Chapter Four

Regime Legitimacy and Societal Resistance in the Transitional State

Introduction

By the tenth anniversary of the SLORC coup, it was becoming generally accepted (except in some activist circles) that the military regime was firmly entrenched in power, and that a political transition would only occur through a power-sharing agreement, not another uprising. However, the authority of the regime is still under challenge, albeit on a smaller scale and in a more diffuse manner than the uprising of 1988.

The preceding chapters have described the development and operation of the Myanmar state. Before the case study is used to delve more deeply into the workings of the state system, this chapter will consider the dynamics of state-society relations during transition, and its influence on legitimacy and capacity. Specifically, it will explain how SLORC/SPDC’s legitimation strategies make social development politically infeasible and weaken the state. It is argued below that the declining commitment to social equity by SLORC/SPDC results from the regime’s inability to make its reforms (and thus the military-inspired nation-state) politically sustainable. Instead, the top-heavy state weakens the capacity of the state. In addition, because the legitimacy of military rule is not embedded in society, the regime’s hold over society is only partial. Social actors, even if unorganised and apolitical, have a small amount of manoeuvrability, and have the potential to influence the behaviour of the state in subtle ways.
Myanmar is dealing with the transition from a socialist economy, with the accompanying need to renegotiate state-society relations as the changing economic order generates new winners and losers. However, the regime insists that this renegotiation must be on its terms, and in its favour. The SLORC/SPDC has tried a number of different strategies to institute its authority. Some of these, such as the National Convention, were an unqualified failure. In other respects the regime has been marginally more successful in the methods it has used to achieve that goal. However, the regime’s main strategy in its quest for legitimation involves a version of the developmental state process, a combination of reshaping and redefining public space, and an attempt to seek performance legitimacy through economic development. Not only does the military elite insist that it is the only agent able to secure the country; it also maintains that only the military can develop the country.

However, a government pursuing a developmentalist state model is reliant almost entirely on performance legitimacy that is quickly lost when growth stagnates (Alagappa 1995c: 42). In the case of Myanmar, growth stagnated before it could achieve widespread benefits. The regime is prevented from achieving its goals by a cycle in which the weak capacity of the state precludes the achievement of performance legitimacy, and the lack of legitimacy exacerbates the regime’s preoccupation with control. This serves to create societal resistance and apathy to state policies, and in turn perpetuates the weak capacity of the state.

The Military Way to Nation-Building

The regime’s use of the instruments of coercion and co-option, as outlined in the two preceding chapters, ensures its durability through its ability to suppress, marginalise or coopt any significant threats to its continued rule. However, the regime aspires to more than merely staying in power. The military governments of Myanmar have all had transformative goals, and the SLORC/SPDC is no exception. The SPDC is attempting to shape a new state that will validate its political ideology, and legitimise military rule. This transformative goal is dominated by the prerogatives of the military elite’s
security agenda,1 which Tin Maung Maung Than (1998: 396) defines as ‘an interdependent dyad comprising national unity and state sovereignty’. The security agenda is the basis for the SPDC’s non-negotiable strategies to shape a unitary state, and a homogenised national identity.

In addition to seeing military dominance as the only way to protect the integrity of the state, the SPDC believes that despite popular opposition to its rule it has a legitimate mandate to shape the state and society to its values. As articulated by Tin Maung Maung Than (ibid.: 394),

the current state leadership apparently sees no clear distinction between the state, regime, and the incumbent government. This has led to a reification of the state and its conflation with the regime as well as with the military.2

The priorities of the regime are often at odds with the interests of much of the population. However, it may be that the SPDC justifies this disjunction by a view of its legitimacy as stemming not from the people, but from the military’s accomplishments in protecting the security of the state over the years since independence, especially the supposedly anarchic situation in 1988, and the achievement of drawing the majority of insurgent groups into the ‘legal fold’ (Hla Min 1999: 10-11).

The regime portrays its success in ending many of the insurgencies in the country as a major component of its legitimacy, and a vindication of its claim that only the military can unify the country. Colonel Kyaw Thein, from the Office of Strategic Studies (a military think-tank), stated:

The change of heart exhibited by the armed groups of national races and their return to the legal fold is an unprecedented and spectacular accomplishment for internal peace known only during the time of the State Law and Order Restoration Council leadership. These successes reflect the State Law and Order Restoration Council government’s simple desire without ulterior motives for the welfare of the nation and the masses that make up the national races, and its noble and sincere desire to build and maintain a lasting peace within the country. They are also the direct result of the fact that development activities are currently being carried out with great momentum and that the matters that have the potential to cause suspicion and misunderstanding between the State and the armed groups of national races are being resolved through negotiations and compromise, thereby

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1 Tin Maung Maung Than (1998: 391) emphasises that the concept of state security is derived from a small military elite (the SPDC), which is insulated from societal influences.

2 One effect of the fusion of state, regime and government is that a legitimacy crisis in one translates into a legitimacy crisis in the others (Alagappa 1995d: 59).
promoting mutual confidence, respect and understanding (Colonel Kyaw Thein 1996: 198).

However, the regime is well aware that direct military rule is unsustainable, and promotes itself as a transitional government, working to establish a ‘disciplined and functioning democracy’ (Hla Min 1999: 24).\(^3\) This is a qualified form of democracy, which is required to be in line with the military elite’s values.\(^4\) To be able to shape the future political order around military supremacy, the regime must convince the population of its legitimacy. In addition, the members of the SPDC have the natural human desire to be liked, and to regain the popular admiration for the military that existed to a larger extent prior to 1988.

**Defining Modernisation and Development**

The political model that the regime is aspiring to is not very clear, and has involved a process of experimentation. At the beginning of its rule, the SLORC attempted to establish a procedural basis to establish its right to rule. The 1990 election did the exact opposite, by revealing that the SLORC’s mandate was shaky even among military constituents, and by giving a clear mandate to the pro-democracy National League for Democracy (Lintner 1994: 309; Khin Maung Win and Smith 1998: 100-101). The regime then changed the rules, insisting that a parliament could not convene without a constitution, and that the 1947 and 1974 constitutions were not appropriate as they had been discredited as political models. All legislative, administrative and judicial power would remain vested in SLORC until a new constitution was drafted (Weller 1993: 194-196). The National Convention was convened in 1993 to write a constitution that would confirm the political authority of the military through a political model based on Indonesia’s system of *dwifungsi* (dual function).

\(^3\) Silverstein (1989: 17) argues: ‘That democracy is popularly regarded as superior to authoritarianism can be seen in the fact that the military feels obligated to pay it lip-service, claiming that military rule is actually a Burmese variant of that concept’.

\(^4\) General Khin Nyunt defined ‘disciplined democracy’ as consisting of rights of freedom exercised in the framework of law, being compatible with the political, social and economic structures of the country, being in line with the culture, customs and historical traditions of the nation, and, particularly, bringing equal benefits to all nationals within a framework of national solidarity (see *Myanmar Today*, available at [www.myanmar.com](http://www.myanmar.com)).
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The Convention delegates consisted of some members of political parties elected in the 1990 elections, some members of ceasefire organisations, and hand-picked representatives of society. For many leaders of ceasefire groups, political representation is an important step to reversing the political marginalisation of ethnic minorities under military rule (Smith 1997: 11-12). However, the representative process was entirely superficial; the SLORC ensured that the proposed constitution would institutionalise ‘a leading role in politics for the military’ (Smith 1996a: 11). The proposed constitution grants nominal autonomy to the seven ethnic states, and a number of self-administered areas to cater for ‘stateless’ ethnic groups, but in fact remains highly centralised (Silverstein 1997b: 191-192). According to Taylor, in this structure the ‘nominally decentralised “federalist” concepts of the 1947 constitution would thus be combined with the unitary “democratic centralism” concepts of the 1974 constitution’ (Taylor 1997: 60). The legitimacy of the process was irreparably damaged when several delegates declared the process a sham, and the NLD boycotted the process in November 1995. The National Convention has not met since 1996, but the government’s information sheets reveal that the National Convention Convening Committee still meets regularly, and it is likely that when the regime is confident enough to hold elections, a completed constitution will be presented. The state structure this constitution proposes is not likely to promote national reconciliation. Experience in other countries has made it clear that state structures defined by ethnic-based territorial divisions do not offer a sustainable solution to divisions in heterogenous societies (Callahan 1998b: 62).

