the delegitimation of the Thaksin regime and the breakdown of democracy in Thailand.

After nearly 50 years of direct or indirect military rule, neighbouring Myanmar enacted a partial liberalisation after the military junta dissolved and transferred power to the quasi-civilian government of Thein Sein in 2011. Although largely unexpected, the former general initiated a series of reforms which opened up significant space for political participation. Though the political system was heavily tilted towards the military, new freedoms allowed civil society to flourish and made more room for manoeuvre available both to it and to political parties. The hybrid regime also allowed multiparty elections to be held, which were won by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) in landslide victories in both 2015 and 2020. The partial liberalisation would be accompanied by the rise of several Buddhist nationalist groups, first the so-called 969 Movement which emerged in 2012, and, later, the Organisation for the Protection of Race and Religion (MaBaTha). The mobilisation of these groups did not directly lead to the breakdown of democracy. Yet, it ushered in an increasing illiberalism and xenophobia against Muslims and ultimately prepared the grounds for the ethnic cleansing of 900,000 Rohingya from Myanmar in the years 2016 and 2017. Democracy broke down later in February 2021, with the military coup ending a decade of civilian rule.

The article traces the origins of these uncivil movements, analyses the worldviews of their core actors as well as scrutinises their relationship to other key figures within the two countries' respective political systems. It is argued that uncivil society can act as a useful resource for conservative elites seeking to derail democratisation processes. It stresses the relevance of uncivil society's activists and members of the former authoritarian regime holding shared beliefs. These encompass a range of unhealthy ideas and practices detrimental to democracy and ultimately determine the extent to which autocratisation succeeds. Particularly in times of national crisis, whether perceived or manufactured, uncivil society successfully pursues illiberal agendas – often in tandem with established elites of the former regime. Also highlighted are the core mechanisms through which uncivil society leads to democratic backsliding and reveals the long-term effects of these movements on the erosion of social trust and civility and the poisoning of inter-class or inter-religious relations.

Civil Society, Its Uncivil Elements, and Democratic Backsliding

"Civil society" is generally understood as a space existing between state, market, and the family, where people come together in movements and organisations in pursuit of

common goals and interests. Dominant Western conceptions of "civil society" rely on the Tocquevillian notion that its associational sphere is what protects citizens from the encroachment of the state and where the norms such as "trust" and "tolerance" helping sustain liberal democracy develop (Cohen and Arato, 1992; Diamond, 1994). It is, as such, this "institutionalised civil society" (Bernhard, 2020) of organised interests which keeps democracy responsive and effective. However, Whitehead (1997), Chambers and Kopstein (2001), Kopecky and Mudde (2003), and Berman (1997) have all warned that "bad civil society" or "uncivil society" can have serious repercussions for young democracies. These scholars have demonstrated that Putnam's idea that civil society is key for making democracy work (Putnam, 1993) is actually quite problematic, namely when illiberal, criminal, or nationalistic groups mobilise for political ends. When society itself is already deeply divided, these groups can further erode social trust and civility – instead of bridging social divides and bringing disparate groups together.

The article follows an "empirical understanding of civil society" (Kopecky, 2003: 4), thus not setting boundaries which exclude these "uncivil parts" and so turning also to those challenging liberal democratic values. This follows those scholars who see civil society neither as intrinsically good nor as categorically bad. It rejects a normative understanding designed to distinguish between a peaceful, rule-bound and virtuous civil society and an "uncivil society" which is characterised by violence and a lack of civility. Kopecky and Mudde (2003) have shown that this distinction is ambiguous, sometimes even artificial, by highlighting how East European ethno-nationalist groups would be included in "civil society" when mobilising against Communism in 1989, but left out when mobilising against post-communist, democratic regimes (Kopecky and Mudde, 2003: 3).

Moreover, religious and nationalist movements often have a democratic base and seek the overthrow of non-democratic governments, but their values are not necessarily democratic – and certainly not liberal (Glasius, 2010). Most authors also exclude "violent" groups (Keane, 1998; Whitehead, 1997), though Kopecky (2003) correctly stresses that the whole literature on contentious politics includes both peaceful and violent protests. Setting a tipping point at which to exclude these elements is problematic, as all civil societies eventually harbour violent tendencies, patterns of incivility or behaviours which might degenerate from the "occasional violence of some within a civil society […] into the constant violence of all against all" (Keane, 1998: 135).

Bernhard (2020: 341) distinguishes between "semi-loyal" and "anti-systemic" forms of uncivil civil society. In addition to the "insurgent" and "firebrand" variants of civil society, which help to advance or protect democracy and add another layer of accountability, semi-loyal organisations have an ambiguous relationship to democracy and may support democratisation in one instance but harm it in others. They may advance illiberal agendas, call for military intervention or discriminate against certain religious/ethnic groups. Anti-democratic civil society includes terrorists, extremists, criminals, or even political actors who are committed to the violent overthrow of democracy.

A key point which needs to be taken into account here is the nature of the state itself, which sets the boundaries of what it considers "loyal" or "subversive" behaviour

(Toepler et al., 2020). States delineate what "civil society" is, define power relations within society and set different boundaries regarding what they consider to be legitimate protest or an illegitimate challenge to their authority. Consequently, scholars have highlighted the importance of state strength/weakness in the formation of civil society, particularly the latter's dark side (Englehardt, 2011; Lorch, 2016). Here, strong states provide the healthiest environment for civil society's organisation. They limit the influence of anti-democratic organisations and protect political society from the harmful influence of these actors. Yet, even in weak states civil society can thrive and take over certain functions which states are not willing or able to perform.

