Chapter One

Introduction

At the beginning of 2001, the United Nation’s special envoy to Myanmar, Razali Ismail, announced that a dialogue had been going on between the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and the leader of the opposition party, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, since the previous October. After more than a decade of deadlock between these two major political players, Razali’s announcement sparked the greatest optimism about the political situation in years.¹ The détente resulted in the sporadic release of political prisoners, the reopening of some National League for Democracy (NLD) offices, and freedom for Aung San Suu Kyi to travel outside of the capital, Yangon. Such actions had seemed inconceivable in the previous few years when the deadlock appeared to be at its peak. Yet when the anticipated announcement of a powersharing agreement failed to appear and Aung San Suu Kyi was once again placed under arrest, observers from within and outside the country were resigned to the belief that, yet again, nothing was changing in Myanmar politics. The initial optimism arose from the ongoing hope that political change could come at any time.² However, as military rule has become more entrenched in the last decade, and the strength of the pro-democracy opposition has waned, a sense of deep political stagnation exists.³

¹ See Roger Mitton (Asiaweek webfiles, 27 August 2001). However, this optimism did not last long, see Aung Zaw, ‘Burmese Express Criticism Over Razali’, The Irrawaddy (online), News Alert: February 2001.
² The experience of living under military rule in Myanmar is often popularly likened to the repressive political order of George Orwell’s 1984. But in some respects, Samuel Beckett’s play, Waiting For Godot, might be more apt in describing the agony of waiting hopefully for something, a change, which never comes.
³ Bruce Matthews (2001: 229) describes the context in Myanmar as ‘the sombre life-style of a people who, though not starved or enslaved, survive in what is largely a subsistence economy, for the most part in an atmosphere of political resignation and uncertainty’.
Focusing on the absence of large-scale political change, however, masks the significance of the changes that have occurred in the country under the rule of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) (1988-1997) and the SPDC (1997-). Within the context of Myanmar history, it becomes apparent that 1988 marked a significant break in policy direction, as the regime attempted to legitimise its rule by constructing a new national ideology. Although security remained the priority of the state, socialism was replaced with an emphasis on economic growth. SLORC/SPDC also developed a new pattern of centre-periphery relations, and attempted to gain advantages from being a member of the international community.

The impact of the economic transition, and the changing power structures that have accompanied it, have been underestimated in much of the current literature. Because of the difficulty of access to Myanmar, the political analysis of the country by (mostly) English-speaking foreign scholars since the 1988 coup has been based almost exclusively on macro politics, concentrating on the political confrontations and crisis. Although this trend is slowly changing, much of the detailed fact gathering going on at the micro level of state-society relations is geographically focused in the area adjacent to the Thai-Myanmar border, and is largely informed by an agenda of human rights documentation. In addition, during the 1990s many scholars were concerned with informing the international policy debate on whether to isolate or engage the regime in order to affect political change (Bray 1995). Hence, reflecting sources of information available and the agendas informing them, a major theme in the literature on Myanmar politics since 1988 is the stagnation of politics and economic development.

To a large extent, SLORC/SPDC is perceived as being no different from its predecessors. An undifferentiated view of the illegitimacy of the regime, and of the pro-democracy struggle for political change, gives a transitory view of the political scene and often does not acknowledge the importance of policy changes by SLORC/SPDC. Legitimacy and democratisation have rarely been
examined through the prism of everyday life of the non-politically-active masses. Major changes, such as the ceasefires between the government and former insurgent organisations, the flood of narcotics profits into the economy, and the regime’s attempt to engage its neighbours and the international community, are not ignored. However, these trends are often analysed from the (not unjustified) perspective that these are changes made in the interest of a self-serving and illegitimate regime and are not sufficient to address the long-standing obstacles to political change (Silverstein 1997b; Houtman 1999). In doing so, the full impact of changes in the Myanmar state and society have not been fully explored.

Some of the exceptions to these prevailing trends in Myanmar scholarship are Andrew Selth’s (1996b) work on the modernisation of the military, Mary P. Callahan’s (1996) work on the origins of military rule and current civil-military relations (Callahan 2000), Tin Maung Maung Than’s (1998) work on the mentality of the regime, and Raymond L. Bryant’s (1997) study of the forestry sector from 1948 to 1994. Also, David I. Steinberg (2001a) has recently provided a detailed overview of multiple dimensions of contemporary politics.

Towards the end of the 1990s, the dominant focus on prospects for political change shifted slightly, as it became apparent to scholars (and other observers) that political change would not occur in the short-term, at least not in the form of a transition to democracy under the NLD. In recent years, there has been a more substantial focus in academic work on the realities of military rule in Myanmar, including local-level politics. Some scholars, like Bruce Matthews (2001: 230), have written of ‘Myanmar’s continuing struggle to bring to birth a new polity, economy, and society’. He argues that ‘internal change is taking place, slowly but unpredictably’. In particular, two anthropological studies, by Monique Skidmore (1998) and Christina Fink (2001), have deepened the field’s understanding of life under military rule.

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4 There is a number of Japanese scholars specialising in Myanmar studies, but most of their work is inaccessible to non-Japanese speakers.
Changes in policy have resulted in a process of economic and social change which makes the Myanmar of 2003 different in many significant ways from the Myanmar of 1988. But, as I will demonstrate in this study, not all of the new policy goals have been realised, and few have been manifested in a way that the regime could have intended. Most importantly, despite the new strategies employed, the current regime has been no more successful than its predecessors in building a unified and legitimate state.