Meanwhile, the regime cannot establish its own legitimacy without first discrediting the mandate of the NLD. Until the end of 2001, it did this through

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5 For a description of the state structure outlined by the National Convention, see Tin Maung Maung Than (1997: 191-195).
6 For more detail on illegitimacy of the National Convention, see 'Extracts From a Personal Statement By Khon Mar Ko Pan Regarding the SLORC's National Convention' (1993: 10-12); Venkateswaran (1996: 66-71), Diller (1997) and Fink (2001L 83-86). In response to criticism of the National Convention by delegates, Order 5/96 was passed, which made criticism of the Convention illegal, punishable by up to twenty years detention (Liddell 1999: 59-60).
7 The NLD is a broad-based coalition, formed to contest the election, with the stated aims of creating a genuine democratic government and laying the foundations for a long-lasting union.
a propaganda campaign that attempted to establish that Aung San Suu Kyi and her party are allied with neo-imperialists, and will betray the nation if they obtain power. This has included constant personal attacks on Aung San Suu Kyi in the state-controlled media (Houtman 1999: 28-32). In contrast, the SLORC/SPDC portrayed itself as representing the ‘people’s desire’ (See figure 4.1). After the SPDC and the NLD began confidence-building talks in 2001, it appeared that the regime was attempting to neutralise the opposition of the NLD by an agreement that will draw it into the political status quo, as it did with the insurgent groups. At the time of writing the regime has once again returned to the strategy of repression, and the confidence-building talks have been derailed, after the attack on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters by government supporters in upper Myanmar on 30 May 2003.

The regime’s opposition maintains that the only way the political process can be legitimised in Myanmar is through a tripartite dialogue between the

(Khin Maung Win and Smith 1998: 110). Despite government repression, since 1990 NLD has provided a vocal opposition to the military rulers, and on the authority of winning the 1990 election has presented alternative policies. In terms of national unity, Aung San Suu Kyi advocates the unfulfilled vision of her father, Aung San, for a federation of equal ethnic groups (Silverstein 1997b: 196). In 1998 the NLD increased the pressure on the government by forming the Committee Representing the People’s Parliament. Comprising ten members, this committee formed ten sub-committees on subjects including ethnic affairs, health and social affairs, and defence, in order to undertake a preliminary policy-making process (see Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma 2000). However, it should be noted that the political values embodied in the 1947 constitution and the Panglong Agreement, which the NLD uses as the basis of its political platform (Silverstein 1998b: 27), do not necessarily constitute the most appropriate model for national unity. Some ethnic minority leaders, although in alliance with the NLD, remain distrustful of the NLD’s commitment to political equality for all ethnic groups (Smith 2001: 32). Nevertheless, as Bruce Matthews argues, the presence of Aung San Suu Kyi ‘is the single biggest deterrent to any feeling of long-term confidence that the military regime might have’ (Matthews 1998: 22).

8 The SLORC/SPDC has also attempted to marginalise the NLD as an institution. In addition to the house-arrest of the secretary-general, Aung San Suu Kyi, from 1989 to 1995, September 2000 to May 2002, and again from May 2003, its members have faced imprisonment, harassment, and coercion to resign from the party. Janelle M. Diller reports that the status of scores of opposition politicians elected in 1990 has been nullified by the government through charges of criminal offences, while all but ten of the 95 political parties that contested the election have been deregistered (Diller 1997: 33-34). For more information on the restrictions put on NLD members, see ICG (2001b: 13-14).

9 The people’s desire, as defined by the SPDC, is to ‘oppose those relying on external elements, acting as stooges, holding negative views; oppose those trying to jeopardize stability of the State and progress of the nation; oppose foreign nations interfering in the internal affairs of the State; crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy’. Like the Three Main National Causes, and the political, economic and social objectives, the ‘people’s desire’ is widely publicised in books, newspapers, and on billboards.
government, the NLD and the ethnic minority groups. However, the SLORC/SPDC has insisted that political negotiation is entirely on its terms. Meanwhile, with the discrediting of the National Convention and the ongoing popularity of the NLD, the only way the regime can establish its legitimacy is through achievement in development and nation-building. In systems of direct military rule, one of the most important components of legitimacy is economic development (Alagappa 1995a: 20). The SPDC defines economic development as the basis for a national ideology in itself. This is a ‘goal-rational’ ideology. In this type of ideology,

[i]nstitutions and persons claim their authority on the basis of the rational relationship between the ultimate goal and the roles assigned to them in the system. Thus the prescribed tasks and roles form the basis for evaluating their actions. Task achievement takes precedence over process and rule compliance (Alagappa 1995c: 33).

Further, legitimation of a goal-rational ideology is based on the ability of the rulers to transform their sectional goals into the goals of the community as a

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10 The National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), which claims to be a government in exile, concentrates on generating international support for the tripartite talks (see www.ncgub.net/campaign).
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whole (Alagappa 1988: 34). In a speech to a USDA meeting in 2002, Senior General Than Shwe stated that ‘Our Three Main National Causes is the indisputable national ideology of all our citizens’ (see Figure 4.2). Acknowledging the difficulty of the nation-building task, he said to achieve it ‘the entire Myanmar must be peaceful and united and national strength, enhanced’. This strategy is outlined in the twelve political, social and economic objectives.

Figure 4.2: 'Three Main National Causes' and 'Twelve Objectives' from Government Publication

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<th>Our Three Main National Causes</th>
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<td>National integration of the Union</td>
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<td>National integration of the National Solidarity</td>
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<td>Constitution of National Sovereignty</td>
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By asserting the pre-eminence of the three national causes (which are based on the security of the state) as the foundation for nation-building and
development, the military regime defines itself as the only institution capable of governing. Ultimately, the military bases its political legitimacy on its origins as the leader of the mass resistance movement against the Japanese occupiers in World War Two, which made it the ‘people’s Tatmadaw’ (Nawratha 1995: 5). For the SLORC/SPDC specifically, legitimacy is based on the assertion that without the strong hand of the military, the political situation would return to the chaos of 1988, and the development and cohesion of the nation would be lost.\textsuperscript{11} To back up its claim to authority, the regime has been promoting more ‘traditional’ sources of legitimacy. Steinberg argues that in place of the military’s socialist program, ‘it has now tried to substitute faith in and allegiance to itself as a substitute national programme’ (Steinberg 2001b: 63).\textsuperscript{12} This is also why the idea that authoritarianism is innate to the country’s political culture, as part of the legacy of the pre-colonial state, is so important to the regime’s claims.\textsuperscript{13}

A government publication written by a high-ranking military officer states: ‘The military government is systematically moving towards her main objective of a modernized, well-developed and peaceful nation within a solidified union and supportive economic infrastructure’ (Hla Min 1999: 23). The officer argues that the first phase of this involved the restoration of law and order after the crisis in 1988. The second phase is the strengthening of peace and stability, combined with development of the country.

The SPDC’s stated development strategy sees the economic and social development of the nation as based on infrastructural development (Than Shwe

\textsuperscript{11} At the Armed Forces Day ceremony on 27 March 2002, Senior-General Than Shwe stated that ‘the situation in the country became uncontrollable in 1988 due to general discontent stemming from the economic decline in the country. The defence services therefore had to assume state responsibilities. The duty to change from one era to a new era in accordance with the wishes of the people thus fell on the defence services in the political, economic and social sectors...Our genuine goodwill and efforts are not mere words, but are proven by concrete deeds’ (\textit{New Light of Myanmar}, 28 March 2002). See also an interview with Secretary-1 (Information Sheet A-0438(I), 23 May 1998) and Steinberg (1999a).