As Berman (1997) has shown for the case of the Weimar Republic, the interplay of uncivil elements of civil society and political actors as well as parties can have serious repercussions for regime trajectories. Fervent nationalism led to the rise of the Nazi party and prepared the ground for the Holocaust. The argument here is that certain uncivil groups can nurture cleavages or organisations which are subversive or inimical to democratic deepening. They might also poison the political climate for years to come. It is therefore imperative to look at the ideas and motives which drive these organisations, the worldviews of their participants and at how their actions translate into the political arena. But when do these groups gain traction? "State" and "society" are often treated as monolithic entities locked in opposition (Englehardt, 2011: 340). However, state elites often form alliances with social groups against other parts of the state, and social groups often seek assistance as they advance their own interests against those of competing groups. Such interpenetration is more typical than not (Englehardt, 2011: 341). For instance, Lorch (2022) has shown with regards to the case of the Philippines that civil society organisations' (CSOs) lack of autonomy and close relationship to the country's political elite can explain both the democratisation after the fall of Ferdinand Marcos and the autocratisation under Rodrigo Duterte. All this illustrates that civil society is not a (semi-)autonomous space between the state, market, and family (as the Tocquevillian notion suggests) but a sphere wherein the dominant political forces and the state seek to maintain hegemony – being met with heightened pushback. This Gramscian approach can help to disentangle contentious politics much better than the aforementioned Toquevillian understanding does.

The interaction of politicians with civil society or exchange within "un"-civil society are also important, as civil society can serve as the last layer of accountability when political actors have undermined the traditional pathways of horizontal (separation of powers) and vertical (electoral) accountability which characterise a healthy democracy. Democratic backsliding is the "deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance, within any regime" (Waldner and Lust, 2018: 95). The long-term process of autocratisation can involve multiple agents and pathways, such as executive aggrandisement by authoritarian strongmen or (permissive) military coups by disgruntled army personnel; that protracted process can also lead to different endpoints, such as outright democratic breakdown or longer periods of de-democratisation (Bermeo, 2016). As Ufen (2023) has shown for the case of Malaysia and Indonesia, uncivil society may push for or against autocratisation. This can weaken or embolden anti-democratic

actors and tarnish democratic institutions for years to come, setting the country in question on a democratic or undemocratic path accordingly. With this all in mind, and seeking to elaborate further hereon, let us now take a closer look at the cases of Thailand and Myanmar.

Uncivil Society and Democratic Breakdown in Thailand

Thailand is a paradigmatic case for the relationship between uncivil society and democratic breakdown. The country's transition from military rule to a more democratic form of politics started after the Black May protests in 1992. This civil society uprising ushered in a more open form of politics, in which Thailand's traditional elites – the military, royalists, and the bureaucracy – attempted to embrace politicians from the countryside, initiate far-reaching political reforms, and engineer a more liberal version of democracy.

One particular aim of the reform movement was to engineer good governance so as to curb the problems of vote-buying and corruption – as having plagued Thai elections since the 1980s (McCargo, 1998, 2002). The 1997 Constitution, drafted with significant input from civil society, sought to provide for a democratic system with strong checks and balances, a strengthened party system as well as extensive economic, political, and social rights (Kuhonta, 2008; Bünte, 2000). However, democracy could not be sustained and failed to consolidate. The rise of Thaksin, a police officer turned telecommunications mogul, alienated the royal palace and the traditional elites. Electorally invincible, his Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT) proved particularly popular in the countryside in the north and northeast of the country, where Thaksin's welfare policies fell on fertile ground. The 2006 and 2014 coups against the latter and the forces aligned with him sealed the fate of Thai democracy, however. Thaksin's movement, the earlier-mentioned Red Shirts, was suppressed. Uncivil society played a pivotal role in this democratic breakdown: extremist individuals and anti-democratic groups in civil society acted in cahoots with traditional conservative elites to delegitimise Thailand's democratic institutions, paralyse the political process, increase social polarisation and to trigger military intervention.

Conditional Democrats: The Evolution and Transformation of the Yellow Shirts

The PAD started as a legitimate movement to oust a democratically elected politician whose tenure had become increasingly dictatorial. The PAD was a "sectoral alliance" (Kuhonta and Sinpeng, 2014) which developed in late 2005 as a reaction to Thaksin's policies after he had won democratic elections once more (following victory in 2001 too). The then-prime minister appealed to the urban and rural poor, while pursuing his own business interests. While extremely popular, as noted, in Thailand's rural north and northeast, his (alleged) corruption and authoritarian leadership contributed to the deep frustration of Bangkok's middle class.

Initially, the PAD was a loose coalition of Thaksin opponents whose interests were adversely affected by his policies. The coalition's different factions hailed from diverse backgrounds, as well as having varying motives and aims at different stages of the movement's rise. The early PAD was composed of the following key factions: Sonthi Limthongkul, a former media mogul, was a staunch nationalist and a former ally of Thaksin. He used his daily news show to garner public support and popularity – his involvement was a reaction to Thaksin's crackdown on the media. Buddhist groups united under the leadership of former Bangkok governor Chamlong Srimuang, also a former Thaksin ally, and his Sante Asoke group – symbolising the fight against Thaksin's money politics. Some grassroots non-governmental organisations – such as the Forum of the Poor, under the leadership of Somkiat Pongpaibul – opposed Thaksin's economic policies in the countryside, which they felt would destroy the community-based economy and Thailand's unique village culture.

Thaksin's neoliberal policies (and his privatisation plans) also brought powerful trade unions, under the leadership of Somsak Kosaisuk, as well as the student movement up against him (Janjira, 2018; Kasian 2006; Kengkij and Hewison, 2009; Naruemon Thabchumpon, 2016; Nelson, 2010; Pye and Schaffar, 2008; Sinpeng and Kuhonta, 2012; Sinpeng, 2020). Altogether, the movement managed to successfully mobilise hundreds of thousands middle-class citizens critical of the Thaksin regime becoming increasingly dictatorial in nature. From a democratic perspective, this earlier movement was a legitimate protest since Thaksin aggrandised power and closed democratic spaces. The involvement of grassroots activists was highly significant too, since it allowed the PAD to avoid being perceived as merely made up of disgruntled members of the elite (Kitirianglarp and Hewison, 2009: 468). The movement, as noted earlier, became known as the Yellow Shirts. The colour yellow, symbolising the much-beloved King Bhumibol Adulyadej, "was cleverly used to unite the otherwise fragmented, ideologically diverse and eclectic groups under one roof" (Sinpeng, 2020: 146). The strategic choice to come together under a pro-monarchy banner helped mobilise the masses and to appear united in working to counter the Thaksin movement.