One area through which economic, social and ideological change can be charted is the health system. The changing status of health in the state system reflects changing attitudes to the role of the state and illuminates the current transition and the trade-offs it entails. The development of the health and education systems was one of the highest priorities of the military-run socialist state (1962-1988), but the government was unable to put enough resources into the implementation of its policy. Since SLORC came to power, the state has abandoned sole responsibility for social services, because they are no longer perceived by the political leadership as essential to the shaping of the state and society. Instead, the burden of health care has been shifted to the private sector and the community. However, my contention is that it is the failure of the state to promote equitable health services under both socialist and non-socialist regimes that is telling of the values and national goals of the state leadership. That is, ideologies of socialism, and now economic development, are used as a method of promoting the military’s security agenda. When components of these ‘secondary’ ideologies, such as universal health care, do not directly advance this agenda, they are sacrificed. Consequently, I use a case study of the health system to measure the dysfunction of the state system, and illuminate why the state is unable to achieve social development.

Overall, my thesis is that the SPDC’s inability to promote social development is associated with the failure of successive Myanmar governments since independence to achieve state consolidation. This failure stems from legitimacy problems of the state and of successive regimes, which, prioritising security concerns, have pursued a vision of state structure and national identity that is antagonistic to many parts of the society, particularly the country’s
ethnic minority groups. This has prevented successful nation-building of a cohesive state, leaving the state leadership preoccupied with preventing challenges to their power, and to the integrity of the state.

The illegitimacy of the state has been particularly severe under military rule since 1962. The military regimes have shaped their governance around an exclusivist security agenda that privileges elite and military interests at the expense of development and national reconciliation. The regime’s lack of autonomy from military interests, combined with weak state capacity that leaves the government unable to effectively implement policy outside of areas deemed essential to social control, means that allocating state resources and attention to the social sectors is ‘politically unfeasible’.5

These long-standing issues, of illegitimacy, underdevelopment and the unconsolidated state, are now being played out in a new context. The role of the Myanmar state is changing during the transition from a socialist economy, and changes are taking place in political and social structures. The regime is pursuing a narrow development vision6 dominated by economic growth and modernisation, and has abandoned social equity as an ideological goal. In general, the combination of economic transition with the regime’s preoccupation with achieving state consolidation on its terms is reinforcing the systemic obstacles to social development within the state: institutional weakness and antagonistic state-society relations.

The detrimental impact of transition is apparent in the health sector, where the low capacity of the state to deliver public health services has been exacerbated by the subordination of the social sectors to the pursuit of social control and, to a lesser extent, economic growth. Changing economic relations and priorities of the state have resulted in the state giving up responsibility for the sole financing and delivery of social services. Social inequity has been exacerbated, and poverty is increasing. Moreover, the irrelevance of the state in

5 The concepts of ‘political feasibility’ and ‘political capacity’ are borrowed from Michael R. Reich (1994: 418) and Douglas Crone (1993: 56), respectively. See Chapter Four for detailed definitions.

6 The concept of a ‘narrow conception of development’ is borrowed from Rigg, Allott et al. (1999: 590).
the daily lives of its citizens is increased as health care has been pushed out beyond the ambit of the state and an unregulated private sector, including informal health care providers, has grown to fill the gap.

**Characteristics of the State and Nation**

The contemporary Myanmar State is characterised by several interlinked features, which significantly influence politics and society. Most importantly, as a nation-state, it has never been fully consolidated, instead being dominated by a complex political and ethnic conflict that reflects the highly heterogenous composition of the population and a lack of universal belief in the nation. The post-colonial state, with governments dominated by the Burman ethnic majority, has constantly faced challenge from communist and ethnically-based insurgencies. Decades of dispute about the ethnic identity of the state have created deep ethnic cleavages in the society, and strong distrust. According to David Brown (1994: 34), this has produced an ethnocentric state, where ethnic disputes ‘have come to be perceived by all parties, not as negotiable political issues, but rather as clashes between absolutist and irreconcilable ideologies: the imperative of state nationalism confronting the imperative of ethnic nationalism’. The ethnocentricity of the Myanmar state is characterised by what Horowitz (1985: 22) defines as ‘ranked ethnic groups, where mobility opportunities are restricted by group identity, and political, economic and social status are cumulative’.

In a system divided by ethnicity, the exclusive nature of ethnic identity precludes the formation of national identity.\(^7\) Among the ethnic minorities still fighting the government, most realise that secession is no longer realistic,\(^8\) but will only accept a political order that grants them autonomy within a federal state. The military regime, however, continues to promote a unitary state.

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\(^7\) Horowitz (1985: 52) defines ethnicity as ‘based on a myth of collective ancestry, which usually carries with it traits believed to be innate’.

\(^8\) The 1947 constitution had a provision for the Shan and Karenni (Kayah) states to secede after ten years. The military’s fear that U Nu would allow this to happen was one of the key factors that provoked the 1962 coup. For detail on the political context of the 1962 coup, see Chapter Two.
need for national reconciliation is the most important issue facing the Myanmar state, far beyond the conflict between military and pro-democracy forces. It is this conflict that prevents the consolidation of the state, as the central government has neither had complete control over the territory of the state at any point since independence, nor been able to build a widely accepted concept of national identity.