\textsuperscript{12} In addition, Gustaaf Houtman (1999: 60) points out that the SLORC/SPDC has disassociated the concept of unity from Aung San, reinterpreting it as embodied in the leadership of the military. See also Callahan (2000: 27-31).

\textsuperscript{13} Gravers (1993: 68) argues that ‘everything which has occurred in relation to this regime in recent years has merely served to consolidate the following self-fulfilling prophecy: unless one has control of foreign influence in the economy, religion and the ethnic minorities, there will be an imbalance in the universe’.
2002). This is also argued by the regime to be the necessary foundation for a future democracy \((ibid.: 23)\). Than Shwe’s speech to the USDA outlined the government’s development priorities, detailing dams that have been built to extend the irrigated area for agriculture, the construction of transportation infrastructure, which ‘not only constitutes economic infrastructure but can also be considered as socio-economic structures for the national races to extend relations between each other’, and development of the communication system, electric power, and oil and gas industries. Much of this activity is concentrated in areas under the Border Areas and National Races Development Programme, which is the regime’s key effort towards national reconciliation. Other sectors mentioned as priorities are industry, health, and human resource development through education \((ibid.)\).

Further, from the official sources, it appears that the modernisation of the country through infrastructure building is the government’s main strategy for nation-building. It is implied that most of the groups formerly in opposition to the state are now partners with the government in its development tasks. As shown in Chapter Two, the elites of the ceasefire groups have been courted with economic privileges and political power in their regions, and been drawn into the political regime that upholds the state as it is. The groups whose ‘disturbances’ slow down this development strategy are not presented as people to be drawn into the nation. Rather, having refused to enter into a ceasefire agreement and come within the structures and agenda of the military state, the SPDC’s current opposition is presented as a danger to the integrity of the nation. Thus, the nation-building strategy of the military regime is inflexible and non-negotiable. The fundamental problem lies in the fact that the ethnic minority groups maintaining armed opposition to the government reject SLORC/SPDC’s proposals for ceasefires and the National Convention process, which promotes a unitary state. They maintain that the only solution to conflict in Myanmar is a genuine federal state.\(^{14}\)

\(^{14}\) The agreement of almost all ethnic groups fighting against the government in the early 1990s to give up claims to secession, and advocate a federal state, was formalised in the Manerplaw Agreement of July 1992. Even for the groups who have since agreed to a ceasefire with the
Moreover, despite the SPDC’s assertion that it is working for the ‘all-round’ development of the country, and that development of health and education is included in its priorities (ibid.), its record of policy implementation indicates that development and modernisation are primarily defined in terms of economic growth. The success of the transition, or rather the modernisation, of the nation is measured in GDP growth, and the number of dams, bridges and roads built. Economic projects that contribute to growth, such as gas pipelines or mining projects, are given high priority by the regime. These projects are not insignificant, extending the infrastructural and institutional reach of the state, shrinking the distance between the centre of the state and the disparate peoples at the periphery. At the same time, the expansion of road networks increases the speed of military response to security threats,¹⁵ and boosts regional trading, especially from China (see Lintner 2001).

In contrast, the development of primary health care and basic education has little strategic value, prestige or immediately visible growth outcomes. More importantly, because health and education were a major part of the basis of the socialist government’s claim to legitimacy, the discrediting of socialism as a method of legitimising military rule has reflected badly on the prioritisation of social development (see Chapter Two). Thus, in actions if not in words,¹⁶ the notion of equity has been abandoned as a major goal of the state, and the social sectors are left to struggle with the few public resources left from the regime’s big projects.
The socio-economic model that the SLORC/SPDC has been attempting to institute since 1988 is along the lines of the developmental state in the manner of South Korea and Taiwan, where a social pact between state and society allows economic development to take place at the expense of political liberties. This relies on a strong, autonomous state, which has the power within its bureaucracy to determine the course of economic and social development in relative insulation from the interests of civil society and foreign capital (Leftwich 1994: 377-381). However, in states like South Korea, Taiwan and Malaysia, powerful, competent and relatively incorrupt bureaucracies enabled the implementation of a coherent development strategy (ibid). In contrast, the bureaucracy in Myanmar is weak and inefficient, and not trusted by the political leadership to be the guardian of the state. Although growth is the clear goal of economic policy, the economic reform needed to facilitate it is incomplete, and subject to reversal. What has instead been created is a growth state, which places value on a rising GDP, at the expense of social justice. By ignoring, and in some cases sabotaging, social development to achieve economic growth, the military regime remains unable to remove the Myanmar state from the cycle of underdevelopment, and create a social pact for economic development that might bring it legitimacy.

Thus, the development vision of SLORC/SPDC remains inconsistent, highly sensitive to the security concerns of the regime. It is limited by what Kyi May Kaung describes as the leadership’s ‘control mentality’, which is based on a belief that ‘a situation where things or people function best when they are left alone is inconceivable’ (Kyi May Kaung 1995: 1037). What is clear, however, is that poverty alleviation is not an investment the regime feels it can afford to make. Indeed, John V. Dennis (1999: 5) points out that Myanmar’s ‘national planning documents do not mention the word poverty or discuss the conditions

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17 Tin Maung Maung Than (1999) argues that the developmental state was also the goal of the elites in the socialist regime. This analysis is derived from his forthcoming book (which I have not seen) that includes analysis of the post-1988 period.

18 According to Adrian Leftwich (1994: 381-382), the model of the developmentalist state ‘entails a strong and determined state which protects a powerful and competent bureaucracy that largely shapes and directs development policy, a dubious (and sometimes appalling) civil and
confronting poor people’. As far as poverty goes, the concern of the regime is restricted to food distribution in order to offset social instability caused by shortages of rice and oil or inflation of food prices. The limited nature of government policies related to poverty arises because of the SPDC’s apparent perception that the political obstacles to poverty alleviation are too great, because allocating limited state resources for social development (especially health and social welfare) is detrimental to achieving economic development, seen as essential to the security of the state and the survival of the regime. Therefore, SPDC maintains a narrow conception of what development means (Rigg, Allott et al. 1999: 590). As Steinberg (1997b: 174) aptly notes, ‘economics is essentially viewed as a means towards a political end – the maintenance of internal military supremacy – rather than as an avenue for raising the general living standards of the people’. The military regime does not see economic growth and social development as reciprocally beneficial.

**Shaping State Identity: domestic and international**

The emphasis on economic modernisation is a reflection of one part of the regime’s project of state transformation, which is a redefinition of the role of the state. The other is a redefinition of the identity of the state. These aspects of the SPDC’s nation-building strategy are not included in official publications and speeches. As more insurgents have been drawn ‘into the legal fold’, as the government expresses it, the regime has focused its efforts on the homogenisation of the nation.

Gustaaf Houtman (1999: 179) defines this process of nation-building as ‘myanmarification’. This is a political programme to use impersonal means – culture, language, race and Buddhism – to attain to national unity by hegemonizing all diverse peoples of Burma into a singular Myanmar culture and thereby uproot [sic] all opposition for once and all.

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19 The attitude of the state leadership to social services is not revealed in policy, but is obvious to anyone analysing the SLORC/SPDC’s actions in this area, and will be spelt out in the case study.
Homogenisation has been implemented in a heavy-handed manner, with reports of forced religious conversion, and destruction of churches and mosques, coming from the border areas (Philp and Mercer 1999: 44; Fink 2001: 222-226).\(^{20}\)

The key to cultural homogenisation is the identification of the state with Buddhism. The regime seeks to gain moral legitimacy by patronising the religion of the majority of the country. The *sangha* have posed quite a problem for the regime, as some members have used their moral authority to challenge the authority of SLORC.\(^{21}\) In particular, the monastic boycott of the military and their families in Mandalay in 1990 was a turning point in relations between the *sangha* and the state.\(^{22}\) As Houtman (1999: 122) points out, at the same time as cracking down on the monks who took part in the boycott, the regime also began to increase the state’s identification with Buddhism. Under this state patronage, characterised by events such as the regilding of the Shwedagon Pagoda in 1999, the practice of Buddhism has gradually become more ostentatious, with emphasis on gilt and greatness. This includes state-sponsorship of a ‘national cult of relic veneration’, as occurred in 1994 when the Chinese Tooth Relic was brought to Myanmar. Juliane Schober argues that the encouragement of relic worship by the state was part of a legitimation attempt to transform ‘a ritual community into a national community in which the state regulates access to merit, prestige, and power’ (Schober 1997: 1).\(^{23}\)


\(^{21}\) Bruce Matthews reports that the administrative bodies of the *sangha* turned a blind eye to the pro-democracy activities of many of its members in 1988-1990, and ignored government directives ordering it to discipline these members (Matthews 1993: 416).