The PAD was set up on 9 February 2006, a few months before the military coup against Thaksin. After the latter event, the PAD disbanded and the movement fizzled out, but the Yellow Shirts re-emerged once more after Thaksin's proxy party, the People's Power Party (PPP), won a majority in the 2007 elections. This led to the second phase of mobilisation vis-à-vis the PAD, which started on 25 May 2008, lasted for 193 days and included the occupation of the Government House compound and Don Muang and Suvarnabhumi Airports. When the PAD launched its third round of protests in January 2011, their target was not Thaksin or his proxy government anymore but their erstwhile ally the Democratic Party and its chairperson Abhisit Vejjajiva.

These protests, organised by the "extremist ultra-nationalist wing" of the PAD (Pongsudhirak, 2011), were triggered by the Preah Vihear Temple dispute with Cambodia but went largely unnoticed by the local and international media (Nelson, 2014: 142; Pawakapan, 2013). In 2013, the PAD re-organised under the banner of the PDRC, primarily as a response to the electoral victory of Thaksin's sister Yingluck in

2011 and her attempts to achieve an amnesty for her sibling, who had been living in self-imposed exile since the military coup of 2006. The PDRC had a similar membership base as the PAD, although the successor alliance had much closer connections with the military and the opposition Democratic Party (Sinpeng, 2020); at this stage, its claims to be a grassroots organisation were rather weak (McCargo and Thabchumpon, 2021). What started as a legitimate protest transformed over time into activism with markedly anti-democratic goals (see below). Sociologically, the Yellow Shirts were a middle-class, predominantly urban movement coming from Bangkok or its surrounding provinces (McCargo and Thabchumpon, 2021). Both the PAD and the PDRC would become a regular feature of Thai street politics: they organised rallies as well as the blockading of roads and (government) buildings, mobilising at their peak (in January 2014) more than half a million people in Bangkok; at their nadir, (in April 2014) only a few thousand (McCargo and Thabchumpon, 2021: 126). After the military coup of 2014, the PDRC's various factions fell apart: some worked under the new military government, others were sidelined (Sinpeng, 2020: 146).

Anti-Democratic Core: Royalism, Nationalism and Conservativism

In terms of ideology, the Yellow Shirt movement combined arch-conservative ideas with rather liberal ones too – though progressive voices thinned out towards the end (Kanokrat, 2018). A nationalist-royalist social movement was nothing new in the country, and can be linked to the core pillars of Thai identity: namely, the monarchy and Theravada Buddhism (Connors, 2003). Similar movements also emerged in response to the 1973 student uprising. With the spread of Communism threatening the dominance of traditional elites (royalists, bureaucrats, and the military), members of the country's armed forces formed militia groups such as the village scouts (Luk Sua Chaoban) or the red gaurs (Krathing Daeng). These collectives took part in the brutal crackdown against the 1976 student uprising and the nationwide communist insurgency (Prajak Kongkirati 2006; Kanokrat, 2018). Janjira Sombatpoonsiri (2020: 337) highlights how this 'military infrastructure' would remain in place even after the formal democratisation of the 1990s, thus allowing conservative elites to continue mobilising in times of "crisis" in the kingdom.

The anti-Thaksin alliance was the first movement since 1976 to re-awaken and coalesce the country's right-wing groups into a major political force. For the PAD, royalism as a mobilisation frame helped to recruit supporters and garner financial support – Thaksin and his successor governments were framed as dangers to the monarchy. Royalists, meanwhile, framed the king as "sacred, popular and democratic," as the divine protector of the masses and father of the nation (Thongchai, 2008: 21). According to Hewison (2015), the opposition between the monarchy – deemed standard-bearer of morality and heart of the nation – versus elected politicians – presented as intrinsically corrupt – has been a core conservative discourse throughout modern Thai history.

While the king himself was supposed to be above the Constitution, democracy was not framed as existing in the Western sense. PAD leader Sonthi claimed that representative

democracy was not suitable for Thailand. Based on the moral foundations of the state, society should rather be led by "righteous" and "clean people." According to the Yellow Shirts' rhetoric, the rural electorate – who voted for Thaksin and his proxy parties in all possible polls (2001, 2005, 2007, 2011) – were "naïve" and "stupid" and had sold their voting rights to the highest bidder. This was a reflection of the money politics and vote-buying practices accompanying Thai elections since the 1980s.

The reform movement of the 1990s attempted to root out these informal practices by inserting a number of exclusionary articles into the 1997 Constitution. For instance, the latter stipulated that politicians should have a bachelor's degree – thus excluding 95 per cent of the electorate. Several watchdog agencies – Election Commission, Corruption Commission and an independent upper house – were created to limit the influence of money politics (Bünte, 2000; Thompson, 2016). Callahan (2005: 503) demonstrates that the reform movement aimed at creating "virtuous technocrats," while elected politicians from the countryside were depicted as corrupt and evil. At the same time, he shows also how these informal practices are mirror images of the developmental and social capital accumulated in rural Thailand (Callahan, 2005). Civil society thus had an undemocratic, anti-majoritarian element to it, something which had already come to the fore during the heyday of democratisation in the 1990s.