Underlying this conflict is a legitimacy deficit of the governments that control the Myanmar state. In Muthiah Alagappa’s (1995c: 2) definition, 

The legitimation of power relies of the conviction of the governed that their government...is morally right and they are duty bound to obey it. In the absence of such conviction there can only be relations of power, not of authority.

Legitimacy is vital in that it is at the centre of political organisation, and thus affects all political activities (ibid.: 3). Conversely, a lack of legitimacy has significant implications for the cohesion and effectiveness of a political system.

According to Alagappa (1995a: 15), legitimacy consists of four main elements: shared values and goals, conformity with established rules for acquiring power, proper and effective use of power, and consent of the governed. David Beetham’s definition (1991: 15-16) is similar, focusing on the elements of conformity to established rules, justification of these rules by shared beliefs, and consent by the ruled to the power relations. However, what both these scholars emphasise is that many of these attributes are relative, and strength in one area may make up for weaknesses in others (Beetham 1991: 20; Alagappa 1995a: 24-25).

Essentially, legitimacy is the sum of the relations between the state leadership and the population, and consequently forms a measure of state-society relations. This means that it varies not only across different parts of society, but also in different time periods (Alagappa 1995a: 11). The issue of legitimacy has been especially prominent in Myanmar politics since 1988. The advent of SLORC rule was marked by a crackdown on widespread anti-

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9 However, the political stagnation in the capital is a hindrance to addressing other political issues facing the state.
government protests. Thousands were killed in the streets,\textsuperscript{10} and many more were either arrested or fled into exile. These traumatic events have focused the energies of the military regime on establishing its right to rule, in the face of the insistence by a coalition of insurgent and pro-democracy groups, morally supported by much of the population and many Western governments (particularly the United States), that the military government is illegitimate. Then, having run an election in 1990 but refusing to honour the result when the pro-democracy NLD won, the legitimacy of SLORC/SPDC is restricted by the existence of another political organisation with a clear mandate to rule.

The opposition and its supporters advocate the establishment of a government that meets all of Alaggapa’s and Beetham’s criteria.\textsuperscript{11} However, the focus of this study is on the political system as it is under military rule. For the most part, the criteria for legitimacy are not present in Myanmar, and it is argued here that, overall, the regime governs the state without a valid ‘right to rule’. Beetham (1991: 20) distinguishes between different forms of non-legitimacy: a breach of rules leads to illegitimacy; lack of shared beliefs to justify rules leads to a legitimacy deficit; and withdrawal of consent leads to delegitimation. He argues that although military governments may acquire a degree of support, they can never acquire legitimacy because, by destroying the ability of the population to express consent, they destroy the means of public legitimation (\textit{ibid.}: 233). The rationales of military rule are difficult to sustain, and easy to challenge (Alagappa 1995b: 62-63).

But legitimacy is not all or nothing, instead representing a continuum (Held 1989: 102). As such, legitimacy may be judged by how widespread and substantial are the deviations from its key elements (Beetham 1991: 20). Indeed,

\textsuperscript{10} Estimates of the number of people killed during the 1988 demonstrations vary greatly. One of the most thorough accounts comes from Bertil Lintner’s (1990) description of the demonstrations, which is based on numerous eyewitness reports. According to Lintner, Western diplomats estimated that at least 1000 people were killed in Yangon alone during the four days following the general strike on 8 August 1988, and a further 500 to 1000 people were killed in the crackdown following the 18 September coup. If the hundreds of fatalities from Mandalay and other regional towns are counted, the death toll is much higher. In addition, several hundred people were in killed during demonstrations in March and June 1988 (\textit{ibid.}: 71, 77).

\textsuperscript{11} For example, see \textit{Freedom From Fear} (Aung San Suu Kyi 1995) for the political philosophy of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the charismatic leader of the National League for Democracy.
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some definitions require only that the population is habitually compliant (Jackman 1993: 40). Following David Held (1989: 101), I reject the view of legitimacy as merely compliance; such a view does not distinguish the negative reasons for compliance, such as coercion or apathy, from compliance as a result of consent. Rather, I argue that in the face of a legitimacy deficit, the ability of the regime to gain compliance in key sectors of the population means that it has enough support from the elite and acquiescence from other parts of the population to maintain its rule. Even when a political order is illegitimate, it can be maintained by a combination of incentives and sanctions, as well as the use of its resources and organisation to uphold power (Beetham 1991: 28-33). Indeed, a vital component of state power is the ‘complex web of interdependencies between political, economic and social institutions and activities which divide power centres and which create multiple pressures to comply’ (Held 1989: 151). Unable to achieve legitimacy, the military regime has concentrated on institutionalising its presence in society to create these webs of interdependence (see chapters Two and Three).

In the case of Myanmar, it seems that attitudes towards the regime are not uniform. Military personnel (especially officers) share the values of the state leadership, and acknowledge the rules that it has established. As for other parts of the population, although there was widespread withdrawal of consent in 1988, the passage of intervening years has led many people to accept (if not like) that the military remains firmly in power. While some people do not share the core values of the military, they do enjoy the benefits that can be gained through the opening up of the economy. Yet, for a significant sector of the population who have felt directly the adverse affects of military rule, the regime is quite clearly illegitimate. Overall, the support for or legitimacy of the SPDC (which are not the same) is very difficult to measure (these issues will be

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12 Robert W. Jackman (1993: 98-99) argues that a regime is legitimate when it can achieve a measure of compliance without resorting to force. Less important is a popular belief in the normative rightness of the political order.