\(^{22}\) It is estimated that approximately 20,000 monks took part in the boycott (Matthews 1993: 421).

\(^{23}\) Even in states suffering from a legitimacy deficit, public ritual is a key component in their durability. Migdal argues that inefficient states do not only rely on the allocation of political spoils to maintain loyalty, but supplement this by ‘recontextualising the relationship between state officials and citizens beyond simply ruler-and-ruled through the use of public ritual’ (Migdal 1998: 28-29). Although there seems to exist certain contempt for the SLORC/SPDC’s ceremonies and state rituals, at the least, these ceremonies would appeal to key segments of the population. For example, the parade on Armed Forces Day is restricted to soldiers and their families. The participation in an exclusive and extensively organised event (rehearsals run for weeks before-hand) could not fail to have an impact. For other parts of the population, religious ceremonies can hold a powerful influence, regardless of who has orchestrated it. For example, to assist in the regilding of the Shwedagon Pagoda in 1999, US$2 million worth of gold and almost 68,000 pieces of jewellery were donated by the general public (Fink 2001: 218).
SLORC/SPDC has also placed emphasis on the restoration of ancient Buddhist pagodas, especially at Bagan. Philp and Mercer (1999: 45) argue that ‘religious sites have been inscribed through historical connections with the monarchy in order to legitimate the military regime’s authority’. At the same time, many historical religious sites in ethnic minority areas have been neglected, and sometimes, destroyed (ibid.).

The ritual of the military state is not restricted to religion, but involves invoking nationalistic and patriotic values through ‘re-emphasis on Myanmar literature, culture, and religion as well as the reification of glorious traditions of past Myanmar kingdoms’ (Tin Maung Maung Than 1997: 200). For example, Gavin Douglas (1998: 1) argues that the regime is nationalising music culture in the country. Through the creation of the University of Culture and standardisation committees, ‘Burmese classical music is presently undergoing some changes as it moves from a system that once enjoyed great regional variation to one with greater uniformity’.

The SLORC/SPDC are building upon a tendency for the ideology, policies and patterns of resource distribution of the state to be shaped by the dominant ethnic community. As a result, national identity is mono-ethnic (Brown 1994: 36-37). Thus, while the regime attempts to create legitimacy by unifying the state with its concept of national identity, this national identity by its nature excludes the groups that do not share the military regime’s values.

However, as John Badgeley (1989: 78-79) warned at the end of socialist rule, ‘[l]egitimacy established within a Theravada Buddhist context, but tolerant of the other religions and ethnic groups who claim Burma as their homeland, although these rituals might not increase regime legitimacy, they surely extend and maintain the ties of the population to the military-dominated state.

24 It is interesting to note that among ethnic minority groups identity is still being defined. Sandra Dudley’s (1998) research on Karenni (Kayah) refugees reveals that the Karenni are actually ethnically diverse. Instead the name is politicised and refers to those originating from the Karenni State. Further, within the refugee communities, the diverse identities of new arrivals are gradually integrated.

25 However, Callahan (2000: 35) notes that the ethnocentrism promoted by the military regime has a certain amount of resonance in the wider Burman population. Similarly, Fink points out that many in the army, as well as civilian, are sympathetic to the military’s claims that it has to hold the unity of the country together in the face of ethnic insurgency. She argues that they do not realise it is the regime’s refusal to allow self-determination to ethnic minorities that exacerbates the ethnic division in the country (Fink 2001: 143).
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was a vision fostered by Aung San. Any who would govern this troubled land must recapture that key principle.

At the same time, undesirable or powerless groups are excluded from the Myanmar nation through a restricted definition of citizenship introduced by the BSPP in 1982. This legislation makes it impossible for anyone not included in the state-defined ‘national races’ to gain recognition as a citizen (Aguettant 1998: 42). National identity cards, which are the key to mobility and basic citizenship rights in the Myanmar state, are being issued to members of ceasefire groups being officially drawn into the nation (The BurmaNet News, issue #1914, 7 November 2001). However, groups that cannot easily be homogenised, such as the Muslim Rohingyas in the Rakhine state, are denied citizenship even though most have been in the country for generations, giving them the status of ‘de facto statelessness’ (Aguettant 1998: 1). The very poor can also find themselves excluded from the state. It is not unusual for identity papers stored in substandard housing to be destroyed by the elements. Without these, many men are unable to get employment, leaving them vulnerable to forced conscription by the army (interview 54, Yangon: September 2000).26

It is these projects – economic development and nation-building – that the regime has defined as the source of its legitimacy. But it is not only in the domestic arena that perceptions of legitimacy matter to the SPDC. The governments of Ne Win and the BSPP ignored the outside world to a large extent, yet still received financial aid. At the beginning of SLORC rule, the military elite decided it needed to engage with the international community in order to further its project of economic transition. However, key members of the international community disengaged from Myanmar to protest the excessive repression used by the regime to gain and maintain power. To a large extent, the regime reacted to its ostracism by regressing to the myopic attitude that the Myanmar state should be self-sufficient. Yet over the 1990s the regime has been gradually courting the support of other countries, and trying to
establish itself as a good international citizen. This goes beyond the need for aid and trade partners, to a matter of national pride. Consequently, the regime has committed itself to all major United Nations policy initiatives, and exercised its membership rights in forums such as the United Nations General Assembly.  

Commitment to a policy is a far step from successfully implementing it. Many of the international initiatives that SLORC/SPDC has ratified cannot be met in the current system, either because they threaten interests of the regime’s key supporters, or because they simply are beyond the capacity of the state. Many of the international goals taken on by the regime remain rhetoric, because SLORC/SPDC has channelled institutional resources into developing a growth state, rather than a developmentalist state. As will be demonstrated more fully in the following chapters, even when the government puts serious effort into development issues at a policy level, the resources and capacity to translate the policy into reality are rarely available.

To this point, the SLORC/SPDC’s ideology has faired no better than ‘the Burmese Way to Socialism’. Apart from the lack of progress in development, the biggest fault in the regime’s nation-building project is that it is not widely shared in society. Without shared values political legitimacy is impossible to achieve because trust in the political system does not exist. The lack of respect for the political system tends to be manifested in actions such as ‘[r]outine disregard of the judicial system, widespread evasion of government orders, extensive political disobedience, and, more generally, skepticism and cynicism’ (Alagappa 1995a: 20). The result is weak state capacity.

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26 For other ways in which the SPDC is constructing a controlled version of national identity, see Houtman (1999: Chapters 1-6).
27 For example, see the statement by the Myanmar foreign minister, U Win Aung, to the 57th session of the United Nations General Assembly, 19 September 2002, which states that ‘Cooperation with the United Nations is the cornerstone of Myanmar’s foreign policy’ (United Nations General Assembly 2002).
Weak State: examining capacity and autonomy in a transitional state

The regime’s lack of legitimacy affects the functioning of the state. The institutional power of the state is concentrated in social control, making the state powerful in this area. But Myanmar cannot be defined as a strong state. The integrity of the state is still threatened by persistent opposition from several insurgent armies. Even in the parts of the country where the central government has had a firm hold for decades, small-scale resistance to the state’s authority impedes the everyday activities of the state. As a result, the regime is preoccupied with challenges to its leadership. In such a situation, as Migdal (1988: 207) argues, the state leaders tend to weaken the institutions of the state in order to uphold their own positions. The bureaucracy becomes disabled as civil servants attempt to keep out of power struggles, even if that means neglecting their duties (ibid.: 419-423).