As a consequence of Thaksin's rise, the success of his parties in elections and the prevalence of money politics, the Yellow Shirts accused the lower classes of selling out. The incumbent's policies were hence criticised as an attempt to buy votes from the uneducated poor. He was framed as nothing more than a super patron of the lower classes who wrecked state coffers to satisfy rural demands for patronage. The PAD developed the narrative that a "new politics" was needed which lessened the electoral power of the lower classes, namely by giving greater proportional representation to the middle and upper ones instead (Thompson, 2020: 75). In 2008, during their occupation of Government House, PAD supporters suggested that 30 per cent of the country's members of parliament should be elected while the remainder should be appointed (Nelson, 2010; Sinpeng, 2020). After Yinluck's election victory in 2011, the PDRC launched a nationwide anti-government campaign to overhaul the entire democratic system under the slogan "reform before election."[3] As mentioned above, the PDRC was more radical and anti-democratic than the PAD. The Yellow Shirts' liberal components thinned out over time and middle-class support waned, while ultra-nationalists and royalists became leading voices in the movement. It strongly endorsed the 2014 military coup and supported, too, a stronger and politically involved monarchy (Sinpeng, 2020: 152ff).

From Street Protests to the Call of the Praetorians: Fomenting Chaos, Aiding and Abetting Coup-Making

The Yellow Shirts (the PAD and PDRC) bear a significant degree of responsibility for Thailand remaining under a hybrid form of military rule today. Which exact mechanisms,

then, led to a breakdown of democracy here? First, the PAD delegitimised both the entire voting process and respective democratically chosen governments by linking them to the narrative of electoral fraud and money politics. This damaged the essence of the democratic process. Whereas the PAD would criticise corruption and money politics from the early Thaksin period – themes first brought up by the reform movement in the 1990s –, the PDRC went a step further and tried to negate the whole electoral process. The PDRC mobilised their supporters to boycott elections through a "Vote No" campaign and to disrupt the electoral process by blocking polling stations. In the February 2014 elections, there was no voting in the country's nine southern provinces – the Democratic Party's heartlands. Overall turnout was only 47 per cent, much lower than the 75 per cent rate in previous elections (Sinpeng, 2020: 155).

Second, the Yellow Shirts emboldened other political actors to step into the fray too. They fomented chaos and aided and abetted coup-making. Both the 2006 and 2014 coups were triggered by Yellow Shirts-led mass protests. Whereas the 2006 one followed the "invitation" extended by the PAD, the military intervened in 2014 two days after Suthep Thaugsuban had announced mass protests by the PDRC. Sinpeng (2020: 155) emphasises the proximity of the latter's protagonists to the coup leaders, who were easily able to step in after the 2014 polls failed to provide electoral legitimacy.

The Yellow Shirts' mass mobilisation and the rise of street politics were visible signs that the country's core institutions were now defunct. PAD protests against the governments of Samak Sundaravej and Somchai Wongsawat – both aligned with Thaksin – destabilised the respective incumbents even further and led to a "crisis of confidence" and the perception that Thailand "was on the brink of civil war" (Janjira, 2020: 338). Here, particularly the six-week siege of government buildings in 2008 gave the impression that the country had become ungovernable. When military coups were no longer viable due to the elected governments' high legitimacy, anti-democratic actors were emboldened to step in: in September 2009, the Constitutional Court ruled that Prime Minister Samak had violated the constitution by accepting payment for hosting two cooking shows and banned him from politics; under his successor Somchai, the PPP was disbanded by the Election Commission. This increasing assertiveness and politicisation of the judiciary contributed to the breakdown of democracy as much as the mobilisations of the PAD/PDRC did (Dressel, 2010; Merieau, 2022). Another key point which needs to be taken into account here is the degree of polarisation existing between the Yellow Shirts and Red Shirts. The social and cultural divide between the two groups could not be bridged, with state institutions increasingly affected. Uncivil society – working in alliance with traditional royalist elites, the armed forces, the Democrat Party (DP) and the urban middle class – induced a complete break with the democratic system.

Academics have given three potential explanations for the Thai middle class's turn against democracy and support of authoritarian alternatives. The first sees their social position as decisive: squeezed in between an abusive elite on the one side and the newly emancipated lower middle class and politically transformed rural poor on the other, the (upper) middle class turned to the old elites to disenfranchise the "uneducated

poor." Sinpeng (2021) argues, second, that both movements – the PAD and PDRC – developed into anti-democratic actors only after they had experienced an "institutional blockage" – that is, they cultivated such traits only when the road to meaningful political participation had been blocked by Thaksin and his proxies. While this is correct for the early PAD and the NGO camp, which mobilised against Thaksin's increasingly repressive and illiberal rule, it is much less true for the late PAD and the PDRC. As demonstrated above, Thailand's civil society always had an undemocratic core – with it expanding over time, as enriched by royalists and frustrated members of the country's middle class. A third explanation emphasises, meanwhile, historical continuity, pointing here to authoritarian nostalgia being an enduring value set of the country's middle class. From the 1980s, the latter's members would be socialised into prioritising order, morality and royalism in Thai politics (Janjira Sombatpoonsiri, 2020; Kanokrat Lertchoosakul, 2021; Pitidol and Techasunthornwiwat, 2014).

Anti-Democratic Movements and Autocratisation in Myanmar: From Lobbying to Ethnic Cleansing

Myanmar's reforms in the last decade would never bring the country close to the democratic threshold (Bünte et al., 2018). Its partial liberalisation, which followed the dissolution of the military junta and the retirement of Senior General Than Shwe in 2011, brought some basic civil and political freedoms, multiparty elections in 2015 and 2020, parliamentary politics as well as an elected government. The transition from direct military rule was, however, not one towards liberal democracy; rather, a hybrid regime emerged which combined competitive elections with extensive tutelary powers for Myanmar's armed forces (Tatmadaw, or sit tat) in both the legislature and executive branches (Bünte, 2021; Stokke and Myint Aung, 2020). The military coup of February 2021, followed by large-scale and multifaceted resistance thereto, ended the experiment of power-sharing between civilians and the military for the time being. It ushered in an intensified civil war and growing polarisation between pro-democracy forces under the civilian National Unity Government (NUG) and a repressive military regime.