13 Alagappa (1995a: 28) points out that support from the elite, who have great control of resources, carries more weight than support of the masses, who tend to be more politically marginalised.
explored further in the next few chapters). However, what is obvious to most
visitors to Myanmar is that the moral authority of the government is very weak,
and it is highly probable that the majority of the population would not support
the military if it had a reasonable choice.\footnote{The work of Ardeth Maung Thawngmaung (2001) on the nuances of legitimacy in rural
areas will be examined in later chapters.} As Alagappa (1995a: 19) points out,
the excessive use of force will undermine the legitimacy of a government, even
for those who are not the target of the state’s punitive capacities.

The contested legitimacy of state and regime focuses the energy of the
state on defending itself against challenges to its cohesion, and, at times in the
past, its very existence. It is in this manner that the legitimacy deficit of the
regime contributes to its inability to achieve state cohesion. The military
regime’s preoccupation with the protection of national integrity and internal
order is genuine, and sustained by a belief that the military is the only group in
society capable of unifying the country. As a result, the state leadership refuses
to consider calls by many ethnic minority groups and political organisations for
a federal solution, and concentrates on the attempt to blend a multi-ethnic
population into a homogenous unitary state. However, the nation-state that the
military is attempting to institute is normatively and institutionally weak.

Because the military’s primary agenda has little legitimacy with the rest
of society, and none with the political organisations representing the ethnic
minority groups, the regime must concentrate the resources of the state into
internal security and social control. The regime’s reliance on coercion reflects
its inability to achieve a form of support more sustainable than compliance. In
turn, the lack of legitimacy of the regime affects the power and capacity of the
state. Defined as the ‘\textit{capacity} of social agents, agencies and institutions to
maintain or transform their environment, social or physical’ (Held 1989: 1), the
power of the state is limited under military rule because, lacking the ‘right to
rule’, the military regime relies on the inefficient tool of coercion to govern a
population that is distrustful of authority and preoccupied with its own
survival.
The SLORC/SPDC has attempted to appease its supporters and replace its reliance on coercion through the pursuit of performance legitimacy. Yet, apart from allowing a small elite to get rich, the economic performance of the regime has been marked by a failure to institute economic reform and improve living standards. Although performance legitimacy is recognised as the only means of legitimation open to a military regime (Beetham 1991: 253), economic growth and social development in Myanmar are subordinated to the regime’s need to maintain its precarious support.

State capacity involves several components: adequate financial resources, a competent bureaucracy, and ‘sheer sovereign territory and the stable administrative-military control of a given territory’ (Skocpol 1985: 16). In Myanmar, the prioritisation of security leaves the capacity of the state in other areas of governance very weak. Since independence, a common trend has been the attempt to combine the pursuit of state integrity with ambitious programs of state development, leading to institutional weakness in the state and the inability of the government to implement its goals. Authoritarian rule has also been manifested in strong centralisation and a tradition of top-down development, which also inhibits effective governance.

Thus, there is a difference between the regime’s ability to stay in power and its ability to run an effective state apparatus (Rudland and Pederson 2000: 2). In Myanmar, the strength of the state, or what Midgal (1988: 4) calls the ‘capabilities’ of the state, is limited. State strength involves, at least in part, the willingness and ability of a state to maintain social control, ensure societal compliance with official laws, act decisively, make effective policies, preserve stability and cohesion, encourage societal participation in state institutions, provide basic services, manage and control the national economy, and retain legitimacy (Dauvergne 1998: 2).

Much of this strength, or otherwise, derives from how the various parts of the state interact with various societal groups (ibid.). As will be seen, the Myanmar state has strength to fulfil only a small number of these criteria. In this context, it is useful to consider Eric A. Nordlinger’s (1987: 369) differentiations of state strength, which are determined by varying
combinations of varying levels of societal support and autonomy.\textsuperscript{15} Accordingly, weak states ‘strive to act autonomously despite divergent societal preferences, but failing to do so, they rank low in both autonomy and support’. However, even when the autonomy, support and capacity of a state is weak, the resilience of the state can be maintained through its organisational, allocative or coercive functions (Dauvergne 1998: 3).\textsuperscript{16} The role of coercion in keeping the military regime in power is well recognised. This study will also examine the contribution of its organisational functions to regime durability.

Nevertheless, the trading-off of state strength and capacity in order to maintain the power of a regime without legitimacy means that the regime’s control over society is limited. Midgal argues that the coherence and character of many underdeveloped\textsuperscript{17} states is impacted on by the inability of state leaders to determine how people behave, which impacts on the coherence and character of the state (Migdal 1988: 5). Certainly, in Myanmar the illegitimacy of the regime encourages what James C. Scott (1986: 6) defines as everyday resistance. This is carried out through

the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, false-compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth. These Brechtian forms of class struggle…require little or no co-ordination or planning; they often represent a form of individual self-help; and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms.