One of the most telling indicators of state weakness is the unevenness of capacity across policy areas (Skocpol 1985: 17). Such unevenness is also evident across time, as social forces supporting or opposing policies change, and the goals of state leaders vary (Dauvergne 1998: 8). Although the regime has strengthened state capacity in maintaining internal order, SLORC/SPDC has not been able to extend this capacity to other areas. The record of achievement of policy goals is patchy. The Myanmar state can only concentrate on achieving the regime’s most important priorities. The SPDC has a monopoly over the instruments of coercion, but the regime is not successful in pursuing policy goals not directly related to social control because its autonomy is limited by its narrow power base. Attempts by the SPDC to implement political reform may be hindered by several factors: the threat such reforms pose to high-ranking military officers in the regions; the actions of groups such as the UWSA, which have grown rich and powerful under the current regime; and by the generals themselves, who fear reprisals for their actions over the years.

Consequently, policy implementation can be differentiated by high-priority and low-priority policy areas. High-priority policies, which cover areas such as defence, foreign investment and food security, are given a greater share
of state resources. The personal interests of the regime enable greater mobilisation of personnel in the bureaucracy and support from social interest groups to meet policy goals in these areas. The success or otherwise of implementation is important to the regime’s authority, and therefore potentially threatening to the status quo if not carried out according to the regime’s interests. Because these high-priority policy areas are so sensitive, they are constantly being renegotiated and are thus prone to erratic changes in policy.

In contrast, low-priority policies, such as social policies, are generally non-threatening to the regime. This allows for more flexibility in policy-making, with a greater capacity for international input, and smarter policy outcomes. But low-priority policies are much harder to implement, as they receive less attention and resources. It is in these areas that the community is often forced to compensate for the deficiencies of the state.

Overall, the regime’s control over the implementation process is tenuous because the state is top-heavy in most areas. The SPDC is the primary-decision maker, and determines the policies and organisation of the state. But lack of resources, combined with the obstructive bureaucratic culture bred over the decades of military rule, means that the intention of policy is often lost once it goes beyond the committee rooms. As the case study will show, inconsistency is a key feature of the regime’s policy making, reflecting the SPDC’s continuous attempts to find a policy that achieves its aims.

Skocpol (1985: 16) points out that when the state is attempting tasks beyond its capacity, reforms often have unintended results. More specifically in this context, some of the policies SLORC/SPDC has embraced have had a momentum of their own, because they fall into areas over which the state does not have firm control. This will become more apparent as the health system is examined in the next few chapters.

Further, a weak state has difficulty meeting new challenges. For example, rapid population growth in Myanmar since the late 1980s28 has meant

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28 The population of Myanmar has increased from 33.8 million in 1980 (World Bank 2001: 44) to 48.4 million in 2001, and is currently growing at a rate of an average of 1.2 per cent (UNFPA 2001: demographic, social and economic indicators).
that the scarce resources of the state must be stretched much further, offsetting any benefit from the economic growth that has been achieved since the opening up of the economy. This is especially so in sectors such as health and education, which predominantly focus on children.

Thus, the weak capacity of the state has consequences for the regime’s control over the processes of the state in transition. The regime’s development strategy is stalled by its lack of success in achieving policy change in matters important to economic development. As mentioned in Chapter Two, fiscal policies create macroeconomic instability, and inhibit sustainable growth. Since economic growth is a major component of the performance legitimacy of the state, why does the SPDC refuse to implement these reforms? It has been argued that macroeconomic stability has been subordinated to expansionist monetary and fiscal policies because the latter policies have the effect of creating employment and maintaining short-term support (Myat Thein and Mya Than 1995: 253). Thus, changing the current policies would threaten the vested interests of the regime’s support base, and threaten political stability. Further, Deputy Senior-General Maung Aye, who heads the Trade Policy Council, is a strong believer in self-sufficiency.29 This has resulted in policies that strongly disadvantage foreign investors, as detailed in Chapter Two.

More fundamentally, although economic transition is a key element of state transformation, it challenges the regime’s hold on power because of the more complex nature of a market-based economy. Military rule is generally more successful in less complex societies (Huntington 1968: 229), or, as Harold Crouch (1988: 56) expresses it,

[m]ilitary domination is most common in societies where the development of the social structure has not produced strong social classes or groups with interests at variance with those of the military-dominated bureaucracy.

29 An ICG report argues that the emphasis on self-reliance is shaped by the military elites’ values and attitudes, particularly a conservative and insular form of nationalism, political paranoia, and cultural relativism. These mentalities ‘constitute an interrelated and largely self-reinforcing belief system. They exist independently of their political usefulness – and indeed in the face of their obvious (to outsiders) negative consequences, not only for the country, but also for the military rulers themselves’ (ICG 2001a: 8). In a related argument, Houtman maintains that the military elite perceives freedom and national independence as interchangeable, a view derived from the struggle for independence in World War Two, and thus fear losing control to foreign interests (Houtman 1999: 36).
Such groups include ‘a strong and independent business class, a large urban middle class, an industrial working class, or an established landowning class’ (ibid.). In theory, a successful economic transition in Myanmar would encourage the development of at least the first three categories listed. This produces a contradiction between the regime’s desire to modernise the economy and boost its performance legitimacy, and its need to prevent the development of strong interest groups that could challenge the regime’s monopoly over the policy agenda of the state.

States that successfully develop their economies often find that the very structures that generated successful transition are changed in the process (Evans 1995). Therefore, for authoritarian states, ‘[g]enerating an entrepreneurial class with an interest in industrial transformation would be almost as dangerous as promoting the political organization of civil society’ (ibid.: 248).

This is why the economic transition can never be complete under the rule of the current regime. As it is, some of the most basic institutional structures of a market economy are still missing. John D. Sullivan (1994: 149) argues that, the growth of a market economy requires more than just the retreat of government. On the contrary, markets are well-developed institutions based on highly complex sets of politically formulated, government-enforced rules – in other words, laws.

Yet in Myanmar, economic transition has been characterised by unpredictability and favouritism, as shown in Chapter Two. Political stability is a precondition for economic growth, whether under authoritarian or democratic rule (Crouch 1988: 55). Some military governments are able to establish the foundations needed, but Myanmar has not been one of them, and will not be until the institutions of the state gain more autonomy.

**The State and Equity**

The biggest problem faced by a government during economic transition is how to make reforms politically sustainable. One of the more significant impacts of the partially-implemented transition in Myanmar has been on equity. The longstanding structures of poverty, such as landlessness and unemployment, have been exacerbated by the growing lack of social justice.
under the current regime. Under the first government since colonial rule that has explicitly sacrificed equity\textsuperscript{30} for economic growth, Myanmar is facing a growing gap between the rich and poor, an institutionalisation of inequality of opportunity in a country formerly renowned for social mobility (Lissak 1970: 70-71), and cuts in health and education that most affect marginal elements of society. If, as argued above, the military is unable to promote sustainable growth, then the inequity in society will continue to increase. This is a situation the regime will have difficulty addressing, as the sections of the population who have benefited from policies favouring economic growth over redistribution of resources are crucial political supporters of the regime.

The maintenance of a commitment to social equity is difficult in economic transitions. In Vietnam, for example, rapid economic growth has been accompanied by ‘sharp declines in the quality and accessibility of state-sponsored basic social services’, mainly through the privatisation of services (London 2001: 2). Jonathan D. London describes this as resulting from the ‘tensions and contradictions which exist between a modern state’s need to promote economic growth and social order on the one hand, and its efforts to maintain political domination and popular legitimacy on the other’ (ibid.: 5).\textsuperscript{31}

For most of the other countries in the region whose economic development the Myanmar government seeks to emulate, ‘economic growth was achieved at considerable cost in terms of disparities between the rich and poor’ (Purcel and Cohen 1995: 13). However, it is not unknown to achieve high health status in low-income countries, simply through a redistribution of available resources. China in the 1970s and Kerala State in India are two examples where this has been done successfully, and were the inspiration for the Primary Health Care (PHC) movement (Asthana 1994a: 182).\textsuperscript{32} It is believed by many health policy experts that

\textsuperscript{30} Equity is important because it ‘guides and legitimates distributive choices, thereby making them sustainable and setting precedents for future allocative decisions’ (Graham 1998: 20-21).