The hybrid regime in place from 2011 to 2021 allowed civil society to flourish and influence politics to a degree never seen before (Stokke, 2023). Greater room for manoeuvre and increasing economic opportunities due to the influx of foreign aid allowed civil society organisations to take on a key role in the formal discussion of contested topics such as peace-building, land rights, gender issues, and similar. This led to CSOs' increased professionalisation, though their political access and impact on decision-making – and, thus, potential for democratic deepening – remained limited both under the respective Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and National League for Democracy (NLD) administrations. Arguably, civil society became increasingly depoliticised in this brief period of openness (Stokke, 2023).

Liberalisation also gave rise to uncivil society. Here, the increasing mobilisation of ultra-nationalist Buddhist groups is particularly relevant. Though there is no direct link

between the greater engagement of these groups and the coup of February 2021, militant Buddhist monks played a vital role in turning a localised conflict in Rakhine State into a broader anti-Muslim movement. What started with local riots[4] between Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State in 2012 transformed into anti-Muslim violence in Meikhtila, Lashio and several other cities elsewhere in Myanmar in 2013 and 2014, ending with the military undertaking clearance operations against the Rohingya in 2016 and 2017. In the course of the latter, 700,000 Muslims were forced to flee from northern Rakhine State. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights called the incident "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing, possibly genocide" (Cummings-Bruce, 2017). Lee begins his monograph, meanwhile, with the assertion that the genocide against Myanmar's Rohingya had commenced earlier in fact, since "it first happened gradually, then suddenly" (2021: 1).

To gauge the overall political impact of the ultra-nationalist Buddhist movement, some initial remarks are in order: Religion (and ethnicity) are prime markers of identity in the country (Bünte, 2020: 177), with 80 per cent of its population following Theravada Buddhism. Myanmar's approximately 400,000 to 500,000 Buddhist monks are deeply revered, although they are not allowed to play an active role in politics – either as voters or as parliamentarians (Larsson, 2015). Yet, as Walton (2017) points out, Theravada Buddhism provides a powerful conceptual framework by which to judge the legitimacy of chosen political courses of action. The relationship between the community of Buddhist monks (Sangha) and political rulers is symbiotic in nature – with the latter protecting Buddhists and providing fertile ground for their religion to flourish, while the Sangha legitimises rulers and constitutes more generally a key pillar of the state. This has been highlighted at various times throughout history, such as during the protests against colonial rule in the 1930s, the 1988 democracy protests or during the 2007 Saffron Revolution (Gravers, 2015; Schober, 2011). Apart from these monks' social and moral authority derived from their religious legitimacy, Buddhist monasteries have a strong physical and organisational influence on Myanmar's social and political movements. With their approximately 1700 monastic schools, they also play an important role in the country's education system.

Origins and Transformation of Militant Buddhism After 2011

Ultra-nationalist Buddhist groups first emerged under the banner of the 969 Movement in 2012,[5] later morphing into the larger and better-structured MaBaTha (ICG, 2013). The latter movement initially appeared in Mawlamyine, but quickly spread to other parts of the country too. MaBaTha broadened the 969 Movement's scope of activity by linking up with Buddhist NGOs involved in offering free funeral services, schooling and welfare. In 2015, MaBaTha was already active in more than 70 per cent of Myanmar's 330 townships (Bertrand and Pelletier, 2017: 270). The network was led by the firebrand monk Ashin Wirathu,[6] who *TIME* magazine described as "The Face of Buddhist Terror," and by Ashin Wimala (Beech, 2013). Wirathu not only repeatedly demanded that the government expel the Rohingyas and Muslims from Myanmar, he and other MaBaTha

monks also gave anti-Muslim sermons and speeches and incited violence in areas where, a few hours later, anti-Muslim riots would then occur (Bertrand and Pelletier, 2017: 270).

The question of whether the network has constituted an "instrument" or "tool" of hard-liners in the military and of conservative members of the ruling USDP is contested: Min Zin (2015: 383) points to the patronage here of high-ranking government officials at both the local and national levels. He asserts that the degree of sophistication to the violence and participation of civilian militias leads one to assume that members of the former military regime are heavily involved herein. Bertrand and Pelletier (2017: 271) highlight that the USDP's attempts to use MaBaTha to win the 2015 elections and to later discredit Aung San Suu Kyi's government might be seen as proof that the ultra-nationalist movement and the USDP have formed at least a "temporary alliance" intended to slow down the transition. However, Min Zin (2015), Bertrand and Pelletier (2017), and Walton and Hayward (2014) also all emphasise the broader support for the network existing among both the reformist camp of the USDP, the oppositional NLD and Myanmarese society at large.

As Bertrand and Pelletier (2017) argue, MaBaTha's rise from 2011 to 2014 and its subsequent slow weakening between the latter year and 2018 can be best explained by two structural factors: the country's partial liberalisation and opening up of the public sphere on the one hand and the decentralised nature of Buddhism, which lacks a disciplinary authority, on the other. Both factors in combination would lead to changed opportunity structures, thus facilitating the rise of the ultra-nationalist Buddhist movement. The lifting of censorship on publications in 2012 and 2013 and the broadening of the freedom of association would make the mobilisation of such ultra-nationalist monks easier. Newly available telecommunication forms combined with increased access to social media would accelerate the spread of nationalist narratives, of nefarious rumours and of hate speech. Social media developed into "spaces of toxicity rather than civility" (Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 2020, 88) – with progressive voices being increasingly sidelined therein.