Resistance to the state in Myanmar not only involves the ongoing civil war and political opposition, but also everyday non-cooperation. As Chapter Three explores, the fear generated by the regime creates a spectrum of behaviour among the population. Although acquiescence to the power of the regime is common, this apparent passivity tends to be accompanied by relatively innocuous actions that form a psychological barrier to the state’s dominating tendencies. The regime has devoted much of its resources to overcoming the substantial and overt challenges to its supremacy, but this

\textsuperscript{15} See below for a definition of autonomy.
\textsuperscript{16} This can extend further than the penetration of the state’s organisational functions into everyday life. For example, Migdal (1998: 12-13) explains the resilience of weak states as being due to the naturalisation of the state through legal structures, public rituals and the reconstitution of public space, which create meaning for people in society.
leaves very little to be used to overcome the ‘everyday resistance’ that hinders the capacity and autonomy of the state.

The prevalence of everyday resistance, even within the institutions of the state, explains how the lack of state legitimacy perpetuates lack of state capacity. In turn, the lack of state strength and capacity has hindered economic and social development with the result that the Myanmar state is unable to eradicate the pervasive and unrelenting poverty that shapes the lives of the majority of the population, and hence fails to generate performance legitimacy. In fact, since the beginning of the economic transition, underdevelopment has been accompanied by growing inequity in society, where there are more losers than winners (see Chapter Two).

Why the Health System?

The study of Myanmar politics is characterised by widely differing views about what is the most important political issue facing the country, which is often closely related to the personal experiences of the scholar. A researcher who has spent time in the border regions, working with people who have borne the brunt of civil war and seen the very worst of the military regime, will have very different views about what is significant in Myanmar politics from a researcher who has experienced the dynamics of life and politics in the capital. The experience of politics in the capital can also differ, according to whether the focus of research is power plays in the SPDC or the relative ‘mundaneness’ of everyday life. There is room for all of these views. The different views of Myanmar scholars, some of which are irreconcilable, reflect the realities of existence in the Myanmar state, which people experience in a very different manner.

The focus of this research was influenced by contact with the pervasive poverty experienced by the Myanmar people. When visiting a clinic for severely malnourished children in the outer suburbs of Yangon, or a village

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17 For an examination of underdevelopment, as defined by economic, sociological and social welfare criteria, see Hardiman and Midgley (1989: 9-12).
where the inhabitants are constantly preoccupied with day-to-day survival, the human rights atrocities on the border can seem abstract and the political fighting in the capital contemptible.\textsuperscript{18} While obviously important, the high politics of the state and the conflict and atrocities in the border regions have been well studied, so much so that other political issues can be pushed into the background (see above).\textsuperscript{19}

Therefore, this study seeks to bring the everyday running of the state into the foreground, and show those aspects of the state that have a broad impact on most of the population. By using the health system to examine the nature of the state and state-society relations in the context of economic transition, my hope is to contribute another important piece of the puzzle to the understanding of an extremely complex political situation.

The study of the health system is important for three reasons. First, the state of the health sector is closely related to the political economy of the state. The priority placed on provision of health services by the state depends on how it balances economic development and social equity. By examining the regime’s concept of development and the priorities that arise from it, this study will make apparent the elements of the political context that have made the effective promotion of health within the country not merely a low priority of the transitional state, but infeasible for the regime.

Secondly, a detailed examination of the health system reveals the complexities of policy formulation and implementation in the Myanmar state, and the way in which the state relates to international organisations, mass organisations and communities on a daily basis. This in turn reveals the

\textsuperscript{18} Nonetheless, I acknowledge that these topics are interlinked with the politics of health and poverty, and address the human rights abuses in Chapter Three, and the political context that informs the case study in Chapters Three and Four.

\textsuperscript{19} Writing in 1983, Robert H. Taylor (1983b: 6) lamented the intellectual deficiency caused by an absence of study on the nature and role of the Burmese state. He writes, ‘The frequent claim by seven-day visitors to Rangoon that time has stood still in Burma is truer of Burma studies themselves than of Burma’s politics’ (ibid.: 1). His contribution towards correcting this is \textit{The State in Burma} (Taylor 1987). Similarly, in reflecting on the state of contemporary Myanmar studies, Martin Smith (1999b: 1) argues that ‘not only is much of the new writing and analysis in propagandised form, but, beneath the day-to-day headlines, many other grave issues – from HIV/AIDS and narcotics to displaced persons and armed conflict – continue to suffer from the difficulties of access and polarised state of confrontation that exist within many parts of the country’.
sources and impact of weak state capacity. In addition, it indicates how weak state capacity causes people to move out of the state’s sphere to find the services they need, thereby reducing the relevancy of the state in people’s daily lives.

An understanding of the way the state is run on a daily basis can contextualise more prominent political and economic issues. Indeed, the underlying motivation for this study is to contribute to knowledge about the very nature of the state in Myanmar. The dearth of major studies on the state itself, as opposed to manifestations of its politics, is largely due to the paucity of access to Myanmar for research purposes. I was fortunate to be given a visa that enabled me to spend time in the country to research this thesis. Because of this, I was able to focus my study on the people who are not involved in political dissent, who live in secure areas of the country, and who therefore have a perspective and a place in the state that is often neglected in studies which focus on the more obvious victims of political repression. By looking at the experience in parts of the state that do not attract the attention of the military regime, the quieter tragedies of the Myanmar people are highlighted, along with the areas of political space that have been quietly developed over the years.