\textsuperscript{31} For the impact of economic transition on the health system in Vietnam, see also Beresford (1995: 115-117) and Hull and Hull (1995: 137-146).

\textsuperscript{32} The equitable distribution of health services has not been easily translatable elsewhere. China’s ‘barefoot doctor’ program, lauded for its success in health services decentralisation to rural areas, and its mass participation (Asthana 1994b: 183), is an example of strong state
while economic growth is necessary for improvement of living standards and social services, countries emphasizing redistribution as a major development objective (and not only socialist countries) are characterized by better education, lower infant mortality and higher life expectancy than countries choosing growth alone (Kloos 1994: 210).

Consequently, resource-distribution may be a more important factor in explaining differences in levels of social development than absolute levels of economic growth (Asthana 1994a: 54). Not only is government intervention a key factor in improving the welfare of the citizens, but much can be achieved even within resource-deprived states. At the same time, the assumption underpinning UN initiatives in the 1970s and 1980s, that a government with proper political commitment can achieve good health, is tempered by evidence that good governance in developing countries is very rare.

In examining the political economy of health, Michael R. Reich (1994: 418) warns against reducing problems in a health system to a lack of ‘political will’, which he argues is a vague concept with little analytical value. Instead, Reich employs the concept of ‘political feasibility’, which takes into account ‘a full assessment of trade-offs, an analysis of political regime characteristics, and an understanding of the dominant political and economic interests’ (ibid.: 420). Similarly, Douglas Crone (1993: 56) defines political capacity and political will as the main variables determining the status of social services in Southeast Asian countries and shaping the choices of state leaders. He argues that ‘political capacity derives in part from the underlying structure of the political system; political will is rooted in an intraelite struggle over whether change is necessary, and if so, what sort of change’. In regimes with a narrow social basis – or autonomy, as I have defined it above – reform of social policies is inhibited (ibid.).

33 This definition of political capacity focuses on the ability of a government to achieve its goals, as opposed to the use of the term in political development theory as a measure of institutionalisation and legitimation of a political system, such as in Jackman (1993).

34 The detrimental impact of low political capacity on health systems has been noted in Indonesia (see Hull and Hull 1995: 120-137; Achmad 1999: 113-167).
The level of provision of health care and other welfare services in Myanmar has been low, regardless of whether the state was ideologically committed to social equity, as in the socialist era, or downgraded its commitment to social equity, as now. Regardless of degrees of ‘political will’, the state does not have the autonomy from military interests to significantly reallocate state resources from security to social development, or the capacity to implement policy accordingly.\(^{35}\)

The SPDC does not treat social development as a core component of the nation’s development, with the consequence that its social policies are failing to develop the human resources and institutional capacity that are needed for Myanmar to become a developmental state.\(^{36}\) This contrasts with Ramesh’s (2000: 146) argument, that most states in Southeast Asia, although they also favoured economic growth, expanded social policies as a method of political survival. Lacking the ability to develop social services for the entire society, the military regime has instead developed a two-tiered set of public services (Steinberg 2001a: 73-74). Because it relies on such a narrow support base, the regime cannot afford to let the military suffer the same deprivations as civilians. The military establishment has access to superior health, education and other services, while for the rest of the population these services have fallen into neglect.\(^{37}\) The result is, ‘just as in the former BSPP, senior military officers are becoming ever more institutionalised and far removed from the daily health sufferings of most ordinary people’ (Smith 1996b: 25).

This poses a problem for the state in the long run. It has been shown that poor health has specific economic costs: directly, for expenditure on treatment and care services; and indirectly, for loss of production (in a household, or direct economic production) from sickness, disability or premature death.

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\(^{35}\) For example, even if it were possible to increase expenditure on health services, John Seaman argues that ‘adequate administration and revenue collection itself costs money which is not available’ (Seaman 1995: 8).

\(^{36}\) It is widely accepted that expenditure on welfare is an investment in human resources. Howard Jones argues: ‘The achievement of social welfare means, first and foremost, the alleviation of poverty in its many manifestations. This cannot be solely a matter of redistributing more fairly what wealth there already is, but requires in poor countries that redistribution be incorporated within a policy for economic growth (Jones 1990: 281).

\(^{37}\) See Chapter Six.
These costs impose a burden on the community in terms of care and compensation for lost manpower (Abel-Smith and Leiserson 1976: 143). Furthermore, as Carol Graham points out, ‘there is fairly wide agreement that very large differentials in the distribution of income inhibit social cohesion’ (Graham 1998: 20).

Consequently, government legitimacy, and the motivation of state authorities to pursue equitable policies, must be considered in the context of complex state-society relations. Without legitimacy, the government cannot successfully implement policies that enhance social development. However, it may be that social development is not a key factor in determining government legitimacy, in that many people do not necessarily demand an equitable state. Indeed, after the experience of socialist rule, the rhetoric of equality is probably not taken seriously. What most people want is for their own lives to be unaffected by poverty.

Thawnghmung (2001: 361) argues that the personal impact of state policies is the prime determinant of an individual’s attitude to the state. She emphasises that, in rural areas at least, political concerns are focused on specific policies and authority figures who have a detrimental impact on villager’s lives. Thus,

as long as their basic needs are fulfilled, the local authorities can moderate the damaging effects of the rigorous and unpredictable impositions of central authorities, or there are some real and perceived legal remedies on the part of the central government to take action against the abuses and violations that take place at the local levels, peasants will accept the system as “legitimate” and will remain complacent. If such conditions are absent, peasants will continue to strive to improve their lots by evading or moderating the claims of authority (by making deals with local officials) or by contesting the practices of local officials through the utilization of a variety of means that are available to them.

Current agricultural policies benefit some, leave some worse off, and leave the rest in much the same position as before. On the other hand, the state-dominated agricultural system puts many farmers at a disadvantage; Mya Maung (1998: 51) reports protests from farmers in some districts in 1996 against

38 In a similar manner, the World Bank measures the burden of disease by calculating a disability-adjusted life year (DALY), ‘a measure that combines health life years lost because of premature mortality with those lost as a result of disability’ (World Bank 1993: 1).
the state rice procurement system. The change in domestic rice trading policy in 2003 is reported to have resulted from instability in rural areas of the Rakhine and Mon states, and Irrawaddy division (BurmaNet News 12 June 2003). But given that much of the population does not usually challenge government authority, the regime has ‘relatively little incentive or enthusiasm to solve all the agriculture-related problems, and to appease the groups who have posed very little threat in the past’ (Thawnghmung 2001: 366).

State-Society Relations

As the examination of the capacity of the state has indicated, looking at the actions of the state shows only one part of the picture. Equally significant to how the state works is the way in which individuals, communities and civil associations adapt to the overbearing state, and affect it in turn. Although complacency and acquiescence in state authority tempers the legitimacy crisis of the regime, societal reactions to state policies also contribute to restricting the reach of the state.

Examinations of modern Myanmar politics have been predominantly state-centric. Taylor’s *The State in Burma* is an example. In the introduction to the book, Taylor explains that although his study is about the interaction of state and non-official institutions, the state is the dominant institution in society, and ‘thus normally able to determine what is a viable and appropriate political issue and what is not capable of political solution, as it limits the growth of institutions which can express official and private political options’ (Taylor 1987: 4). Although important non-state institutions, such as the sangha, receive attention, this is only in the context of its political role. Yet, societal life that is not overtly political can be just as revealing of state-society relations.