It was only from 2014 that CSOs would increasingly start to lobby against these militant groups' narratives. A coalition of 180 CSOs openly voiced their opposition to the four pieces of legislation – The Monogamy Law, the Religious Conversion Law, The Interfaith Marriage Law and the Population Control Law (ICG, 2017) – adopted in August 2015 by the USDP and military representatives which are collectively known as the country's "race and religion protection laws," signing a related petition and demanding changes hereto. In reaction, MaBaTha labelled them "traitors" (Nyein Nyein, 2014). The ultra-nationalist Buddhist movement heavily influenced these four laws' promulgation, submitting 1.3 million signatures in support of them to parliament after a nationwide campaign. They respectively outlaw polygamy, penalise religious conversion, place restrictions on interfaith marriage and give authorities the power to implement draconian birth-control measures (Bertrand and Pelletier, 2017; Nilsen, 2015).

In 2015 and 2016, interfaith, women's groups and other CSOs organised community networks to counter inter-religious violence.[7] Prominent monks started to speak out more boldly against anti-Muslim discourses, while both local and international NGOs increasingly devoted themselves to programmes tackling hate speech and promoting interfaith

dialogue. However, given the continued broad support for ultra-nationalist Buddhist views among Myanmar's populace, attempts to find counternarratives remained an uphill struggle until 2018. In that year, a number of CSOs working on hate speech wrote an open letter to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg to demand the company address the problem.[8] It was only then that Facebook took down MaBaTha's pages and removed its most prominent members, its national and township-level committees, from the site (ICG, 2023: 8).

The second factor conducive to the mobilisation of radical monks is the authority structures within Buddhism, a weakly institutionalised religion with no rigid hierarchical control and decentralised legitimacy (Bertrand and Pelletier, 2017: 260). This format allows individual monks or networks – like Wirathu – to compete for influence and to gain increased followership. The Supreme Sangha Council (SSC) – a 47-member-strong body established under the country's Ministry of Religious Affairs in 1980 to regulate (or control) Buddhism – tried to ban the 969 Movement in its early days. This provoked the establishment of the more formal MaBaTha in 2013. The Thein Sein administration, seen as supportive of the movement, did nothing to limit MaBaTha's influence and even promoted it (Min, 2015: 380f). It was only under the NLD that both the government and the SSC started to act more decisively: under pressure from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Council issued a statement indicating that MaBaTha was not recognised as a Buddhist organisation – a rebuke but not an outlawing of the movement (Walton and Tun, 2016). In May 2017, the SSC banned it entirely – although a large number of monks defied this ruling, rebranded the group as the Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation and thus continued its activities.

Yet, local authorities gradually became more assertive in countering MaBaTha's sway – no longer allowing it, for example, to hold events. The influence of radical monks also slowly waned. Wirathu was detained by the NLD government on charges of sedition and defamation in November 2020, but was released eight months after the coup of February 2021 (Myanmar Now, 2021). However, the NLD administration's weakening of MaBaTha meant the latter was ultimately unable to regroup, and the overall movement lost its impact. Another factor here might be the changed opportunity structures after the 2021 coup, since the anxieties sustaining MaBaTha's xenophobic and illiberal rhetoric have largely dissipated and been replaced with anger at the military's brutality and incompetence (ICG, 2023: 8; 16f). However, some smaller ultra-nationalist Buddhist groups are still weaponised by the military to fight regime opponents (ICG, 2023: 8 and 16f).

Ethno-Nationalism and Illiberalism Poisoning the Public Sphere

The MaBaTha movement can be classified as ethno-nationalist in nature. Since the colonial era, Buddhism and (Burman) ethnic identity have been closely interlinked; the country's anti-colonialist nationalist movement had religious origins as well. However, Sayadaw U Ottama, the first popular nationalist hero and eventual martyr calling for home rule, advocated the use of peaceful methods of protest, whereas more recent ultra-nationalist Buddhist monks have come to preach the path of violence instead. While

earlier violent ultra-nationalist Buddhist groups had targeted Indians in the 1930s, the current movement's hatred is directed at Rohingya Muslims or Muslims in general – Islamophobia would replace xenophobia, then, from the 1990s (Bertrand and Pelletier, 2017; Egreteau, 2011).

In its Constitution, MaBaTha referred to the official concept of the Myanmar nation consisting of 135 'national races' (Foxeus, 2019). This understanding – coined in 1963 under the Ne Win government, and inscribed into the Citizenship Law of 1982 – continues to represent the country's formal position, with the Rohingya excluded hereby and thus rendered stateless (Cheesman, 2017). From the ultra-nationalist view-point, ethnicity is subordinated to religious belonging – as such, only Buddhists are seen as part of the Myanmarese nation (Foxeus, 2019: 669). According to them, faith represents the ultimate moral order and the protection of "race and religion" hence has to be at the heart of the political agenda.

MaBaTha encouraged Buddhists to boycott Muslim businesses, and was also a leading voice in passing laws restricting interfaith marriage. It justified discrimination and sometimes even violence against Muslims as a necessary response to the imminent threat of Islam's spread in Asia, and its encroachment therewith on the sanctity of the Buddhist community (Walton and Hayward, 2014: 20). Fed by conspiracy theories (e.g. about the high birth rates of Muslims in Rakhine State being a plot to take over Myanmar or large parts of Asia; jihadi infiltrators or schemes to pay Muslims for marry-ing and converting Buddhist women), Muslims would be characterised as an existential threat and the Rohingya deemed a "fearsome other" (Lee, 2021; Schissler et al., 2017; Wade, 2017). Internationally, the most extreme examples of such Othering gaining media attention would be their framing of Muslims as "rabid dogs" or an "invasive species."