Neither state administration nor covert societal resistance to military rule has been favourised in the current literature. Almost no substantial work has been done on the administrative system or state-local relations since the early 1960s, apart from analysis in Robert H. Taylor’s (1987) *The State in Burma*, which predates the rule of the current regime. Only Ardeth Maung Thawngmhung’s (2001) study of the relationship of rice farmers with local and central authorities, completed in 2001, provides an examination of state-society relations since 1988. Her findings, which benefited from several months of anthropological research in two Myanmar villages, confirm many of the findings on state-society relations that emerge through this study of the health

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system. Analyses of community and society in Myanmar are further restricted by the dominant view in the field that the lack of political space in the country has eliminated civil society, and therefore any potential influence on the state from non-state actors. This is a view I will challenge.

Thirdly, a better understanding of the health system may help explain the systemic reasons for the country’s health crisis. The poor health status of the population, characterised by high mortality rates from preventable disease, is widely recognised, but little understood. Statistics on health and other development indicators are commonly understood to be unreliable, and very conservative estimates. As Table 1 shows, Myanmar’s key mortality indicators are worse than the average for the region, and developing countries as a whole. More accurate figures are likely to show Myanmar’s indicators closer to the average for its Least Developed Country (LDC) counterparts. Academic work on health issues in Myanmar is restricted to a handful of articles (Carriere 1997; Chandler 1998; Steinberg 2001a: 198-222). The few examples of more substantial work include Martin Smith’s (1996c) monograph examining the health system in the context of human rights, Dr Chris Beyrer’s on-going research on the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Beyrer 1998; Beyrer and Hnin Hnin Pyne n.d.), and Monique Skidmore’s (1998: 209-299) case studies of the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital and the Yangon Drug Rehabilitation Unit.

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Source: UNDP (2002).

21 See also the Burma Debate and The Irrawaddy, both of which have kept the health crisis in the foreground, especially the HIV/AIDS epidemic.
Defining State and Regime

In an authoritarian state, it can be difficult to determine the boundaries between the state, the regime and the government. Such distinctions are not in the interest of the regime, as it tries to establish its legitimacy by promoting a monolithic view of the state and its components. For the purposes of this study, I will use R.J. May’s (1998: 70) definitions of the state as a set of institutions and the regime as those who occupy the institutions of the state or exercise significant political influence over it. The state, as an institution, is ‘historically-rooted’; according to Peter Evans (1995: 18), it is not reducible to the interests of power-holders, but is a social actor in its own right that influences economic and social change at the same time as it is being shaped by these forces. Thus, economic, political and social factors are important to an understanding of the context in which the state is embedded.

May (1998: 70) defines government as those occupying the institutions of the legislative and executive offices of the state. In the case of Myanmar, however, the high-level offices of the state are monopolised by the core members of the regime. As the change of government in 1997 showed, the control of state institutions is not intrinsically related to government structures, as would be the case in a system where the heads of state are elected. Consequently, when I refer to the regime it is these personnel I am specifically referring to. In this study, ‘government’ refers more broadly to the personnel occupying the administrative institutions of the state, who are involved in the

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This definition of the state is mainly neo-Weberian. Such a definition highlights the administrative, legal, extractive and coercive organisation of the state (Skocpol 1985: 7). These institutional features of organisation exist to structure state-society relations, as well as intra-societal relations (ibid.). This contrasts with neo-Marxist views that see the state as embodying class and economic relations. For example, Peter Dauvergne (1998: 1) defines the state as ‘one organisation within a societal arena where groups and individuals contest rules and norms’. See an overview of the two traditions by Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol (1985: 350-351).

Most definitions of regime are a variation on the idea that a regime consists of a group of people who hold the power in society, and are able to determine the political organisation of the state. However an alternative definition of regime conceives of it as a set of norms and principles, which define the rules by which the state is run (Lawson 1991: 7-8). Also see Cotton (1991: 3), who perceives regime as being ‘the character of the rule of the state’. As will be apparent in the following chapter, I argue that in this case, the characteristics of the rule are less consistent than the personnel and their institutional values.
policy-making process, but do not have the final say, and who implement the
decisions of the regime (*ibid*). These personnel are not intrinsically connected
to the regime, but are changed and restructured periodically.  

Forty years of military rule in Myanmar has created a state dominated by
praetorianism. In a praetorian state, ‘military officers are major or predominant
political actors by virtue of their actual or threatened use of force’ (Nordlinger
1977: 2). The institutionalisation of the military into the administration,
economy and society means that the state is largely synonymous with the
regime. Significant political influence over the institutions of the state is very
limited, effectively confined to the members of the SPDC, who hold most of the
decision-making power. Outside the capital, influence is also exercised by
regional commanders, who hold military and administrative power in their
regions but are no longer members of the SPDC. Support for the military
government comes from military and business elites (see chapters Two and
Three).  

The interests of the military elite go beyond private or corporate
interests. Luckham (1991: 41) points out that ‘state security and national
identity are almost invariably fused in the military imagination’. However,
institutionalisation of the state around narrow military interests makes it
difficult for the regime to achieve goals outside of the military prerogatives.
With a growing business class, the state leadership is faced with a constant
tension between the military’s agenda and the wider agenda of running a state.