John Hobson points out that ‘state capacity is based not simply on institutional factors but also on social power residing within society’ (Hobson 1997: 2). Civil society, as conceived in a Western liberal perspective, does not exist in Myanmar. As Steinberg (2001b: 53) irreverently notes, ‘civil society in Myanmar is alive and well and run by the government’. There are no organisations autonomous from the state, which does not permit freedom of
association, information or speech. The destruction of autonomous organisations under military rule is compounded by a lack of social trust, mentioned in Chapter Three (Steinberg 2000: 116-118). Moreover, long-term military rule has weakened the sociocultural factors that encourage independent organisation. An International Crisis Group report notes that ‘[l]ow levels of education and cultural factors mean many ordinary people in Myanmar lack confidence in their ability to effect change’ (ICG 2001b: ii). But power does exist beyond the state, and the fact that it often does not support the state leadership contributes to the weakness of the state.

Finding Social Space

One of the realities of military rule is that it has an uneven impact on the population. The heaviest impact, of course, is on those actively engaged in politics (May, Lawson et al. 1998: 31). For others, it is possible to partially escape and subvert the authority of the state. In relation to Myanmar, the anthropological concept of civil society, which focuses on the activities hidden within ‘the banality of everyday life’ (Monga 1996: 12), may be most appropriate.40

The anthropological perspective of civil society is based on ‘a range of informal interpersonal practices’ (Hann 1996: 3). This is not an assertion of relativist values, but rather represents a focus on social organisation; it counters the image that societies under authoritarian rule are placed in stasis, instead recognising that there is ‘continuous movement and great diversity’ (ibid.: 7). Michal Buchowshi (1996: 79), talking of Poland under communist rule, maintains that civil society thrived at the grassroots level. Casual, apolitical social institutions, such as a sports club, contributed to social cohesion and generated informal networks. Although they may not obviously fall within the political domain, Buchowski classified these informal groups as civil society

39 For more detail on the restrictions on civil society, see ICG (2001b).
40 See also Steinberg, who similarly applies a narrower definition of civil society to Myanmar, consisting of ‘non-ephemeral organizations of individuals banded together for a common
because they are ‘capable of acting as a kind of countervailing force to the state’ (ibid.: 80-82). They are politicised because authoritarian regimes consider most areas of life to be political.

While more robust forms of civil society are not attainable in the current political system, the informal networks that exist, such as religious-based social organisations and kinship networks (outlined in Chapter Three), are a vehicle for finding space beyond the reach of a state that seeks to be omnipresent. The Myanmar state is not totalitarian, and cannot help but cede some minor space. Talking of the academic environment in Myanmar, Craig Reynolds (2000: 135) describes ‘spaces where the non-homogeneity of authoritarian power makes it possible to speak, albeit in a guarded fashion’.

Reynold’s description of the university environment emphasises the everyday reality that forces people to choose the degree to which they will opt for complicity or resistance. This is more complex than a choice for or against the state. For people who live firmly within the authority of the state, but perhaps do not recognise its legitimacy, the boundaries of state authority are constantly renegotiated. Complicity and resistance are not mutually exclusive actions.

This personal dilemma occurs mostly in a more formal sphere of society: state-sponsored civil society. Like the state, civil society is not a monolith. Further, the interests of state and civil society are not always inimical; indeed, most of the state elite will concentrate their patronage on the parts of civil society that complement their power. In some states this means promoting purpose or purposes to pursue those interests through group activities and by peaceful means’ (Steinberg 1999b: 3).

41 A totalitarian system is one of ‘total domination’ (Linz 1970: 255). In contrast, an authoritarian system retains a degree of separation of state from society, has distinctive mentalities as opposed to an overarching utopian ideology, is not characterised by extensive and intensive mobilisation of the population, merely striving for passive acceptance, and generally operates within ill-defined boundaries (Linz 1970: 255-259). There are similarities between the two systems, particularly in methods of social control, but under an authoritarian regime, there exist ‘islands of exemption’ from the domination of the state (ibid.: 266).

42 Karl A. Wittfogel (1957: 122-126) refers to ‘politically irrelevant freedoms’, where certain groups and organisations, such as village communities and secondary religious organisations, are restricted by the state, but not completely integrated into its power structure. Because these groups are not a political threat to the state, they are allowed a degree of autonomy. Sometimes this is a literal space, such as the monastery, which is generally considered outside of military
business-related institutions at the expense of local community associations (Williams and Young 1994: 96). In Myanmar, the structuring of an acceptable ‘civil society’ by the state is extremely blatant. Certain business organisations and welfare-oriented NGOs are allowed to operate, but only within the parameters acceptable to the regime.

However, although the state denies autonomy to institutions in society, a small degree of manoeuvrability is possible. It has been suggested that state-supported organisations can be ‘political at the top and non-political at the bottom’ and provide ‘a significant means for collective activity’ (Buchowski 1996: 84). In the mass hierarchical organisations that characterise civil society under military rule, there can be pockets of quiet autonomy, where motivated individuals take advantage of the privileges of being in an organisation sanctioned by the state. Thawnghmung (2001: 302) cites such a case in a township in Sagaing division, where the leader of the local USDA branch is a well-respected teacher, who is devoted to social activities. Under her leadership, the USDA in that township concentrates on social and cultural activities, and opportunists are kept out of the organisation. Membership of state-supported organisations may also be a matter of strategic complicity. One result of restricted political space is competition for state patronage, by the intelligensia and others who might benefit from social mobility, which leads to a voluntary identification with the regime’s goals.

However, the SPDC’s view of civil society involves a one-way process: formal non-state groups either accept the values, goals and structures of the state, or are not permitted to exist. The regime’s insistence on compliance by non-state organizations, and its inability to employ anything but the most blunt control (Fink 2001: 215). In the same respect, the government restricts access to spaces such as Yangon University and Aung San’s mausoleum, which are politically sensitive.

Thawnghmung (2001: 302-303) also emphasised the importance of personality over membership of institutions. In this village, although the USDA is disliked, its leader is much admired, and is not identified with government organisation. At the same time, while tacit support for the NLD is widespread, the leader of the local branch, who is considered to be patronising and domineering, is much disliked.

This is similar to the situation in China, where Edward X. Gu (1998) notes that the political penalties of operating outside the sanctioned public space has caused many intellectuals to voluntarily seek out positions within institutions of the Party establishment.

See the examination of GONGOs in Chapter Seven.
methods of social control over the population, suggests a lack of depth to state-society relations, which might explain why the regime has been unable to pursue a successful economic transition.

*State-in-Society*

Although the Myanmar state maintains a position of dominance over society, it is not entirely immune to ways in which individuals cope with and get around the state. Joel S. Migdal’s (1994a: 3) thesis of state-in-society posits that the relationship between state and society is mutually transforming. He argues that

> where states were presumed to have been pervasive, domineering, and efficacious in the developing world…the reach of the state turns out on closer inspection to have been limited.

The reach of the state is qualified because even if it does not overtly listen to social actors, its goals can be transformed by societal influences. Patterns of state authority are determined by struggles in multiple arenas of domination and opposition (Migdal 1994b: 9). In essence, society shapes the state as much as the state shapes society.

Non-threatening methods of subverting authority are well documented. As James C. Scott (1986: 8) points out, even the weakest groups in society are not entirely powerless. Through everyday resistance, small, apparently non-political, actions, multiplied thousands of times, can affect the policy options available to the state.