Moreover, ultra-nationalist Buddhist groups also felt endangered by growing liberalisa-tion and increasing pluralism, a loss of traditional (religious) authority and by secularism – with the goal of protecting Buddhism deriving therefrom. The argument for the defence of religion (Sasana) – inextricably linking state, race, and nation – is compelling and difficult to refute due to these monks' elevated moral authority. No Buddhist can afford to be accused of failing to defend their religion (Walton and Hayward, 2014: 24). This under-standing would gain ground particularly after the 2012 riots, which MaBaTha used as a rallying cry (Foxeus, 2023). In light of a general deficit in interpersonal trust coupled with huge uncertainties due to the massive social, economic, and political changes accom-panying Myanmarese society's opening, the idea of defending Buddhism is, in the final reckoning, an expression of moral panic and civilisational angst (Bünte, 2020).

From Hate Speech to Ethnic Cleansing: the Impact of Militant Buddhism

Ultra-nationalist Buddhist mobilisation led Myanmar down an anti-democratic path just as the country's liberalisation was taking shape. It did not usher in a complete breakdown of electoral democracy, although the democratic rights of the Muslim population were curtailed heavily. Its detrimental impact unfolded via two specific mechanisms: the

official lobbying of political parties led, first, to the growing exclusion of Muslims and other minorities; the use of hate speech and fake news, second, poisoned the public sphere.

To exert its illiberal influence, the ultra-nationalist Buddhist network reached deep into political society. Its local branches gave media training; distributed CDs, DVDs, and published monthly magazines; MaBaTha also lobbied in parliament and worked with political parties to foster a nationalist, anti-Muslim agenda (Bünte, 2018; Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 2016). The movement's impact on electoral politics would also be considerable, gaining greater leverage over all parties' agendas through its active campaigning in the 2015 elections. As a consequence, all became more anti-Islam; neither the NLD nor the USDP fielded any Muslim candidates at the local or national level (Bertrand and Pelletier, 2017: 273). Shortly before the elections, parliament also stripped persons with temporary identification cards (so-called white cards), mostly Rohingyas, of their voting rights.

While MaBaTha's lobbying led the country in a more illiberal and anti-Muslim direction, its' attempts to discredit Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD failed, with the latter winning the 2015 elections by a landslide (Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 2016). However, even under the NLD, the situation of the Rohingya did not improve with the country's "race and religion protection laws" left untouched.[9] MaBaTha and the military bloc in parliament systematically tried to undermine the NLD's legitimacy by highlighting Aung San Suu Kyi's lack of leadership and her party's failure to solve the "national crisis" (Bünte, 2021a).

MaBaTha's poisoning of the public discourse was only possible with the liberalisation of the media and the Internet. Before 2011, Myanmar had one of the most restrictive news-media environments, the Internet was tightly controlled and mobile-phone ownership practically non-existent. All this changed rapidly with the societal opening of 2011: pre-publication censorship ended (although some other forms remained), mobile-phone ownership increased exponentially and foreign Internet sites were unblocked (Fink 201; Lee, 2019). Facebook established itself as the main medium of communication; in consequence, Myanmar people equated the platform with the Internet per se.

From 2012, Wirathu regularly used Facebook to make inflammatory posts to his more than 500,000 followers (Lee, 2019: 3210). The negative comments were rarely removed or blocked, since Facebook did not employ enough local (Burmese-speaking) editors. The military regurgitated the content via its own online propaganda machine (Bünte, 2021). Moreover, state media and some officials' institutional and personal Facebook accounts simply echoed the shared ultra-nationalist sentiments, thus adding to their validity (Fink, 2018: 45; Lee, 2019). As a result, Myanmar's public sphere would become subject to a steady stream of anti-Rohingya messages from Buddhist nationalists, the military and leading figures. Social trust – among the lowest in Southeast Asia, reflecting the repressive nature of the country's former military regimes – declined even further (Bünte, 2020; PACE, 2018). In a survey carried out by the People's Alliance for Credible Elections (2018), respondents felt more at ease with those who share their own religion and less than 10 per cent cited being comfortable with having a Muslim neighbour.

Hate speech and ultra-nationalists' inciting of violence also prepared the grounds for the broad social acceptance of the military's ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya in 2016 and 2017. In the aftermath of attacks by Rohingya militants against border forces in October 2016 and subsequently on 25 August 2017 – the day that the Kofi Annan Commission submitted its report to the government –, the military launched clearance operations which resulted in more than 700,000 Rohingya refugees fleeing to Bangladesh and left over 6000 dead. Most of the country's Buddhist monks supported calls to rally behind the military (Walton, 2017). MaBaTha's toxic influence on the public discourse only came to an end in 2018, with Facebook's earlier-outlined intervention. Hereafter, the movement found it increasingly difficult to win support for its activities (ICG, 2023: 8) and so its reach waned. Civil society activists increasingly argued that monks should limit their focus to religion. During anti-coup demonstrations in April 2021, protesters apologised on banners to the Rohingya; an NUG cabinet minister lamented the past treatment and promised justice for the atrocities previously committed (RFA, 2023).

One aftereffect of this ethnic cleansing has been Aung San Suu Kyi's fall from grace with the West, as she defended the military's atrocities both in Rakhine State and in other regions of the country. As well, she appeared at the International Court of Justice to defend the military against accusations of genocide. Being stripped of many accolades also ensued due to her collusion with Myanmar's armed forces. Arguably, Western criticism of her arrest in February 2021 would have been more vocal had she not been supportive of those atrocities. Although a bit far-fetched, some even see her compromised position and the possible prosecution of top military generals in The Hague as a reason for the coup of February 2021 (Simpson, 2021). The latter, however, rather had its roots in General Min Aung Hlaing's personal ambitions and in the military's fears of a loss of political influence (for a discussion of possible causes for the coup, see Bünte, 2021a).