Because military interests have captured the Myanmar state, the state is
autonomous only to the extent that its interests are synonymous with those of
the military elite. One view of autonomy is as the ability of the elite to shape
the state around its interests, to the detriment of civil society (Mann 1986: 125).

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24 In a Southeast Asian context, the state has also been described ‘an expression of power’,
consisting of political, economic, social and ideological components in a particular form of
organisation (Hewison, Rodan and Robison 1993: 4).
25 James Cotton (1991: 2) points out that ‘government’ is defined by formal-legal criteria.
Although the term usually refers to elected political figures who have specific functions, a more
casual usage of the term refers to sources of administrative policy and administrative office.
26 Elites in Myanmar are interconnected. After independence, members of the same families
(Myanmar has an inclusive definition of family) were scattered through the ranks of political
In this sense, because the military has mobilised the state to implement its agenda to the exclusion of others in society, the state is highly autonomous. But this study supports an alternative view, which perceives a state as autonomous when its institutions are able to escape capture by narrow elite or class interests (Skocpol 1985: 9; Evans 1995: 12). Such autonomy is not constant, and applies only to certain policy areas, depending on the relation between the administrative and coercive organisations of the state, and societal groups at a given time (Skocpol 1985: 13-14).\(^{27}\) As will be seen through an analysis of institutional patterns that affect the ability of the regime to implement its policy goals, without strong societal support for its goals, the autonomy of the Myanmar state is weakened by the dominance of the military’s security agenda.

Josef Silverstein maintains that the last regime change occurred in 1962.\(^{28}\) Since that point, the governments of Burma/Myanmar have been dominated by the military. The 1988 coup, obviously carried out with the consent of the former government, was not an explicit change in regime. Nevertheless, I argue that over the course of its rule, the SLORC/SPDC has created a significant change within the regime, even though the members of SLORC share with their predecessors a commitment to the same core values and goals. As Stephanie Lawson (1991: 4) suggests, politics within a regime are not static, and successive governments do not necessarily share identical interests. This applies to Myanmar, where the events of 1988 marked an epoch for state and society, and the change in government within the military regime started a process of political and economic change.\(^{29}\)

The most obvious change in 1988 was the retirement of U Ne Win, the general who had actively shaped the political order since 1962. The members of organisations, the bureaucracy, the military and insurgent organisations such as the Communist Party of Burma. This characteristic of society has not changed.\(^{27}\) See also Nordlinger’s argument (1987: 371-384) that state autonomy is shaped by degrees of malleability, insulation, resilience and vulnerability of the state.\(^{28}\) Presentation at ‘Regime Change and Regime Maintenance in Asia and the Pacific’ Workshop, Australian National University, 12-13 February 2002.\(^{29}\) The change in leadership and policy in 1988 comes into the category of what Charles F. Andrain (1988: 54) defines as ‘within-system’ change. In a system such as Myanmar’s, which Andrain defines as an elite mobilisation system, the failure to realise ideological goals leads to the attempt to build a new sociopolitical order to achieve those goals (ibid.: 57-58).
SLORC were his protégées and no doubt remained under Ne Win’s influence for some time after taking power, through the necessity of seeking advice from a revered elder. However, the speculation that Ne Win continued to be the power behind the regime was put to rest in March 2002, when his son-in-law and three of his grandsons were arrested, allegedly for plotting a coup against the government. The events implied that the SPDC has consolidated its power bases separately from its position as Ne Win’s political heirs. More than that, the rule of SLORC/SPDC has seen generational change, a new ideology and economic system, changing power structures, and greater modernisation of the state. Some of these represented things the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) (1974-1988) was unable to achieve, some represent a radically different path. Therefore, this study distinguishes the SLORC/SPDC (the difference between the two being essentially a restructuring of the regime in the form of a change of government) from the governments dominated by Ne Win.

Even though decision-making is largely restricted to the SPDC, those decisions are filtered through government, and are affected by bureaucratic culture, lack of resources, and the ambivalence of civil servants.

One misleading generalisation, often employed by journalists and activists, is that all members of the Myanmar government are complicit in the actions of the regime. This tends to demonise the whole institution of government. An interesting exception was recorded when eighteen foreign activists were arrested in August 1998 for handing out pro-democracy messages on the streets of Yangon, and were detained for six days before being deported; one of the activists, a Malaysian woman, later wrote of her experience, noting that witnessing the mundaneness of life of the police and attendants changed her black and white perception that all members of government were as ‘guilty’ as the top leadership. She wrote:

[o]ur captors, they become people in my eyes. They fear us and hate us, but came to like us. Me too, though to admit it is as if to imply that the junta, with their human rights abuses and atrocities, is okay….During those six days, I discovered

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30 For detail and analysis, see Maung Aung Myoe (2002: 1-4). Ne Win died while still under house arrest, on 5 December 2002. His son-in-law and grandsons had been convicted of treason and sentenced to death a few months earlier.
humanity behind the villain’s mask (Ong Ju Lynn, ‘One Week in Rangoon’, The Nation (Bangkok), 21 August 1998).

As I will demonstrate, few civil servants associate themselves with the actions of the regime, for which they often share distaste. Certainly, the role of members of the security forces and military in carrying out atrocities cannot be excused. But the government also includes primary school teachers, doctors, and clerks who spend their days immersed in meaningless paperwork, but endeavour to make the best of the policy and resources they have been given to work with. Even senior bureaucrats cannot be easily pigeon-holed, having little influence over the policy they must deal with.