Similarly, in the case of Vietnam, Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet (1995) emphasises the effect that cumulative everyday actions by social actors can have on the state. He describes how acts of everyday resistance at the village level contributed to a radical change in the state’s agricultural policy. Resistance to collective production was faced at first by local authorities. Having little success with punitive measures, the authorities gradually began modifying central state policy to meet some of the villagers’ demands. Eventually, in the face of economic crisis, the state leadership responded to grassroots pressure by implementing a system of household farming (*ibid.*: 67-70).
The major political protests in Myanmar’s history are outnumbered by the incremental pressures from non-state actors that have produced changes in policy. One example is of the way in which the state was forced to legalise the private use of satellite dishes. In a place where all knowledge must be sanctioned by the state, the ownership of satellite receivers was closely controlled by restricted and expensive licensing. However, over the last decade thousands of unlicensed satellite dishes were installed throughout the country by the urban middle class and elite, hotel owners and others. Because these people are able to receive Thai, American and British news services that do not pass through the state’s strict censorship process, this represents an open subversion of the authority of the state. But many of the owners of these satellite dishes are high-ranking state bureaucrats or people of influence. The only way the state could respond was to offer an amnesty, in January 2001, to satellite dish owners. By the deadline of the amnesty, over 33,000 renewable licences had been issued by the Department of Post and Telecommunication (Win Kyaw Oo 19-25 November 2001).

Further, the state has much more difficulty countering the influence of everyday resistance than it has countering overt political dissidence. The ability of the army to rapidly mobilise in urban areas, where the regime faces its most overt political opposition, has little relevance for a housewife who buys her household goods on the black market, or bureaucrats who attend to private business concerns during office hours.\(^{46}\) Farmers attempt to subvert the compulsory rice procurement system, by underreporting the amount of land they cultivate, or increasing the weight of the rice by soaking it in water before it is weighted (Thawnghmung 2001: 312).\(^{47}\) Such resistance is also common among the elite. It is reported that during the tour of the Chinese Tooth Relic, almost half of the people making large donations to state-patronised religious

\(^{46}\) The widespread moonlighting of public sector doctors in the private sector was legalised by the state, which is unable to pay them enough. However, the government must turn a blind eye to the fact that the attendance of doctors at private clinics often takes place to the neglect of their public sector duties (see Chapter Six).

\(^{47}\) For other methods of avoidance and passive resistance used by farmers to avoid the demands of the state, see Thawnghmung (2001: 309-324)
activities did not attend the merit-making ceremonies that honoured their contribution (Schober 1997: 15). In this manner, the hegemony of the state is compromised.

This pattern of state-society relations explains why the regime's attempt to change the role of the state through economic transition is of limited effectiveness. Peter Evans (1995: 228) argues that the key to becoming a successful developmental state through industrial development is a mutually reinforcing state and society. According to Evan's criteria, Myanmar can be described as a 'predatory' state, which pursues economic development 'at the expense of society, undercutting development even in the narrow sense of capital accumulation' (ibid.: 12). Such states are characterised by a lack of autonomy among ruling elites, and state-society relations based on personal, rather than institutional, connections. This is in contrast to the ideal 'developmental' state, which is able to facilitate industrial transformation. Evans argues that the success of the developmental state lies in 'embedded autonomy'. This is a combination of an effective and autonomous bureaucracy, and institutionalised ties between state and society that reinforce and help to constitute each other (ibid.: 12, 228).48

As Tran and Smith (1999: 86) conclude, in relation to the economic transition in Vietnam, 'a transition to a market-oriented society requires state intervention and guidance, as well as state’s willingness to be flexible and adaptive to social conditions'. Given the unwillingness of the Myanmar state to be flexible and adaptive, what are the implications for its process of economic quasi-transition?

While states such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand have also been (and to varying extents, remain) a repressive presence in the lives of their citizens, the cohesion of the state lies in its ability to gradually introduce the benefits of its rule in a direct manner, through agricultural subsidies, the

48 As similar concept is used by Michael Mann (1986: 114), who defines ‘infrastructural power’ as the ability of the state to penetrate everyday life, which involves routine and institutionalised negotiation with civil society groups.
extension of social services, and an overall decrease in impoverishment. 49 In order to strengthen their rule (particularly in the face of communist insurgency), these governments placed an emphasis on rapid economic development combined with the equitable distribution of growth (Ramesh and Asher 2000: 146). In Myanmar, although the functions and apparatus of the state have penetrated to the local level, and have even been normalised as an accepted part of life, the fact that the state still exercises a negative influence in the lives of people means that the Myanmar state is not internalised by its citizens as a nation-state.

Conclusion

The purpose of these last three chapters has been to provide an overall framework and contextual background for the analysis of the health system. The examination of the nature of the Myanmar state has suggested that it is the inability of the political leadership to unify the state that links the different regimes and ideologies. In fact, differences in ideology, particularly the changes in policy implemented by the SLORC, reflect different means of achieving state consolidation. The regime led by Ne Win was strongly affected by the Thakin’s distrust of capitalism and outside influence, and assumed the only path to development was socialism. Therefore, social development was prioritised in policy, but the lack of state control over state territory and the dominance of the coercive side of the state made development impossible to achieve.

The SLORC represented a new generation of leaders, reacting against the failure of socialism. Its perception of the inability of socialism to consolidate the state (and ensure the dominance of military power) led to a dramatic change in policy, which, in addition to blatantly embracing the military’s security agenda as the new national ideology, is pursuing the secondary goal-rational ideology of economic development as a means to gaining legitimacy (and hence

49 Although these countries are not high spenders on social policies, high economic growth of the last few decades has resulted in significant decline in levels of poverty (Ramesh and Asher
guaranteeing the security agenda). On the surface, the regime is attempting to achieve a ‘developmentalist’ state model, that combines growth and social stability. However, this strategy is limited by a narrow conception of development that focuses on maximising economic growth, even while the regime refuses to complete reform in the semi-command economy. Pursuing development through social equity is seen by the regime as conflicting with their goals; without the allocation of sufficient resources, strategies for social development remain little more than rhetoric.

As such, a key element of the new legitimising strategy of SLORC/SPDC has been adjusted to achieve its aims through providing political and economic benefits to certain influential groups, rather than winning the hearts and minds of the population. The process of economic transition, in combination with changing domestic and external political alliances, has created new power dynamics in the society, as well as vastly widening the economic gulf between a very small elite and the rest of the population. Certain features of the state, such as infrastructure and the modernising of the capital, have been improved far beyond the socialist days. The SLORC/SPDC have also had more success than their predecessors in strengthening central power and national cohesion through the modernisation of the army and the development of a pervasive intelligence apparatus.

The process of economic quasi-transition is slowly producing changes in state and society. In addition to the longstanding problems of the state, the ruling elite is faced with new challenges. However, this chapter has shown that, given its lack of institutional resources to draw on and a lack of autonomy from military interests, the SPDC’s style of governance continues to be primarily reactive. Economic and political strategies have been ad hoc and experimental, sometimes producing unintended results. Aside from the small proportion of the people who have benefited through the patronage of the military leadership, coercion and instilling fear remain the state’s only substantive form of control over the population. The regime is unable to embed

the concept of its legitimacy and its vision of the Myanmar nation into the wider societal context. Rather, it faces overt opposition to its goals from the pro-democracy opposition, as well as covert everyday resistance from many people. This necessitates the diversion of large amounts of state resources into the regime’s project of generating legitimacy, causing areas that are considered irrelevant to this goal, such as the social sectors, to be sidelined. The emphasis on social control may maintain the power of the regime, but it weakens the state. Thus, without the ability to pursue goals outside its narrow security and development agendas, social development is not politically feasible for the regime.

The previous chapter described a situation where some functions of the state are quite intrusive, but others, especially social services, are almost non-existent. The consequence is that while the state is run in a highly repressive and dictatorial manner, it is unable to monopolise every aspect of life. Not only are people forced to be self-sufficient in everyday life, but most of the population attempts to adapt to the demands of the state, and make the presence of the state in their daily life as small as possible. The alienation of people from the state makes it impossible for the regime to legitimise itself. Consequently, everyday social control by the state remains elusive, as does the ability of the regime to implement its agenda.

Moreover, although the physical and institutional characteristics of the state have been extended to most of the borders, the prospect of a unified nation is as remote as ever, still hindered by the military elite’s uncompromising quest for a unitary and Burman-dominated state.

Within this context, the following five chapters use a case study of the health sector to examine state capacity, power, and the role of social development. These chapters provide more detailed evidence to support my analysis of the nature and functions of the state, and the way in which society compensates for the failure of state capacity.