Conclusion: The Devastating Effects of Uncivil Society

This article has analysed uncivil society's contribution to autocratisation (Myanmar) or democratic breakdown (Thailand). In both cases, democratisation would be accompanied by the rise of uncivil groups forming alliances with members of the (former) establishment. In each country, these uncivil groups would manufacture an existential "national crisis" presumably endangering the polity's core identity and well-being. Whereas in Thailand the Yellow Shirts – mainly of a royalist, military or middle-/upper-class background – framed the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra and his proxy governments as an imminent danger to the country's monarchy, militant ultra-nationalist monks positioned Myanmar's opening and Muslim representation as a threat to the Buddhist nation. Elites and uncivil groups evoked fears of a future democratic order in which traditions dissolve and anarchy prevails. We find historical precursors here, whereby earlier movements would emerge and mobilise along similar lines to their more recent counterparts: In Thailand, right-wing militias worked with both royalists and the military to fight the burgeoning student movement and Communism. In Myanmar, ultra-nationalist Buddhist

groups mobilised against Indians in the 1930s. In both cases, nationalism, royalism, and religious ideas would be used to bind members of the former establishment and parts of (un-)civil society together in seeking to mobilise the broader population for their own undemocratic ends.

It has been demonstrated that uncivil society can further erode social trust and civility when a country's people are polarised along religious or class lines. In Thailand, the rise of Thaksin and his proxy governments and the politicisation of the rural masses led to constant street protests and gridlock. Thailand's upper and middle classes feared a loss of wealth and status with Thaksin's attempts to channel money into rural areas. Due to constant mobilisation and the prevailing chaos, the country's institutions no longer functioned, generating nationwide anxiety about the future. In Myanmar, the opening up of society led to civilisational angst and a fear of a Muslim takeover based on fake news and hate speech.

However, despite these similarities, there are important differences between these respective movements and their effects. In Thailand, the Yellow Shirts' mobilisation ushered in an alliance between the upper and middle classes, inducing a period of extreme polarisation and social unrest and, finally, a takeover by the country's military generals. Uncivil society fomented chaos and gave the military a pretext to take over again, leading to a repression of the Red Shirts and an exclusion of rural constituencies. With democracy breaking down, the country's generals were able to dominate once more in seeking to safeguard their own interests. In Myanmar, however, militant Buddhist monks' mobilisation did not lead to democratic breakdown. Together with an increasingly assertive NLD administration, which reined in the monks' ability to so operate, civil society groups were able to act as a firewall. They organised inter-religious seminars and pushed the authorities to curtail the influence of extremists. This underlines the vital importance of civil society networks in countering the influence of radicals.

Despite not culminating in the imminent breakdown of democracy, these monks' activities did still result in the proliferation of hate speech, religious violence, and ultimately ethnic cleansing. Consequently, the positive effects of civil society countering its own dark side came about too late. The Myanmar case also highlights the importance of control over social media and the dangers of hate speech. Countering the influence of fanatics remained an uphill struggle due to the poisoned public sphere, as resulting from Facebook's predominance as the medium of communication, a mistrusted and weak system of state news, and ongoing military propaganda.

Finally, the article has also highlighted that in Thailand and Myanmar alike civil society is closely aligned to the state, and particularly to old elites who strive to protect their power in times of crisis or when facing challenges to their dominance. Civil society is not a (semi-)autonomous sphere between market, the state and family, but a space wherein dominant forces and the state try to maintain hegemony in a situation breeding heightened pushback. This contention is much more pronounced during processes of international opening up and liberalisation; as competition grows, stalwarts of the elite become increasingly resistant to change.

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Notes

1. This article treats the Yellow Shirt movement as part of uncivil society. It bears discussion whether the Red Shirts are part of the latter, too. The United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) was formed in response to the coup in 2007 and, although some of its actions were uncivil, it fought for the inclusion of rural constituencies in a centralised state and an end to military and bureaucratic interference in politics. The UDD is therefore considered here as supporting democracy (see Naruemon Thabchumpon, 2016; Sopranzetti, 2020).
2. Direct military rule lasted until the elections in 2019. The latter were not a democratizing event, but intended to prolong military rule (see Ricks, 2019).
3. The meaning of "reform," however, remained unclear and often vague (McCargo and Thabchumpon, 2021).
4. Riots in Rakhine State erupted after the rape and murder of a Buddhist girl by three Muslim men in June 2012. Rakhine Buddhists retaliated, and the fighting spread quickly. In 2013, riots erupted in Meikthila, Lashio and other towns in central Myanmar. In 2014, riots were seen in Mandalay, although smaller-scale incidents occurred in Yangon as well. Altogether, at least 140,000 people were internally displaced and 200 killed during the nationwide riots from 2012 to 2015 (Walton and Hayward, 2014: 8ff).
5. The movement used the symbol "969," a numerical representation of the qualities of the "Three Gems" (Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha). It also refers to a booklet written by U Kyaw Lwin – an influential Buddhist monk, who died in 2001 – in which he urged Buddhists to openly display the numbers 969 in their homes, business, and vehicles. It is supposed to be a counterpoint to the number 786, long used by Muslims in Myanmar to designate own restaurants and shops (ICG, 2017: 18).
6. Wirathu began preaching in 2001 about the rising threat presented by Islam; in 2003, he was arrested and sentenced to 25 years in jail for inciting deadly violence. He was then freed in 2011 as part of a broad amnesty by President Thein Sein in 2011.
7. Interview with civil society activist, Yangon, 1 August 2018.
8. Facebook's role in inciting violence in Myanmar has been widely discussed. See, for instance, Fink (2018) or Nyi Nyi Kyaw (2020).
9. Aung San Suu Kyi established the Rakhine Commission led by Kofi Annan.

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Author Biography

Marco Bünte is a Professor of Asian Politics at the Friedrich-Alexander University in Erlangen Nürnberg (FAU). His main research interest lie in the comparative politics of East and Southeast Asia. He is particularly interested in topics of democratisation and autocratisation, the role of the military, civil society, and social movements. His latest publication is "Presidentialism and Democracy in East and Southeast Asia," London: Routledge 2023. Marco Bünte is also co-editor of *the Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*.