Fieldwork Experience

Preliminary attempts to collect information on the health system in Myanmar through secondary sources were limited by the sparse and ad hoc nature of the material. I gained permission to undertake ten months fieldwork in Myanmar in 2000 based in Yangon where I was affiliated to the Universities Historical Research Centre (UHRC). The library of the UHRC and the Universities Central Library provided an eclectic range of historical sources. Most of the documents on health and education were gathered from the United Nations Documentation Centre, and the libraries at the country offices of the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO).

Tourist travel was not restricted by the terms of my visa, and I travelled widely in the country to gain background for the study. This included one official research trip to the Kachin State, as a guest of World Concern, an International Non-Government Organisation (INGO) operating primary health care projects in the area. I visited six villages of varying size and prosperity over several days, and interviewed volunteer health workers, government health workers and village elders. These visits, along with trips to the outer-Yangon suburb of Hlaingthayar, were a major source of my personal
impressions of poverty and daily life in Myanmar. Although my ability to undertake research beyond the capital was more limited than I would have liked (mainly due to logistical problems), the visits I did undertake served to contextualise the information I gathered through other sources and my experiences of living in the country.

Although officially approved, my presence in the country as a researcher was very sensitive, and I was aware that my research activities were potentially dangerous for local people who assisted me. Consequently, the bulk of my interviews were initially with personnel from UN agencies, INGOs, foreign diplomatic missions, and foreign businesses, who generously shared their knowledge and experiences in the country with me. Gradually, I was introduced to a range of Myanmar bureaucrats, health workers and intelligentsia who rounded out my knowledge through informal talks. Due to the need for most of the interviewees to maintain anonymity, the interviews have been numbered for citation in the thesis; the names, occupations and full dates of the interviews are detailed in a confidential appendix.

In the end, I had greater access to sources for my research than I had expected. However, I chose not to interview members of the political opposition while I was in the country, since this would have drawn greater attention to my activities and reflected badly on other people I was talking to, as well as the UHRC and individuals who had helped me secure a visa. Unlike the government, the NLD makes an effort to be transparent, and its position on the health crisis and related issues is widely circulated outside Myanmar.

Most of the documentary evidence in this study was collected during my fieldwork, and therefore dates from 2000 or earlier. However, just prior to the completion of my thesis, I returned to Yangon for one year to work with an INGO. I did not pursue further research, but my experience served to confirm my thesis. In order to include events occurring after 2000 that contribute to my argument, the timeframe of the study goes to early 2003.

31 For a description of the UHCR and the context in which it operates, see Reynolds (2000).
Introduction

The study is limited somewhat by the fact that the information gathered during fieldwork is dominated by foreign or elite sources, and relies heavily on English language sources. It seeks, however, to establish a framework for examining the functioning and nature of the state through the prism of the health system, which may to be confirmed or contested by further studies.

Structure of the Thesis

The main aim of the thesis is to present a detailed analytical description of the health system in its political and administrative context. This is drawn mostly from primary data, though I have also used secondary literature to fill out the story and provide broader comparative context.

The approach I have chosen is similar to what Peter Evans (1995: 19) describes as the comparative institutional approach. This is a process of ‘locat[ing] specific state policies and societal responses in the larger institutional context that produces them, showing how that context defines interests, aspirations, and strategies’.

The first three chapters outline state-society relations in Myanmar. Chapter Two provides the historical context and background to the current situation, looking first at the historical evolution of state institutions and ideologies, and then the context of SLORC/SPDC rule, including the structure of the economy and the impact of economic transition on state and society. This chapter establishes the trends in development, and inherent weaknesses in the state. Chapter Three adds more depth to the picture of the state, exploring the basis of the regime’s lack of autonomy and the state’s institutional weakness through an examination of the administrative and broader political power structures. This chapter also looks at attitudes to authority in the context of everyday life in Myanmar, specifically social organisation at the village level and strategies of psychological and economic survival. Chapter Four attempts to explain how SLORC/SPDC’s strategies of legitimisation and nation-building create political infeasibility for promoting social development, and weakens the state. It also examines how the weakness of state capacity is perpetuated by the lack of ‘embeddedness’ of the state in society.
Chapters Five to Seven examine the health system. Chapter Five contains an examination of the political-economy of health, focusing on the historical development of the health sector in Myanmar, and the political factors that influence it now. Chapter Six looks at the financing, formulation and implementation of health policy, in order to assess the capacity of the public health sector, and show how policy implementation is detrimentally affected by the bureaucratic culture and systemic problems of the state, as well as the tendency for people to chose their health care outside of the public system. It also contrasts the health and education systems, to place health within a more comprehensive picture of social development. Chapter Seven fills out the analysis by looking at three different aspects of the public health sector in more detail: the use by the government of mass organisations to supplement the capacity of the state and strengthen social control; the differences within the health sector of the peripheral areas of the state, many of which are either ceasefire zones with different dynamics of power relations to the centre of the country, or conflict areas, where everyday life is subject to war conditions; and a comparison of two government health programs – the Expanded Programme on Immunisation, and HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control. Chapter Eight concludes the thesis, and considers the implications of the findings.